

A Comparative Study on the Effects of Cloze Tests and Open-Ended Questions on Reading Comprehension of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of cloze tests and open-ended questions on reading comprehension ability of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners. 47 EFL language learners at intermediate level, all female, from a high school in Chabahar were selected for this purpose. The homogeneity of their proficiency level was determined by using a TOEFL proficiency test. Then they were randomly divided into the control and experimental group. The control group received the traditional way of teaching reading comprehension while the experimental group worked with cloze tests and open-ended questions in addition to traditional way of teaching reading comprehension. Two reading comprehension tests as pretest and posttest were given to the students of both groups to find out their reading comprehension ability at the beginning and at the end of the study and the treatment. The results of data analysis revealed that the students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group in their reading comprehension ability. Finally the findings of this study suggest that cloze tests and open-ended questions empower students' reading comprehension ability. It also indicates that open-ended questions are significantly more effective on students' reading comprehension.*

Keywords: *Test/ Reading / Reading Comprehension/ Cloze-test/ Open-ended question*

1. INTRODUCTION

If we believe that the main purpose of language teaching is communication, then improving students' reading comprehension competence becomes an overall goal in language teaching. No doubt reading ability is one of the most important skills when we use a foreign language. Therefore, reading comprehension has long been hold as an important way of testing testees' language ability. Cloze-tests have been widely used for measuring reading comprehension. Wilson Taylor first developed the term "cloze-test" in 1953 (Cloze procedure: A new tool for measuring readability, 1953). He explains that the term cloze derived from Gestalt psychology concept of "closure". It describes a tendency that humans have to complete a familiar, but not quite finished pattern. Another way of testing reading comprehension is by open-ended questions. Open-ended question allows the person to take the test and answer the questions in his or her own way, in contrast to questions with limited multiple-choice possibilities (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). The aim of present study is to investigate the result of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension tested by using cloze-test and open-ended question .The subjects of the study were 47 female EFL learners at intermediate level. The purpose of this study is to answer the following question:

Q1. Do cloze tests and open-ended questions have significant effects on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Reading Comprehension

Understanding a reading text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible (Grellet, 1981). Reading comprehension is a complex undertaking that involves many levels of processing. One of the most fundamental aspects of comprehension is the ability to deal with unfamiliar words encountered in text (Paynter, Bodrova, & Doty, 2005). Reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from the text. The goal, therefore, is to gain an overall understanding of what is described in the text rather than to obtain meaning from isolated words or sentences.

As comprehension involves the interaction of a wide range of cognitive skills and processes there are many occasions where difficulties arise that many lead to comprehension failure (Cain & Oakhill, 2007).

Reading comprehension (understanding/ gaining meaning and interpreting the text) depends on a variety of reader-related, text-related, and situational (De Corte, Verschaffel, & Van de Ven, 2001) meaning is formed in the reader's head, that is, a person's prior knowledge affects the kinds of meaning constructed from the text information (Fukkink & de Gloppe, 1998). From this perspective an individual's existing knowledge is a major determinant in acquiring new information. Furthermore, the reader's comprehension of the text is considered to be linked to the reader's ability to construct hypotheses, rules, schemes and mental models (Withers & Vipond, 1980).

Alderson (2000, p. 1) believes that reading comprehension is to process text meaning through some processes of interaction with print. Not only looking at the print, the reader also "deciding" what they "mean" and how they relate to each other. Related to reading comprehension, Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 443) state that reading is an activity of perceiving a written text in order to understand its contents. This can be done silently (silent reading). The understanding that results is called reading comprehension.

A reading expert, Katharine Maria in Arietta (2010, pp. 1-5) defines reading comprehension as: holistic process of constructing meaning from written text through the interaction of:

1. The knowledge the reader brings to the text, i.e., word recognition ability, world knowledge, and knowledge of linguistic conventions.
2. The reader's interpretation of the language that writer used in constructing the text; and
3. The situation in which the text is read.

Based on some definitions above, it can be inferred that reading comprehension is a process of constructing a meaning from a written text that involves the interaction of the reader's prior knowledge with the new given information.

2.2. Importance of Testing

Testing becomes important at every stage of human lives, as well as in language learning. McNomara in Razi (2005, p. 1) argues that there are some reasons for administering language tests, which play a powerful role in an individual's social and working life. Language teachers work with language tests since they need to evaluate their students. In language learning, testing is important to find out where students have difficulties in a language course, to explore progress to reflect how well the students in learning a particular subject, and to give a general idea about students' proficiency in the target language. It means that a test can be tool to measure how successful a language teaching had been held.

2.3. Basic Methods for Testing Reading

There is some evidence in the literature that test format might affect student performance (Weir, 1990, p. 43). It is clear that the test takers' abilities are not always reflected in the test scores and to a certain extent this is inevitable, but we should try our best to decrease the influence of external factors to achieve the better understanding of examinees' reading abilities.

It is important to understand that there is no one “best method” for testing reading. No single test method can fulfill all the varied purposes for which we might test (Alderson & Charles, 2000). However, claims are often made for certain techniques -for example, cloze procedures- that might give the impression that testers have discovered a panacea. Moreover, the ubiquity of certain methods -in particular the multiple-choice technique- might suggest that some methods are particularly suitable for the testing of reading.

Two areas of applied linguistic theories –reading and testing- come together when testers design a test of reading ability. Hughes (1992) discusses that in order to elicit reliable behavior from the candidate and have highly reliable scoring, the test designer must consider, which ability he or she is interested to measure, so he or she writes the items on the basis of his or her aims. This study mainly deals with one of language skills that is the reading skill, particularly it deals with testing techniques for reading skills, but here we discuss only the methods which are related to our study. Among significant methods of testing comprehension we are going to understand the effect of cloze-test and open-ended question on reading comprehension.

2.4. Testing Reading Comprehension

In many second and foreign language-teaching situations, reading receives a special focus. Many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals. Reading is a skill, which is highly valued by students and teachers (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

How to assess reading ability in the EFL context in a best way has interested language testing researchers for a long time. Harris (1968) puts across the idea that the same general types of tests, which we used to test the reading ability of the native English, have the same effectiveness with the foreign learners of the language.

Alderson (2000, p. 87) identifies three different types of questions used in reading test. According to this categorization, “*textually explicit*” questions are the ones in which the respondents are able to find both the question information and the correct answer. On the other hand, through “*textually implicit*” questions the respondents are expected to find the answer by combining information across sentences. The last type is “*script-base*” (or “*scripturally implicit*”) questions, in which the respondent needs to refer to his or her background knowledge since the text does not contain the correct answer itself. Different studies show that the choice of text has marked effect on the test scores. Hughes (1992) argues that successful choice of texts depends on experience, practice and a certain amount of common sense.

2.5. Testing Techniques for Reading Comprehension

There are many kinds of testing techniques for reading comprehension. Brown (2004, p. 190) proposed: reading aloud, written response, multiple-choice, picture-cued items, editing, gap filling test, cloze-test, C-test, cloze-elide test, short-answer test, ordering test, summarizing test.

In line with Brown, Heaton (1991, p. 105) has: word matching, sentence matching, picture and sentence matching for initial stages of reading; matching tests for intermediate and advanced stages; true/false reading tests, multiple-choice items, completion, rearrangement, cloze procedures, open-ended and miscellaneous items, and cursory reading. In this particular study, the researcher tried to use cloze-test and open-ended questions to test the students’ reading comprehension.

2.5.1. Cloze Test and Reading Comprehension

Rye (1982) claims that the term “cloze test” was first developed by Wilson Taylor in 1953. He explains that the term cloze derived from the Gestalt psychology concept of “closure”. It describes a tendency that humans have to complete a familiar, but not quite finished pattern. Urquhart and Weir (1998, p. 156) further explain that it refers to the tendency of individuals to complete a pattern once that have grasped its overall significance.

Brown (2004, p. 109) claims that it is not difficult to get people to take a cloze test because of the compulsive human need to fill gaps. Harmer (2002, p. 323) states that cloze test is the deletion of every n^{th} word in a text (somewhere between every fifth or tenth word). Manning (1987) also says that classic cloze words are systematically deleted from a text and the testers are required to

replace them. This testing technique is considered appropriate to test reading comprehension. It is based on what Heaton (1991) says, "Perhaps the most common purpose of the cloze test, however, is to measure reading comprehension". He said so because it has long been argued that cloze measure textual knowledge: i.e. an awareness of cohesion in a text, involving the interdependence of phrases, sentences, and paragraph with in cloze text. He also stated that cloze test can be applied to the testing of reading comprehension at both levels, the elementary and the more advanced level.

In the "Cloze Test Procedure," the teacher instructs students to restore omitted words (usually every fifth word) in a reading passage. Based on reviewing students' restored words from the text passages, the teacher can determine a more accurate level of comprehension.

Another rule in cloze test construction is that it is not permissible to shift a deletion to a position before or after where it would normally occur, thus making a string of, say, six, a cloze deletion, and then a string of eight words of text. This tends to violate a global constraint on the written discourse.

2.5.2. Open-ended Question and Reading Comprehension

The teachers can use language to stretch children's curiosity, reasoning ability, creativity, and independence. One effective way to do this is by asking open-ended questions, those with no single right or wrong answer. Instead of predictable answers, open-ended questions elicit fresh and sometimes even startling insights and ideas, opening minds and enabling teachers and students to build knowledge together (Denton, 2007).

One can define an open-ended question as attest item, which allows the person taking the test to answer in his or her own way, in contrast to questions with limited multiple-choice possibilities (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Open-ended questions are questions that do not provide response options. They ask the respondent to answer in his or her own words. Open-ended questions are not multiple-choice questions without options. They are not questions that demand a single correct response. Nor are they questions where any response is acceptable. Langer (1989) proposes four kinds of relationships that occur during the reading process as readers' attitudes shift while they try to understand the text:

1. Being out and stepping in. Readers use the information from the text and their background knowledge to get enough information to "step into" the author's vision. In literature, readers try to make an initial acquaintance with the character, plot, and setting; in exposition, they try to figure out what the topic is about.
2. Being in and moving through. Readers immerse themselves in the author's vision, trying to understand the author's meaning. In exposition, readers take each new bit of information, trying to understand it and link it to what they already understand the text to say about the topic. In fiction, they use each new bit of information to go beyond what they already understand--asking questions about motivation, causality, and implications.
3. Being in and stepping out. Readers relate the text to their own knowledge and experiences. Readers of fiction use what they read in the text to reflect on their own lives, on the lives of others, or on the human condition in general. In non-fiction, readers use the text information to rethink information they already know.
4. Stepping out and going beyond. Readers distance themselves from the text and assume a critical stance, judging the text and relating it to other texts or experiences.

Therefore, in evaluating students, we can no longer simply judge whether or not the reader's conclusions are similar to the teacher's or test constructors. Instead, the quality of the reader's argument or justification becomes most important.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Subjects

In this study, the subjects were 47 female students who are participating in English classes of fourth grade of high school at Narjes Khatoon high school in Chabahar. Their ages, mainly ranged from 17 to 18. Although the subjects were expected all to be in the same level of proficiency, a

TOEFL proficiency test and sample comprehension passage from Longman Preparation course for the TOEFL test (Deborah, 2004) were administered prior to the beginning of the study. Then these subjects were assigned in to two groups: experimental group including 23 students, and control group 24 students. Both groups received same amount of instruction i.e. two sessions a week and each session lasted 90 minutes for nearly 10 weeks. Gender was not considered in this study.

3.2. Instruments

To fulfill the purpose of this study different instrument were used in this study.

3.2.1. TOEFL Proficiency Test

Subjects of this study were in fourth grade of high school. The researcher administered a TOEFL (PBT: the paper-based Test) (Deborah, 2004) proficiency test, which is reliable and valid to become sure about the level of subjects as intermediate EFL learners. This TOEFL test consists of three parts: listening comprehension, structure and written expression and reading comprehension in three different sections, which each section by order had 30, 40, and 30 multiple choice items. The test was taken from Longman Preparation Course for TOEFL test (Deborah, 2004).

3.2.2. Reading Comprehension Pre-Test

A reading comprehension test was used as the second pre-test in this study, because the main focus of this study was on reading skill, one session after administrating TOEFL proficiency test. All subjects were asked to participate at this reading comprehension pre-test to ensure the homogeneity, and comparability of the learners' reading comprehension ability in each group prior to the treatment. The pre-test consisted of 40 multiple-choice items. The sample of TOEFL reading comprehension test was taken from Longman complete course for the TOEFL test (Deborah, 2004).

3.2.3. Authentic Instructional Materials

Using authentic materials is one of the most important ideas in classroom. In this study the course book for both groups, experimental and control, was (Birjandi, Anani Sarab, & Samimi, 2012), and Developing Reading Skills (Markstein & Hirasawa, 1981), which were thought as the instructional materials. The reading topics covered during the experiments for both groups were variety of common topics such as: Motherhood in a changing world: Women in Ghana, U.S cities: Past and Present, Ordinary Aspirin is truly a wonder drug, The Crime of the Month, Tips on Doing Business with the Arabs, Everyday Life in the Soviet Union: the Shopping Runaround, and etc. For experimental group in addition to above mentioned materials. The teacher worked with cloze test and open-ended question. One week, she worked with cloze test, and next week she worked with open-ended question during the semester. The researcher made use of different sites for finding these two kinds of tests.

3.2.4. Reading Comprehension Immediate Post-Test

To determine possible progress in reading comprehension ability of the subjects after each two weeks an immediate post-test was administered, after separate instruction of cloze test and open ended questions. This study consists of four immediate post-tests, which were administered to all subjects of two groups. Each immediate post-test consists of a passage with 10 multiple-choice questions.

3.2.5. Reading Comprehension Delay Post-Test

A reading comprehension post-test similar to pre-test was administered after 10 weeks of instruction as a delay post-test. This test was used to see whether the reading comprehension of subjects has improved at the end of the experiment or not. Post-test was the same as the pre-test and consists of 40 multiple-choice questions. All subjects in both groups were asked to participate at this reading comprehension post-test.

3.3. Procedures

The present study was carried out in a second term of schooling year at Narjes Khaton high school in Chababar. None of the subjects were informed about the purpose of this study.

Prior to the study, and in order to determine the proficiency level of subjects and the extent of homogeneity of them a TOEFL proficiency test (PBT) was administered to both experimental and control groups. After that a standard reading comprehension test taken from Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test (Deborah, 2004) was administered to both groups as pre-test. It contained questions in multiple-choice form, which are considered valid and reliable. After ensuring the homogeneity the students were put in one experimental and one control group. Experimental group included 23 students, and control group included 24 students. All the subjects in groups received the same amount of materials, and as it was referred before, both experimental and control groups enjoyed of the same amount of exposing to language, reading and language instruction. The main difference was that the control group received traditional instruction of reading comprehension while in experimental group, in addition to traditional instruction, the subjects worked with cloze test and open-ended question.

This course was taught through using three different teaching approaches i.e. pre-reading stage, during-reading stage, and post-reading stage. These three stages were applied to both experimental and control groups.

Pre-Reading Stage: The main focus of this stage is to make connections between students' background knowledge and prior learning experiences, and developing their academic vocabulary. Therefore, stimulating students' interests through identifying their background knowledge and incorporating it into new information were the main goal of reading comprehension strategies in this stage.

During-Reading Stage: At this stage, teacher helped students to be aware of the meaning of the text. At this stage, the teacher asked the students to skim the text to understand the general idea, then read the text aloud. After reading, teacher gave feedback on students' pronunciation, and then he asked the students to retell the text on their own word to ensure their right reading comprehension.

Post-Reading Stage: At this stage, students would apply new knowledge and practice new skills supported by the teacher and peer feedback to gain the mastery. They would do the comprehension exercises and summarize the read text to gain mastery of complete reading comprehension. In experimental group in addition to these stages the teacher worked with cloze test in one session a week and she worked with open-ended question the other session.

Each of these two test method was independently worked for a week, two sessions in each week about 90 minutes, then at end of each week instruction an immediate post-test was administered to control and experimental group based on the materials worked in the class room. Five immediate post-tests were carried out for cloze test and five immediate post-test were carried out for open-ended questions during 10 weeks of instruction.

3.4. Data Analysis

SPSS version 19th (Science Statistical Package for the Social) was used for all the statistical analyses in this study. Paired sample t-test and independent sample t-test were used to analyze the statistical data, which were collected within this study.

4. RESULTS

The dependent and the independent variables of the study are students' reading comprehension ability and two test methods i.e. cloze test and open-ended questions respectively. According to the purpose of the study, a number of instruments for collecting the relevant data were used.

The data gathered on these variables were analyzed by the following methods through SPSS software.

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1. Descriptive statistics was used to determine the mean and standard deviation of each group on the pre-test and post-test.
2. Independent t-test was used to find the differences between the levels of the students of both group on pre-test and post-test.
3. Paired sample t-test was used to compare pre-test and post-test of the experimental group and control group.

SPSS version 19th was used for statistics.

Table 4.1 Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	experimental	23	25.39	6.920	1.443
	control	24	23.25	5.689	1.161

Table 4.2 Independent Samples Test for pre-test in experimental & control group

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
experimental	Equal variances assumed	1.435	.237	1.161	45	.252	2.141	1.844	-1.574	5.856
	Equal variances not assumed			1.156	42.626	.254	2.141	1.852	-1.595	5.878

Based on the statistics of table 4.1 and 4.2 the mean of control group and experimental group are 23.25 and 25.39 respectively. And the level of significance /0.237 which is more than 0/05, so it can be identified that there is no significant difference between experimental and control group in pre-test.

Table 4.3 Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	control	24	26.78	6.410	1.337
	experimental	23	33.33	5.223	1.066

Table 4.4 Independent Samples t-Test for experimental and control group post-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
experimental	Equal variances assumed	1.016	.319	-3.849	45	.000	-6.551	1.702	-9.979	-3.122
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.832	42.459	.000	-6.551	1.710	-10.000	-3.102

According to tables 4.3 and 4.4 the reported statistics for control group (mean=26/78, SD=6/410) and experimental group (mean=33/33, SD=5/223) and P=0/000<0/005 reveals a statistically significant difference between experimental and control group. It means that experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the post test.

Table 4.5 Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PRE	23.29	23	5.653	1.154
	POST	33.33	23	5.223	1.066

Table 4.6 Paired Samples t-Test for experimental group post-test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PRE - POST	-10.042	5.607	1.144	-12.409	-7.674	-8.774	23	.000

Table 4.5 displays mean value, number of cases, standard deviation, and standard error of means in the experimental group. Table 4.6 represents the paired t-test statistics of the experimental group in pre and post-test: It is clear in Table 4.6 there is a significant progress between the performances of the experimental group from pretest to posttest. The P value is 0/000 which less than 0/05 so a positive effect of cloze test and open-ended questions on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehensions ability is confirmed.

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Table 4.7. Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre	25.39	23	6.920	1.443
	post	26.78	23	6.410	1.337

Table 4.8 Paired Samples t-Test for control group post-test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pre - post	-1.391	8.596	1.792	-5.108	2.326	-.776	22	.446

The reported statistics in table 4.7 and 4.8 reveals that the mean difference of control group's reading comprehension is -1.391, which is not significant. And the amount of P value is more than 0/05 ($0/446 > 0/05$) so there is a little progress between the performances of the control group from pretest to posttest.

5. CONCLUSION

Results of hypotheses testing investigated that there is a significant difference between the performances of the two groups. Before the program, there was no statistical significant difference between the control group and experimental group in terms of their reading comprehensions ability. At the end of the study, there was statistical significant difference between the performances of the two groups in terms of their reading comprehensions ability. The comparisons made showed that the reading comprehension of those students in the treatment group, where cloze tests and open-ended questions implemented, differ significantly from those of students in the control group where traditional way of teaching reading comprehension implemented. Finally, findings of the study rejected the null hypothesis. It was concluded that cloze test and open-ended questions have significant effect on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners and there is a significant difference between the impact of cloze test and open-ended questions on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability and open-ended questions has a positive effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. The findings of this study are in agreement with the existing studies in the literature which revealed that test methods could enhance students' reading comprehension ability.

This study also has several important teaching and pedagogical implications:

Findings of this study showed that test methods have an important role in EFL instruction.

Findings of this study encourage teachers to use different test methods such as cloze tests and open-ended questions in order to enhance reading comprehension ability of learners.

The present study also can help teachers to decide upon which of these two methods is more useful. Additionally, this study was conducted for EFL intermediate students; it can be replicated with other levels such as elementary or advanced. Finally, interested researchers can investigate the impact of other types of test methods on language skills such as multiple choice question, c-test, cloze Elite test, matching items etc.

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