

*Original Paper*

## Pre-Reading Activities and Iranian EFL Learner's Performance in Reading Comprehension

Massoud Rahimpour<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Mohaddeseh Hodaei<sup>3</sup> and Davoud Amini<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages Tabriz University, Tabriz, Iran

<sup>2</sup> School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

<sup>3</sup> English Department Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran

\* Massoud Rahimpour, E-mail: m.rahimpour@uq.edu.au

### **Abstract**

*The present study is an attempt to investigate the impact of two different types of pre-reading activities of 1: glossary of unknown vocabulary items and 2: content related support on EFL learners' performance on reading comprehension across low proficiency (LP) and high proficiency (HP) levels. 80 language learners with an age range of 18-28 (male and female) participated in this study. Each level consisted of two experimental groups. One experimental group received glossary of unknown vocabulary items while the other group received content related support (in written form) with the aim of activating prior knowledge before administering reading comprehension questions. The results of the statistical analysis of the data revealed that two types of pre-reading activity and proficiency level had positive effect on the learners' reading comprehension. The study suggests that appropriate and relevant pre-task activities should be employed at different proficiency levels to facilitate and improve the learners' reading comprehension.*

### **Keywords**

*reading comprehension, pre-reading activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items, content related support, prior knowledge, proficiency level*

### **1. Introduction**

As pointed out by Anderson and Freebody (1981), it is not only the knowledge of the meaning of words that causes a reader to comprehend a text, but also the knowledge of the concepts that the words represent. The knowledge hypothesis proposes a link between knowledge and comprehension, but vocabulary knowledge is only part of the knowledge structure that plays a role in reading

comprehension. According to Anderson and Freebody (1981), background knowledge and amount of vocabulary of a reading are the most important factors in reading comprehension. The central focus of present study is to investigate the difference between vocabulary knowledge along with content and background knowledge in reading comprehension. It is also important to investigate the difference between content schemata and knowledge of vocabulary in reading comprehension with regard to EFL proficiency. Another point of important concern, as Grabe (1997) states, is the possible interaction among these various sub-components of reading.

## **2. Literature Review**

According to Chastain (1988), the reading goal is to read for meaning or to recreate writer's meaning. Reading to improve pronunciation, practice grammatical forms, and study vocabulary do not constitute reading at all because, by definition, reading involves comprehension. When readers do not comprehend, they are not reading. According to Brummitt-Yale (2007), reading comprehension is a matter of understanding what you read. Reading is a voluntary, active and interactive process that occurs before, during and after a certain person reads a written text. Ajideh (2006) claimed that "students are more likely to experience success with reading if they are familiar with selected vocabulary items before they begin reading" using activities like questioning, creating semantic maps, and studying word definitions.

### *2.1 Pre-Reading Activities*

According to Chia (2001), many teaching techniques have been developed to activate student's prior knowledge for effective top-down processing in order to facilitate reading comprehension. The goals of pre-reading stage are to activate the student's knowledge of the subject, to provide any language preparation that might be needed for coping with the passage and, finally to motivate the learners to want to read the text (Cele-Murcia, 1991). Tudor (1989) named pre-reading activities "enabling activities" because they provide a reader with the necessary background to organize activity and to comprehend the material. Taglieber (1988) stated that pre-reading activities are also motivational devices, they might not only increase student's comprehension of the text they read, but might also make reading more enjoyable and thus encourage more extensive reading. Wallace (1992) argued that pre-reading activities facilitate reader's interaction with the text and provide orientation to context and content. They also offer compensation for reader's linguistic and socio-cultural inadequacies. Of course, pre-reading activities will vary with the nature of the text. Furthermore they will help the reader to be less dependent on the words on the page and will thus be able to minimize the disadvantage of having a less than native speaker proficiency in language.

### *2.2 Vocabulary Pre-Teaching*

Most second language (L2) readers would assert that their main obstacle to reading is their lack of vocabulary. Grabe and Stroller (2002) emphasize the role of large vocabulary in reading comprehension.

They advised teachers to help students better understand the texts by explicitly teaching the key words of the text to be read in class. Most teachers and researchers would agree that knowing vocabulary before reading and having vocabulary knowledge that is well developed is much better for fluent and successful reading in the L2. For that reason language instructors and textbooks often precede a reading selection with a vocabulary list or activity that introduces new important vocabulary. According to Edmondson (2002), collecting and defining vocabulary terms from the text will assist students in understanding words that otherwise may interrupt their reading. It will also help them increase their vocabulary in a meaningful relevant way. Similarly, Stahl (2003) argues that the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension is a “robust” one and that vocabulary knowledge has consistently been the “foremost predictor of a text’s difficulty”. Most teachers and researchers would agree that knowing vocabulary before reading and having vocabulary knowledge that is well developed is much better for fluent and successful reading in second language learning. Harmer (2001) states that “one way of helping students is to pre-teach vocabulary that is, in the reading or listening text. This removes at least some of the barriers to understanding which they are likely to encounter”.

### *2.3 Schema Theory and Reading Comprehension*

The closer the match between the reader’s schema and the text, the more comprehension occurs. Comprehension depends on knowledge; that is, relating what we don’t know to what we already know. Our understanding of a text depends on how much related schema we possess while read in. Carrell (1983) points out that “if students do not have sufficient prior knowledge, they should be given at least minimal background knowledge from which to interpret the text”. Therefore, the reader creates meaning on the basis of interaction between his or her background knowledge and the text. Schema theory maintains that meaning does not reside in the text itself. Instead the reader recreates the writer’s intended message based on the interaction that take place in his head between the text and his background knowledge ( Bernhart, 1987; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

## **3. Method**

### *3.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses*

**RQ 1:** Is there any difference between reading comprehension performance of EFL learners as result of two types of pre-reading activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support?

**RQ 2:** Is there any difference between reading comprehension performance of EFL learners across two different proficiency levels?

**RQ 3:** Is EFL learners’ performance on reading comprehension as a result of two types of pre-reading activities different for high and low proficiency learners?

**RH 1:** There is a difference between reading comprehension performance of EFL learners as result of two types of pre-reading activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support.

**RH 2:** There is a difference between reading comprehension performance of EFL learners across two

different proficiency levels.

**RH 3:** EFL learners' performance on reading comprehension as a result of two types of pre-reading activities is different for high and low proficiency learners.

### *3.2 Participants*

A total number of 80 language learners with an age range of 18-28(male and female) participated in this study. The participants were chosen from six classes. Before the onset of the study, a TOEFL test and a pre –test of reading comprehension were conducted to divide them into low and high proficiency levels and guarantee the homogeneity in their reading skill, which led to the formation of four classes, totally 40 participants in each level. Then each level was divided into two classes, 20 participants in each class. In each level there were two classes as experimental groups each including 20 participants. The experimental groups in each level were given two different treatments, glossary of unknown vocabulary items (GUV) and content related support (CRS) as pre-reading activities.

### *3.3 Materials*

Two language tests were used in the present study to measure learners' proficiency level and reading comprehension. The first testing material was a reading of a TOEFL actual test administered in the past by ETS in 2002. The test was conducted to divide participants into two levels of high and low proficient groups and decide about their homogeneity. The reading was followed by 10 multiple choice questions. The second test materials were topic-based readings followed by 10 reading comprehension questions. The materials were chosen appropriate for low and high proficient levels. For this aim, the materials were from the book of ACTIVE Skills for Reading by Neil J. Anderson (2007).

### *3.4 Procedures*

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-treatment-posttest design using EFL classes. As stated before, the participants were divided into two levels of high and low proficiency by TOEFL test conducted before the onset of study. There remained two classes in each level. All four groups were assigned into experimental groups and no control group. A pre-test of reading comprehension was conducted to be sure of participants' homogeneity in their reading skill and measure their reading proficiency. Treatments offered to two experimental groups in each level were a glossary of unknown vocabulary items consisted of a list of new vocabularies contained in the reading. The content related support was in the form of statements giving some information about the content of the forthcoming reading. This pre-reading activity was aimed to activate the readers' pre-existing knowledge and offer a general view about the forthcoming data. To manipulate learners' reading comprehension as dependent variable, the so-called pre-reading activities and proficiency levels as independent variables were employed. So, this study intended to investigate the effect of its independent variables on its dependent variables through pre-reading activities.

#### 4. Results

Based on the research questions and the design of this experiment, having one dependent variable with two independent variables, two-way ANOVA was applied to compare the mean scores of these groups. The dependent variable for research questions was reading comprehension of the learners and two independent variables were types of pre-reading activities and proficiency level of the learners. To test the research questions and test the hypotheses, a two way ANOVA was computed by the SPSS software represented as follows.

##### 4.1 Testing the First Hypothesis

Table.1 shows that the significant level calculated for types of pre-reading activity is 0.95 which means that activity type was not statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). That is to say as this value is not statistically significant we conclude that activity type did not have significant effect on learners' reading comprehension.

**Table 1. Tests of between-subjects effects**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	68.537 <sup>a</sup>	3	22.846	5.541	0.002
Intercept	4455.112	1	4455.112	1080.544	0.000
group	5.512	1	5.512	1.337	0.251
activity	0.012	1	0.012	0.003	0.956
group * activity	63.012	1	63.012	15.283	0.000
Error	313.350	76	4.123		
Total	4837.000	80			
Corrected Total	381.887	79			

If we take a look at the second row of the table 2, we imply that GUV has a mean of 7.47 which is not much higher than group of CRS (mean=7.45). All in all, it can be implied that in both activity groups, participants who received GUV get almost the same scores on reading comprehension test as those who received CRS.

**Table 2. Results of estimated marginal means 1 activity**

Activity	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
guv	7.475	0.321	6.836	8.114
crs	7.450	0.321	6.811	8.089

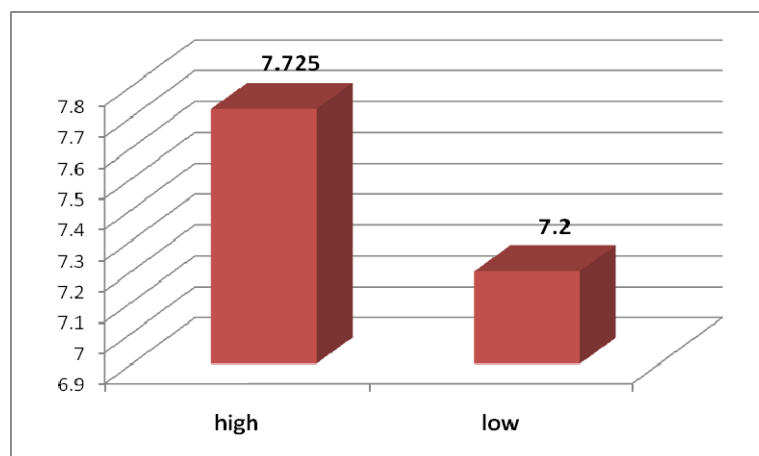
#### 4.2 Testing the Second Hypothesis

If we take a look at table 3, it is shown that with regard to the level of proficiency, the significant level is 0.25 which is more than 0.05 levels and the effect of level was not statistically significant.

**Table 3. Results of estimated marginal means 2 level of proficiency**

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
high	7.725	0.321	7.086	8.364
low	7.200	0.321	6.561	7.839

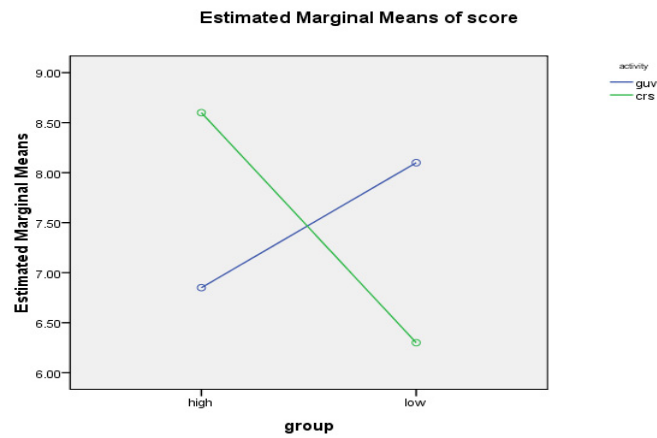
Although statistically it shows that level of proficiency could not affect the students' reading comprehension ( $p > 0.05$ ), if we look at the above table we can see that the mean score of high groups is 7.72 and mean score for low groups is 7.20 that is to say that high level students' performance and reading comprehension is better than low students (See figure1) because of the small size of the groups the statistical result is not significant. This can be one of the limitations of this research.



**Figure 1. Comparing low and high proficiency**

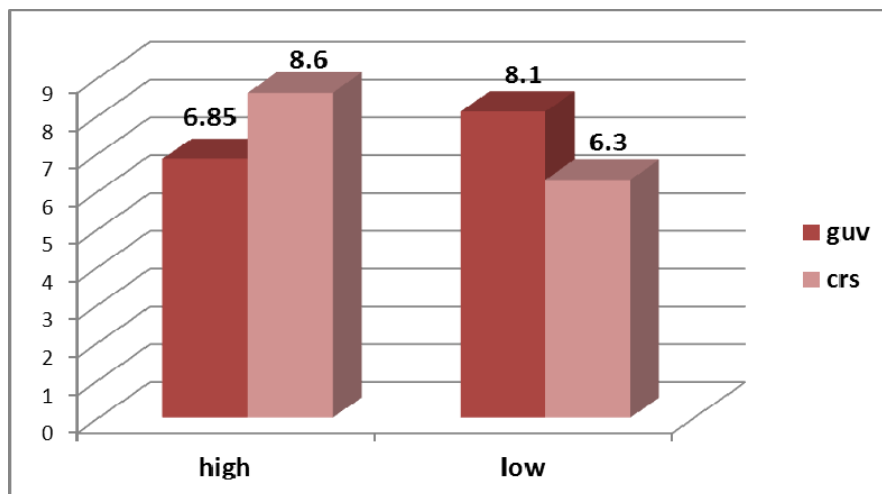
#### 4.3 Testing the Third Hypothesis

The third hypothesis shows the interaction between two independent variables namely as types of pre-reading activities and level of proficiency. As shown in table 1, the difference was in a way that the two variables mutually affect the gain scores of all learners' reading comprehension. It is concluded that the results in two levels (high and low) were exactly reverse as you see in the plot below.



**Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of scores**

That is to say that, in low level the group received GUV got a higher mean score than that of the group with CRS which the reverse result holds true in high level meaning that those who received CRS got higher scores than those with GUV. The results are in line with a few of studies. So, we can conclude that at lower levels, as the students are more dependent on their teachers, they can benefit from GUV more than CRS. On the other hand, as the students' proficiency levels increases and the extent to which they are dependent decreases, they can benefit from CRS (see figure3). It is concluded here that interaction type of pre-reading activities (GUV/CRS) and level of proficiency (high/low) make significant differences.



**Figure 3. Comparing four groups**

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Taken all the points together, the results of this revealed that there are some differences between students' performance in reading comprehension with regard to their level of proficiency and type of pre-reading activity. The findings also showed that the effective role of vocabulary support was related to low proficiency learners' use of bottom-up processing. The result is in agreement with those of Oranpattanachai (2004) and Hassan (1999), in that high proficiency L2 readers used more top-down strategies than low proficiency L2 readers. This is possibly because the high proficiency readers' bottom-up processes are more automatized than the low proficiency readers since they have a better knowledge of English and therefore they paid less attention to them. The earlier studies concluded that there are some differences in the effects of pre-reading activities across proficiency level. The results of this study also confirmed the earlier findings.

## 6. Implications of the Study

Reading skill which is one of the problematic areas of learning has been the focal center of attention for some researchers recently. To improve this skill the use of pre-reading activities has been emphasized. The most important implication of the current study for language classes has to do with the type of pre-reading activities employed in classrooms to facilitate learners' performance. The key point should not be testing this skill, but enhancing the learners' confidence and positive attitude toward reading tasks. Another point pertains to the type of texts used in classrooms. Culturally loaded materials require more topic related knowledge than other materials. The other factor contributing to the cycle of task performance is selection of pre-reading activities according to the learner's proficiency level. Language teachers and syllabus writers are suggested to incorporate a range of pre-reading activities and change the weight of reading lessons from testing reading into teaching reading so that they could support language learners to enhance their reading performance.

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