A Comparative Study on the Impact of Teaching Critical Reading through Pictorial versus Nonpictorial Texts on Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate goal of each and every learning situation is social skills which help learners become better person for themselves as well as their society. In this line critical reading gives learners mental disciplines and intellectual development and it addresses social issues. Therefore, in the present study, the researchers endeavored to investigate if teaching critical reading through pictorial versus nonpictorial texts can be influential and practical in improving the Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. To fulfil the purpose of this study, after homogenizing the learners, they were divided into three groups, namely two experimental and one control groups. In the end of the term a PET of reading was run and the data analysis showed that there were significant differences between the means of the three groups on the posttest of reading comprehension, and the first experimental group which were taught reading both critically and through pictorial texts outperformed both the second experimental group which were taught only through critical reading with no pictorial texts and control group which were taugh noly through pictorial texts and not critically.

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language has obsessed man's mind during the history. Methods and approaches have been developed to teach language skills. Reading is the most important skill. Hence reading became a subset of the language learning curriculum (Bernhardt, 2011). Ouellette (2006) states "reading does not only involve decoding and visual word recognition: The end goal is comprehension" (p. 556). Furthermore, According to Sheng (2000, p. 12) "Reading is the process of recognition, interpretation, and perception of writer of printed material". This shows that reading involves comprehension and thinking. Hellyer, Robbinson, & Sherwood (1998) contend that people usually think reading means recognizing the words, but true reading calls for thinking and understanding of the author's message. Mangal (2005) argued when one reads words, phrases, or sentences in any language, one is stimulated to think. So, reading can be considered as an active and purpose-driven process. In order to make the connection between reading, comprehension, and thinking in everyday life, learners need to employ different approaches to mastering this perceptive, thoughtful, and integrative skill (Block, 1986). One of the approaches is critical reading. In fact critical reading is a skill for discovering information and ideas within a text, and it refers to a careful, active, reflective, and analytic reading (Kurland, 2000). Moreover, critical reading not only teaches students learning skills but also teaches them how to reach real understanding of texts and how to think about them with a critical view (Jones, 2002, p. 54). In addition, Critical reading gives learners the opportunity to analyze the information they

encounter critically and look at the text with the wider scope (Wallace, 2003). That is, learners do not rely just on the author's meaning as they read. Instead, the reader negotiates or recreates meaning that makes sense based on personal background knowledge (Tompkins as cited in Tomasek, 2009). Thus the topic of teaching students how to think while reading should be central to any discussions of reading classes. In this regard, Halpern (1996) put an emphasis on the importance of thinking in reading and place comprehension in the realm of critical thinking.

One of the merits of critical reading is that reading is considered a social process. Critical reading is a practice which involves students in analysis of the article, reflection on the meaning of the article, interpretation of the article, and connection to their daily life events. Therefore, using critical and cognitive techniques to improve comprehension seems to be crucial (Halpern, 1996). From this perspective, Carter and Nunan (2002, p. 220) define critical reading as "a reading practice which attends to the ideological underpinning of text, as signaled not so much by what writer chooses as a topic but how people , places and events are talked about" . Scholars (Wallace, 2003; Kurland, 2002) have been interested in critical reading techniques and in implementing these techniques in actual classrooms. The pleasures that can be gained from reading picture books invariably stem from their aesthetic properties. In particular, it is the visual component which first arrests the reader's attention and becomes the focus of critical review. Lewis (1996, p. 8) attributes this emphasis on the illustrations rather than the words as a direct result of an 'over-riding concern with the aesthetically fine'.

Using a pictorial text is an easy way to introduce students to some of the key elements in critical reading (Bleiman & Webster, 2006). Pictures demonstrate the insights that can be gained by reading a text from different perspectives. Bleiman & Webster (2006) stated that using a short shared text with a picture where images as well as words are open to analysis can significantly increase students' confidence in exploring theory more fully and applying it to more substantial texts. Using pictures also can be considered as an advance organizer. Within second language theory, the idea of advanced organizer was first advocated by Ausubel (1960) when he suggested the retention of unfamiliar but meaningful material could be enhanced by the advance introduction of relevant concepts. Accordingly, Omaggio (1993) maintains that advance organizers take different forms such as pictures, key words or scripts prior to the reading to help comprehension. Muller (1980) found pictorial texts as an advance organizer to enhance students' ability form correct hypotheses and test them through reading.

Pictorial texts are preferred to nonpictorial texts. However, it should be taken with caution. Employing pictures as a medium of instruction may not always prove practical (Davies, 1991). Furthermore, Barzegar (1997) pointed to the controversies by saying that students tend to misinterpret illustrations when they are asked to explain them. Muller (1980) believed that pictorial texts aid less efficient and beginner students. Hence practicing critical reading and devising new and effective techniques to teach its strategies seems to be an ongoing issue.

English, as a language of communication all over the world seems to be one of the important subjects in most educational systems. Thus attempts have been made to devise the most effective methods and approaches for teaching this language, and greater time is now dedicated to learning it than ever. In spite of all methods and techniques which have been used for teaching English language, EFL learners have serious problems in reading and comprehending a text due to the fact that they want to understand every single word. However, rarely in the real life reading do we pay equal attention to everything in a text (Nunan, 1993). Actually the problem is that EFL learners do not look at the text as a purpose driven and they look for the meaning of each and every vocabulary.

The situation may become worse when it comes to critical reading which requires higher order mental processing and triggers learners' ability in understanding, evaluating, and judging the information they encounter. In fact, learners tend to process data and information merely superficially and rudimentarily. They do not seem to go beyond linguistic features and explicit meaning. So, the learners' views towards language and its practical use are limited. To overcome this problem in a classroom in which critical reading/thinking is considered, teachers can use different tasks to teach both language and thinking; and learners make use of the target language to develop their thinking ability (Williams and Burden, 1997).

To address the research question empirically, the researcher suggested the corresponding null hypothesis.
H1. Reading pictorial texts critically have no significant effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension.
H2. Reading non-pictorial texts critically have no significant effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension.
H3. There is no significant difference between the effect of reading pictorial and non-pictorial texts critically on EFL learners' reading comprehension.

Participants

The participants, who aged 15 to 18 with the experience of studying English for three years, were randomly chosen from 95 intermediate students who were homogenized by a piloted Preliminarily English Test (PET). Sixty subjects whose scores fell one standard deviation above and below the mean were randomly divided to two experimental and one control groups with twenty learners in each.. The experiment was conducted for 10 sessions and each session was one and half an hour.

Instrumentation

Pretest

Before conducting the study, the researcher had to homogenize the participants by application of a piloted Preliminary English Test (PET) which is standardized and developed by Cambridge ESOL. The PET consisted of three papers, covering 4 skills reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Administration of the PET would take two hours and 15 minutes. Each skill would allocate25% of the total score of the examination to itself.

Posttest

Since the researcher wants to measure the achievement of candidates in terms of reading comprehension, the reading section of another PET test is extracted and piloted prior to the administration. The PET reading section consists of 35 questions including multiple choice, matching, true- false items, transformational sentences and closed test. The time allocated to this section was 50 minutes.

Procedure

In both experimental groups, before starting the instructional procedure, the first session was devoted to the ice breaking and students and the teacher get to know each other. Also, the course objectives, the material of the course, teachers' and students' responsibilities, and the rules of the class were explained. And, a pamphlet on 'what is reading?' was given to the students to become familiar with general reading strategies. The pamphlet was included 'a brief definition of what reading is, an overview of major reading processes, types of reading comprehension, and an explanation of three reading phases: pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading'. Note has to be taken that the information on the pamphlet is retrieved from How to Teach English by Harmer (2008). The typical method of teaching reading being employed in the language class was based on ESA engage, study, activate by Harmer (2008). Since the control group were supposed to be trained general reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, etc., some texts were mainly taken from 'Inside Reading 1' by Burgmeier and Zimmerman (2009), the Teenager magazine (Issue 66, Vol. 9), and the internet. A number of pre-reading tasks (i. e. vocabulary practice, warm-up discussions, etc.) were used in the engagement part. Participants were engaged by games, music, discussion (when handled challengingly), dramatic stories, and amusing anecdotes. They were asked to make predictions, or relate classroom materials to their own lives. According to Hamer (1998) when participants are probably engaged, their involvement in the study and activation stages is likely to be far more profound. Some key vocabularies were taught indirectly in the engagement part.

In the study part for both experimental groups, the participants were asked to read the texts and get the gist of the topics. Sometimes students could read the texts and found phrases they would like to concentrate on for more explanation. Sometimes the participants were supposed to take

notes or to summarize the text while they were reading it. Finally, there were asked to answers the questions followed the text and to paraphrase the text then they received feedback from the teacher.

In the activation part, the exercises and activities were designed to get students using language as freely and communicatively as they can. For example, personalization, where students used language they had studied to talk about themselves, or to share their personal experience or ideas related to the topic of the reading text, is one of the activities that was used in the last part. Sometimes, a debate or a role-play, an internet based research or a piece of writing was used as the activator of the materials which had been teaching. Samples of the reading texts are available in the appendix.

It must be mentioned that the concept of reading comprehension and reading process and its phases such as pre-, while-, and post- reading and reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, etc., were explained in each session; that is, one strategy through a short simple reading text was explained by the researcher. It is worth mentioning that the participants in the control group were given each selected text in a copy form and this copy was given every session before starting teaching the texts in order to prevent them pre-study each text prior to its teaching process.

However, in the first experimental groups which were supposed to be taught both critically and through pictorial texts the procedure was different: As Painter (1965) states it is apparent that critical reading skills do not appear automatically but must be taught. Three types of thought getting processes consisting of (1) literal comprehension, getting the primary meaning from words; (2) interpretation, getting a deeper meaning from words in addition to simple, literal comprehension; and (3) critical reading including the first two but going further to involve personal judgment on and evaluation of the "quality, the value, the accuracy, and the truthfulness of what is read" (p. 36). Therefore, teaching critical reading strategies with their applications in reading texts were targeted and were presented in a series of pamphlets. Each strategy was presented in one pamphlet and it was thoroughly taught by the researcher. In other words, the researcher both designed the teaching material and taught the course. The students were asked to apply these strategies on reading texts to be able to be a critical reader.

It is considerable to mention that the applied strategies in this study seem to have nothing with reading strategies, but as mentioned before, they are considered critical reading strategies according to Sousa (2004). What happens, he says, is that even if teachers encourage individual responses and divergent thinking in their classes frequently they get no response and this leads teachers to make negative judgments about students' thinking (which will put the students off reading) or to accept any response no matter how silly it is (which will diminish the value of reading).

As the researchers have to accommodate the treatments in to the usual program of the course, they will allocate 30 minutes of each session to the treatments in both groups. Participants receive their usual program of their book for one hour and 30 minutes will be dedicated to the treatments. So to compensate this shortcoming the number of sessions was decreased to 24 sessions (2 sessions in each week). During the treatment phase, both groups will receive equal amount of critical reading techniques and practice .While the first experimental group enjoyed the existence of pictures in their reading texts (pictorial texts), the second experimental group received those texts without any pictures (nonpictorial texts). In fact pictures of texts which were given to the experimental group were omitted in order to be given to the control group. Not mention the fact that control group enjoyed being taught not critically but through pictorial texts.

Before starting the instructional procedure for critical reading in both experimental groups, the first session was devoted to the ice breaking and students and teachers get to know each other. Also, the course objectives, the material of the course, teachers' and students' responsibilities, and the rules of the class were explained. Due to the fact that the experimental group's subjects were not supposed to receive a pamphlet on 'what reading is?', the teacher preferred to give just the explanation of it orally. The teacher taught 'a brief definition of what reading is, an overview of major reading processes, types of reading comprehension, and an explanation of three reading phases: pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading' orally. It should be added that presenting these concepts orally be the teacher aimed at making the experimental group's subjects ready for receiving the critical reading pamphlets through the treatment. The pamphlet was given every session before starting teaching the text in order to prevent letting them pre-study each text prior to its teaching process. And also, they were not informed from which book the texts were extracted.

Students who comprehend ineffectively have the inability to process information being read and derive meaning from the material (Stothard, 1994). Critical reading strategies as one of the skills are not gained naturally. It takes teaching and training to promote critical reading habits in the students by providing them with exercises, which engage them more in the in-class learning process (Ripley, 2007). In the present study some pamphlets were provided to enrich learning experience.

It is worth mentioning that to cut down the complexity of the treatment the researcher herself designed some pamphlets covering the seven critical reading strategies separately and a short reading example for practicing that afore-mentioned strategy. Then students shift to the main reading text. These strategies are as follow: Previewing (prediction-making, scanning, skimming), contextualizing (inference-making, synthesizing), questioning, reflecting (annotating, highlighting, note-taking), outlining and summarizing (identifying the main idea, restating and paraphrasing), evaluating an argument (determining fact and opinion, finding cause-effect relationships, determining claims and support, determining premise and conclusion, analyzing, interpreting and arguing about the text) and finally comparing and constructing related reading (Sousa, 2004, pp. 105-106).

Furthermore, it should be stated that, to know about the best ways of teaching such strategies and presenting them as simple as possible in the pamphlets, the researcher made use of some other books written by scholars like Wallace (2003), Kurland (2002).

Participants were also encouraged to use strategies like note-taking underlining strategies (e. g., impromptu, personal, implicit) while reading, which could lead to higher-order thinking. Then the teacher asked the students to read out loud and paraphrase the paragraphs. In a nutshell, students were asked to answer some questions with the purpose of attracting their attentions to the contractedness and its relevance to real life experiences, and its relevance to other texts, that is, intertextuality. In fact, in this phase students have chance to identify or assess their own ideas with a critical flavor.

Tasks of Critical Reading Strategies: To introduce the concepts and aspects of critical reading, a number of handouts were prepared based on the information retrieved from the internet (Kurland, 2002). Some articles from well-known magazines were used for practicing critical reading based on Hallidayan frame work. In addition to magazine articles, a number of texts containing vivid and colorful pictures were used for practicing critical reading by means of pictures.

The treatments was started with an introduction to critical reading .Learners were taught critical reading techniques based on Hallidayan frame work (Wallace,2003) and critical reading skills i.e. describing behavior, interpreting behavior ,identifying assumptions ,evaluating theories, and generating hypothesis. In order to make the process less burdensome the first critical reading was done with the researcher itself. The researcher analyzed the text with respect to the Hallidyan frame work. She identified reading's field, tenor and mode of discourse, and she raised attention of student to the arguments that were made by the author as well as the reasons supporting them.

Having presented the above mentioned points, the researcher also provided the subjects with some advertisements because the participants needed to identify how the writer seemed persuasive and which tricks he used to attract the attention of readers.

Having conducted the treatments, the researcher administered a piloted posttest which was the reading part of another PET. The time allocated to this section was 50 minutes. The first five questions of reading section checked the participants' understanding of various understanding of short texts. In the second five questions, the participants' detailed comprehension was tested. The next ten questions tested the ability to work with a longer text, looking for the precise information. The 10 final questions dealt with understanding of lexico- structural patterns in the text.

Data Analysis

The one-way analysis of variances was run to compare the three groups' means on the pretest in order to prove that they enjoyed the same level of general language proficiency prior to the main study. Before discussing the results it should be mentioned that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's F (2, 57) = .057, P > .05) (Table 1.).

Table 1. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.057	2	57	.945

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Pretest by Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pictorial	20	66.20	10.611	2.373	61.23	71.17
Non-Pictorial	20	67.10	10.518	2.352	62.18	72.02
Control	20	68.20	11.759	2.629	62.70	73.70
Total	60	67.17	10.821	1.397	64.37	69.96

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the pictorial, non-pictorial and control groups on the pretest. The pictorial (M = 66.20, SD = 10.61), non-pictorial (M = 67.10, SD = 10.51) and control (M = 68.20, SD = 11.75) groups showed almost the same means on the pretest.

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA, PET Pretest by Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	40.133	2	20.067	.167	.847
Within Groups	6868.200	57	120.495		
Total	6908.333	59			

Based on the results displayed in Table 3. (F (2, 57) = .167, P > .05, representing a weak effect size) it can be concluded that there were not significant differences between the means of the three groups on the pretest. Thus it can be claimed that they were homogenous in terms of their general language proficiency prior to the main study.
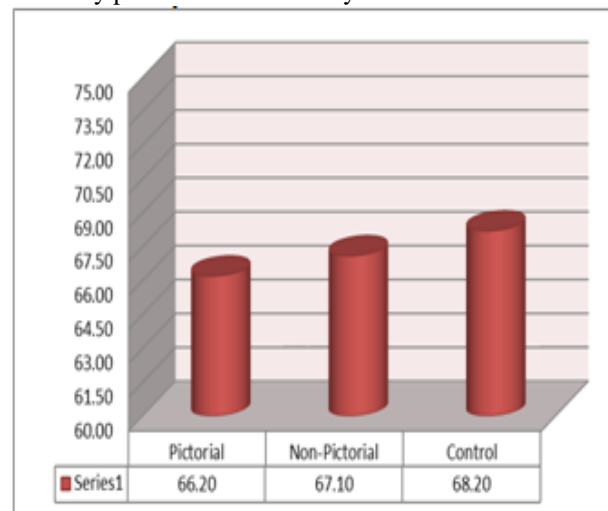

Figure 1. Pretest by Groups

Results of Posttest

The following research question was investigated through conducting this study: Does teaching critical reading through pictorial versus non-pictorial texts have any significant impact on the Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?

Table 5. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.446	2	57	.642

The one-way ANOVA was run to compare the pictorial, non-pictorial and control groups' means on the posttest of reading comprehension. This was followed by post-hoc Scheffe's tests to compare the groups two by two. Before discussing the results it should be mentioned that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's F (2, 57) = .44, P > .05) (Table 5).

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics, PET Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pictorial	20	24.80	4.112	.919	22.88	26.72
Non-Pictorial	20	17.60	3.515	.786	15.95	19.25
Control	20	16.55	3.776	.844	14.78	18.32
Total	60	19.65	5.262	.679	18.29	21.01

Table 6. displays the descriptive statistics for the pictorial, non-pictorial and control groups on the posttest of reading comprehension. The pictorial group (M = 24.80, SD = 4.11) showed a higher mean than the non-pictorial (M = 17.60, SD = 3.51) and control (M = 16.55, SD = 3.77) groups.

Table 7. One-Way ANOVA, PET Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	806.700	2	403.350	27.802	.000
Within Groups	826.950	57	14.508		
Total	1633.650	59			

Based on the results displayed in Table 7 (F (2, 57) = 27.80, P < .05, representing a large effect size) it can be concluded that there were significant differences between the means of the three groups on the posttest of reading comprehension.

The post-hoc Scheffe's tests were run to compare the groups two by two. Based on the results displayed in Table 8 it can be claimed that:

A: The pictorial group (M = 24.80) significantly outperformed the non-pictorial group (M = 17.60) on the posttest of reading comprehension (MD = 7.20, P < .05).

B: The pictorial group (M = 24.80) significantly outperformed the control group (M = 16.55) on the posttest of reading comprehension (MD = 8.25, P < .05).

Table 8. Multiple Comparisons; Post-Hoc Scheffe's Tests

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pictorial	Non-Pictorial	7.200*	1.204	.000	4.17	10.23
	Control	8.250*	1.204	.000	5.22	11.28
Non-Pictorial	Control	1.050	1.204	.686	-1.98	4.08

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

C: There was not any significant difference between non-pictorial group (M = 17.60) and control group (M = 16.55) on the posttest of reading comprehension (MD = 1.20, P > .05).
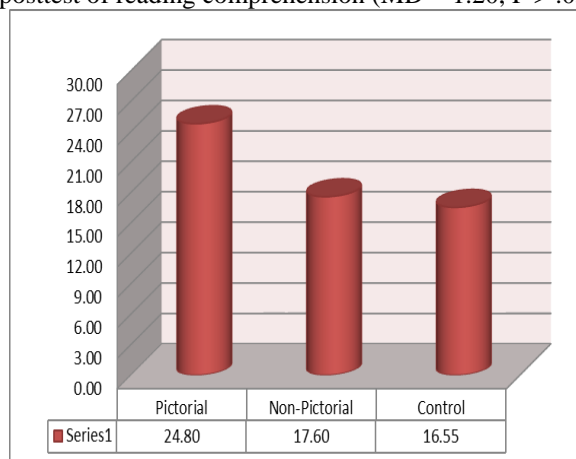

Figure 2. Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups

Implications for Materials Development

Given one of the responsibilities of those who develop materials is to provide and sequence the content of teaching materials, especially the tasks, it seems that imbedding some interesting and high quality pictures in text books and introducing the critical reading techniques can help students enjoy the process of reading comprehension. Especially these techniques can be mentioned in the teachers' book and be indicated that teachers can bring some other pictures, which are related to the text, to the class.

Discussion

The result of the present study can apparently show that using pictorials texts along with critical reading strategies can be effective in improving the reading skills of the learners. Then it seems that the obtained result was as the result of adding the two elements of pictures and critical reading strategies to the context of teaching reading skill. The result indicates that the first experimental group which received critical thinking and pictorial texts as the treatment performed the best. Most of the time there are some extraneous variables which have not been controlled and the results can be affected by them. It means that the results are reached not as the result of the treatment but as the result of these extraneous variables. For instance, one of the probable reasons for getting to this result could be the cognitive learning style of the learners. Being visual, some students tend to outperform as the result of

using visual aids like pictures in the class. Another possible reason for reaching this result could be the 'Hawthorn Effect' which occurs as the result of introducing a new element into the learning situation. The better performance of this group which were taught through pictorial texts and also critical reading can be the result of existing and focusing on this new element, namely introducing some high quality and colorful pictures especially from Teenager magazine (Issue 66, Vol. 9), to the class. On the other hand, the data analysis revealed that the non-pictorial critical reading group

The above mentioned finding corroborates Halpern (1996) who reiterated that how vital it can be to think while reading and he placed comprehension in the realm of critical thinking. Also the outcomes of this s and the control group performed similarly on the reading posttest. This indicates that critical thinking alone (without pictures-embedded texts) was ineffective which again confirms the positive role of pictures in reading comprehension. The rejection of the third hypothesis can, likewise, be discussed through the prolific role of the pictures in reading texts.

The above mentioned finding corroborates Halpern (1996) who reiterated how vital it can be to think while reading and he placed comprehension in the realm of critical thinking. Also the outcomes of this study may lend further support to the statements of Herron (1992) who believed that benefiting the advance organizers like using pictures can help better comprehension in learners. Although it seems that there is no such an experiment done on critical reading, you can find some other studies with divergent perspectives which their findings are somehow in line with this study. For instance, Tagliber's (1988) study with Brazilian students learning English as a foreign language showed that while all three treatments (vocabulary pre-reading condition, pre-questioning condition, and visual condition) did indeed facilitate comprehension, the vocabulary pre reading condition was less effective than visual and pre questioning treatments.

Conclusion

As the aforementioned data analysis demonstrated and by virtue of the significant difference between the pictorial group mean score and that of the control group, the first null hypothesis is rejected. The second null hypothesis fails to be rejected based on the revealed non-significant difference between the non-pictorial group's mean score and the control group's. Also, the third null hypothesis is rejected by virtue of the significant difference between the mean scores of the two experimental groups and the posttest.

All in all, given the data analysis and interpretation of the results, it can be concluded that teaching reading critically through pictorial texts could improve the reading ability of Iranian EFL learners.

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