



Influences of Text Organization on the Iranian Students' Reading Comprehension Performance

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important purposes in reading English written texts is to understand writer's messages. However, it seems that the Iranian EFL learners have fundamental problems in understanding and interpreting English written texts. Making EFL/ESL students aware of efficient reading strategies that help in the reading of English texts has been the concern of educators and researchers, and necessarily reading instructors for years. Educators usually use different text structures such as; compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution and a collection of descriptions to convey the message to their readers. Studies have identified that learners performed differently after they have read different text structures. In this research I investigated 2 groups of Iranian students' performance after reading two kinds of text structures which are compare/contrast and cause/effect. These groups of subjects were 10 intermediate and 10 advanced levels who participated in study. The results of the study through t-test analysis identified that both groups performed differently after reading the different text structures. Findings of this research could provide significant awareness for both teachers and students to recognize how different reading texts can be organized in terms of difficulty.

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Introduction

One of the major problems in teaching reading in the context of Iran is the narrow view towards reading both in material development and practical teaching. It seems that more comprehensive views and theories need to be taken into account and translated into practice (Namjoo and Marzban, 2012). Research on knowledge of text structure has been the focus of attention by many researchers. There is convincing evidence that knowing the text organization influences the comprehension of the text. Competent readers with the knowledge of text structure are able to construct mental models of the main ideas, as well as learn and remember the information presented in the text (Meyer, Brandt & Bluth 1980). In addition, knowledge of text structure enables the readers to construct more elaborate mental models of the text being read (Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983). Another research by Carrell (1989) has indicated that texts with specific logical patterns of organization, such as comparison, contrast, problem solution and cause-effect, are more likely to require recall and comprehension rather than texts organized loosely around the collection of facts. Furthermore, she demonstrated that the amount of information that students recall depend largely on the kind of organization of a text. Another prominent finding of her study was that cultural issue is a major factor that matters in amount of recall in specific text structure.

Review of literature

Previous researchers for example, Carrel (1984) Meyer and Freedle (1984) have carried out research relevant to present study. The latter examined the effect of four text structures: comparison, causation, problem/solution and collection of descriptions on students recall. They also investigated the students' awareness of each text structure type. They came up with the results that more organized text types like comparison and causation seemed easier than the less organized text like collection of descriptions that require students to recall background information. However, with reference to text

structure awareness, there was no difference on awareness by students who read the comparison, causation and collection of descriptions but students were less focus and found the problem/solution texts to be more difficult. The second research carried out by Carrel (1984) includes subjects with a variety of background knowledge and the results showed that the subjects performed differently depending on their language background. The background knowledge shows that cultural issues played an important role on L2 subjects recall of specific text structure type. Richgels, McGee, Lomax and Sheard (1987) applied three different measures to investigate the text structure awareness of sixth- grade students in native English. The measures used were organized as written recalls, organized compositions and the interview. The results indicated that students were more aware of comparison texts and were least aware of the causation text structure when research on awareness was conducted across these three different measures.

Another study by Ghaith, and Harkouss (2003) in the role of text structure awareness in the recall of the four expository text types namely comparison/contrast, description/collection, problem/solution, and cause/effect structure showed that students were most aware of comparison/contrast text and least aware of the cause/effect text structure. The study also revealed that there were no significant differences between proficient and less proficient readers in text structure awareness. In another study, Zhang (2008) selected three types of text structure to study which were: description, comparison/contrast and problem-solution and the study was on Chinese students' performance in different text structure. The researchers came out with the results that the students benefitted more from highly structured texts and found existence of more linkages (cohesive devices) in the texts and they scored higher marks for compare/contrast and problem/solution text structures than descriptive text structure. Nodoushan (2010) carried out a study among Iranian Turkish students to investigate the impact

of explicit instruction of two text structures: causative and descriptive. The study was conducted on experimental and controlled groups. The outcome of the study revealed that the experimental group outperformed in both texts as compared to their controlled counterparts. The findings showed that there was a positive relationship between explicit instruction of text structure and students performance. Another finding of the study which was significant is that the description texts found was to be easier to recall than causative texts among these Iranian students. Sharp (2002) investigated the effect of four formal schemas: cause/effect, description, problem/solution and listing on the students' comprehension. The results indicated that the most loosely structured text (description) was the text that was most recalled by the students. Regarding the relationship between text structure awareness and academic performance, a study by Sharp (2008) which was conducted among Iranian students indicated that knowledge of text structure in academic environment resulted in better demonstration of reading tasks ability.

As a result, it is not exactly clear that among the highly structured text patterns like: compare/contrast and cause/effect which text structure is easier to be recalled. Moreover, most of the studies include two or three types of text structure in their focus of research. So, there are few of them that considered the compare/contrast and cause/effect text structure in the same research to examine the difference between students performance in these two text types. Due to the inconsistency of the findings from different studies regarding the awareness of readers on each text type, I am interested in examining in a different context which includes Iranian undergraduate students of TEFL who are studying at Islamic Azad University in Khalkhal, Ardabil, Iran. Thus, the focus of the present study is on two text types namely, compare/contrast and cause/effect text type.

Research questions

In order to evaluate the Iranian EFL students' performance in reading comprehension based on two different text structures and also by taking into account their levels while performance, at first step the present research aims to investigate the following two fundamental questions:

1. Is there a difference in performance when students read texts from two different text structures; compare- contrast and cause-effect text structure?
2. Is there a difference between advance and intermediate students in their reading performance of the two text structures?

Method

Participants

The data is collected from 20 Iranian undergraduate TESL students who are studying in Islamic Azad University of Khalkhal, Ardabil, Iran. These subjects are selected through purposive sampling. In this kind of sampling, the researcher selected the subjects based on the variables which propose that this group of students has met the criteria of the research. The criteria for this research were two groups of Iranian students studying at the BA levels. The first group (half of the subjects) refers to Iranian undergraduate students who have passed the TOEFL examination with 600 and above, which are called advanced level. The second group (another half) refers to the students attending the preparatory English course for TOEFL examination and these students are called the intermediate level group.

Instruments

In this study two reading passages from a TOEFL book prepared by Barron, which are regarded as standardized texts,

used. The first reading text is viewed to be compare/contrast text type organization entitled "Holms and Dupin". It is a reading comprehension text which includes 10 questions. In this test, the first 5 questions include name (listed A-D) with the opinions (listed 1-5). For questions 6-8, they need to complete the table, using information in the passage. Finally, for the last two questions, they need to choose an appropriate letter from AC.

The second reading text belongs to cause/effect text structure organization entitled "The search for extraterrestrial life" which includes 10 questions. In this test there are two types of questions, in the first 5 questions they need to choose appropriate letters A-D, and for the other 5 questions which describes a number of cause and effect relationships, they should match each cause (questions 6-10) in list A with its effect (A-E) in List B.

Procedure

This study was began by selecting a sample group of 20 male and female students in which half of them were at intermediate level and another half were at advance level and studying TESL in BA level in Islamic Azad University of Khalkhal, Ardabil, Iran. The students were selected according to the purposive sampling as explained above. At first time all the students (both intermediate and advanced students) are given text structures that include compare/contrast and cause/effect texts in order to identify their performance in two different text structures. In other case this study tries to delineate the differences between advanced and intermediate students in their text structure performance. After students completed a paper and pencil task they were collected, analyzed and prepared for producing results.

Result

In an attempt to compare Iranian students' performance in terms of text structures, the number of correct answers collected from the two text structures, one in compare/contrast text structure and another in cause/effect text structure. For the purpose of analysis of the collected data, descriptive statistical analysis using t-Test is employed to represent the findings. The data to examine the difference in performance when students read texts from two text structures, compare/contrast and cause & effect text structures were analyzed using t-test. The students' performance in this study is to discover whether the Iranian students perform better in compare/contrast or cause/effect text structure (Table 3.1). The value $p = .000 > .05$ means that there is a significant difference in Iranian students' performance in the two different text structures. This identifies that the students' performance and their level of understanding of the reading texts vary depending on the type of text structure. As indicated in the table, the results of the comparison between students performance in the two text structures, the mean for correct answers in compare/contrast is 7.53 (s.d 2.001) and the mean for correct answers in cause/effect is 5.58 (s.d 2.008) which indicates that Iranian students have better performance in compare/contrast than cause/effect text structure.

Discussion

In research question1, I wanted compare Iranian students' reading performance in the two text structures: compare/contrast and cause/effect. Based on the results of the study, the compare/contrast structure was found to be easier for Iranian students than the cause/effect text. This result contradicts the findings of some researchers such as Meyer & Freedle (1984) which indicated that highly structured texts as more difficult than the loosely organized text structures. Highly structured text types such as compare/contrast and cause/effect and provide extra cues and linkages for the readers to better understand the text.

Table 3.1 Paired Samples Statistics

Text Structure	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	SEM	Sig
Correct Compare/contrast	20	7.53	2.001	.459	.000
Correct Cause/effect	20	5.58	2.008	.479	

Table 3.2 Performance of Advanced and Intermediate students on compare/contrast text

level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	SEM	Sig.(2tailed)
Advanced	10	9.65	1.098	.366	.000
Intermediate	10	6.48	1.289	.429	

Table 3.3 Performance of Advanced and Intermediate students on cause/effect text

level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	SEM	Sig.(2tailed)
Advanced	10	6.24	2.002	.660	.000
Intermediate	10	4.09	1.645	.548	

On the other hand, loosely structured text type lacks this feature which is believed to cause confusion among readers. Accordingly, when investigating the effects of text structure on recall, the texts were divided in two groups of highly organized and loosely organized types. This means that the differences among highly structured texts were not considered as in Meyer & Freedle (1984). However, Carrell (1984) offered contradictory results in relation to highly organized text structures and this could be due to subjects from different nationalities that took part in the study. Her study showed that cultural background may have an impact on performance, for instance, the Arabic group scored lower for the in collection of description texts than other text types. On the other hand, the Oriental group scored higher in causation and problem/solution types than the comparison and of description texts. In fact, for each pair of text types, students' ability to recall was almost equal. The findings of this study do not resemble Carrell (1984) study in that, her study included participants from different nationalities with different result for the different nationality. The findings of this study also differs from Meyer and Freedle (1984) in which participants scored higher in causation and comparison texts when tests were conducted on four text types. From the results, it seems that there was no significant difference in participants' performance between the two text types of compare/contrast and cause/effect text structures.

In this study, the students performed better with the compare/contrast text structure which is in parallel with the finding of Meyer, and Freedle (1984) that showed students are more sensitive to contrastive relation in texts compared to other structures. According to McCrudden et al (2007) findings, the cause/effect text structure is a more difficult text structure, which requires readers to develop causal inferences to better comprehend the texts.

Another important issue in this research was to investigate the differences between advanced and intermediate students in their text structure performance. Mean and std. deviation of correct answers to questions on compare/contrast text structure from the advanced level students were calculated with those obtained for the students intermediate level and the same procedure was carried out for cause/effect text structure in order to compare the performance of students from the two different levels of proficiency. The mean and standard deviation for both groups of students is shown in the table 3.2 and 3.3. The Independent Samples Test was implemented to identifying significant difference in performance of the two groups. Table 3.2 indicates that the advanced group outperformed the intermediate group. The advanced group obtained a mean score of 9.65 (s.d. 1.098) while the intermediate group obtained a

mean score of 6.48 (s.d. 1.289). In addition, the result from the analysis of the compare/contrast tests' correct answers between advanced and intermediate groups (sig. (2tailed) = 000.P<0.5) indicates that there is a significant difference between correct answers from two groups in the compare/contrast text structure.

Table 3.3 shows that the advanced group outperformed the intermediate group. The advanced group obtained a mean score of 6.24 (s.d. 2.002) while the intermediate group obtained a mean score of 4.09 (s.d. 1.645). In addition, the results from the analysis of correct answers from the cause/effect tests between advanced and intermediate groups (sig. (2tailed) = 000.P<0.5) indicates that there is a significant difference between correct answers given by the two groups the cause/effect text structure.

Based on the results represented in tables 3.2 and 3.3, it can be argued that Iranian students from both advanced and intermediate levels perform better on compare/contrast than cause/effect text structure. This means that reading in compare/contrast is far easier than cause/effect text structure for both advanced and intermediate groups. Another finding is that, advanced students outperform their intermediate counterparts in both text structures. It also indicates that there are significant differences between performances of these two groups on these text structures. This means that level of proficiency affects the students' performance on text structure.

To answer research question 2, I compared the intermediate and advanced students' performance on the two different text structures. Results from the analysis (Tables 3.2 and 3.3) indicate that advanced students scored higher in the two different text structures and it was also found that there is a significant difference in students performance from different level of proficiency on different text structures.

According to Meyer et.al (1980) proficient readers are more able to regulate their reading processes and use more efficient strategies than their unskilled counterparts. Upon close observation of this study, findings showed that there might be some resemblance to Meyer (1980) study although it is not text on mental model. It is expected that advanced group of the study try to apply different reading models in order to relate the new knowledge in the text to their existed knowledge in the attempt to construct the intended meaning.

Conclusion

By collecting and analyzing the results of this study, some important and influential points acquired. It is indicated that reading of compare/contrast text structure is easier for Iranian students than cause/effect text structure. Based on the findings of this study and other studies it is recognized that the compare/contrast text structure is less complicated in compare

with other text structures and easier for students to get the main idea of text.

By considering the results and findings of this research it is recommended that the students at the first step begin with the simple text structure in order to have fewer problems in categorizing the materials of the text and also they would be equipped with the ability of accessing to the main and important idea of the text structure. After they could comprehend the structure of text organization they can move toward different difficult text structures. For this reason it is better that the students at first step to be familiarized with compare/contrast text structure and then go toward other text types.

Finally, by considering the results of this study and other similar studies and importance of all through investigating the intermediate and advanced students performance on the two text structures, it is concluded that the students from both level of proficiency have better performance in compare/contrast text structure. With this regard, the differences between intermediate and advanced students in using text structures are sensible. That is the advanced students have better performance than intermediate students in both text structures. It means that the proficiency level has positive influences on the students' text structure performance.

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