

The Effect of Explicit Morphological Practice on the Reading Comprehension Abilities of Iranian Intermediate Level English Language Learners

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Abstract—This study investigated the effect of explicit morphological practice on improving reading comprehension ability of Iranian intermediate level language learners. Participants in this study were sixty Iranian EFL learners in English institutes of Amol, Mazandaran, Iran. Students were administered a TOFL proficiency test adapted from Sharpe (2010) and thirty homogeneous students were selected as the main participants of the study. These students were randomly assigned to one experimental group and one control group. First of all, students in both groups took a reading comprehension test as pretest. This test was designed to measure morphological knowledge of students and its effects on their total reading comprehension of passages. Then, the treatment of the researcher started and all students in both groups received a six-sessions reading comprehension training, but the experimental group also received explicit morphological practice during reading comprehension classes. After finishing the treatment, all the participants took a post test that was designed so as to be the parallel form of the pretest. The changes, if any, in the performance of both groups were calculated by SPSS and mean of the scores and t value and covariance of the scores were reported. The results indicate that students in experimental group showed a progress in their reading comprehension ability from pretest to posttest. This demonstrates that explicit morphological practice is effective in improving reading comprehension skills of Iranian intermediate level EFL students.

Index Terms—reading, reading comprehension, morphology, morphological awareness, morphological knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the four language skills (listening, writing, reading, and speaking) that second language learners should acquire in their language learning process if they are to become proficient users of the target language. Reading comprehension is defined as “the ability to understand and retain the details, sequence, and meaning from written material” (Androes, McMahon, Parks, and Rose, 2000, p. 55). Language learners acquire most of their vocabulary through reading, particularly if they do not stay in a country where the language is spoken.

As such, vocabulary learning and teaching is a central activity in the L2 classroom. One way in which vocabulary learning can be enhanced is through the use of learning strategies. One potential language learning strategy is the use of morphological awareness to learn novel vocabulary. Morphological awareness refers to the learner’s knowledge of morphemes and morphemic structure, allowing them to reflect and manipulate morphological structure of words (Carlisle, 1995; Carlisle and Stone, 2003).

Perhaps the most significant contribution of morphological knowledge to reading is in the realm of vocabulary meaning. According to Nagy and Anderson (1984), 60% of the unfamiliar words a reader encounter in a text have meanings that can be predicted on the basis of their component parts. A reader with a better grasp of word formation processes will be better able to infer the meanings of these words and will therefore be able to comprehend the text better (Nagy, Berninger, Abbott, and Vaughan, 2003).

A number of studies have investigated the relationship between morphological awareness and reading comprehension in general and vocabulary knowledge in particular.

Deacon and Kirby’s (2004) four-year longitudinal study indicates that there is a positive relationship between morphological awareness and reading comprehension for the second, forth and sixth graders. They compared the effect of inflection awareness and phonological awareness on reading development after controlling variables of verbal and

non-verbal intelligence and prior reading ability. The study indicates that morphological awareness contributes to reading development even after three years of the study and after controlling for phonological awareness.

Ku and Anderson (2003) conducted a study to investigate whether morphological awareness plays a significant role in vocabulary acquisition and reading proficiency among second, fourth and sixth American and Chinese graders of English and Chinese languages. Researchers administered a reading comprehension test along with a set of tests. These tests involve a morpheme recognition test, a morpheme interpretation test and a pseudoword judgment test. The results demonstrate that morphological awareness is developed gradually throughout the students' language experience, and that morphological awareness is indispensable for English and Chinese vocabulary acquisition and reading proficiency.

White, Power and White's (1989) results of experiment 1 of the characteristics of affixed words is in accord with the previous studies. They draw the conclusion that morphological analysis is sufficient to understand affixed words that are semantically transparent (i.e. the meaning of the whole words can be derived from the meaning of its morphological units).

Explicit instruction on morphological units may help the learners to recover the meaning of complex words, and this might be accounted as an important vocabulary learning strategy. The fact that according to studies Iranian EFL students encounter a large number of morphologically complex words in their reading has motivated the researcher to explore further the role of morphological practice in reading comprehension of Iranian students.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The population from which the subjects of the present study are selected, includes sixty male and female intermediate level English language learners attending English institutes of Amol, Mazandaran. EFL students in these institutes take classes of English in reading, writing, speaking and listening. They are exposed to English 4 hours per week. The subjects of the study were recruited from different classes. The first language of all the students is Persian. In order to make the participants homogenous, all the students take the TOEFL proficiency test. Then, thirty homogeneous students having the lower level of English proficiency are selected as the main participants of the study. The mean age of these participants including 10 male and 20 female students is 17.5 years, with an age range of 15 to 20 and they are classified into two groups including one experimental group and one control group. Fifteen students are randomly assigned to each of these groups.

B. Materials

To answer the present study's questions of explicit morphological practice and its effects on reading comprehension skills of intermediate level students, three tests are applied to achieve the purposes of the study. The first test is TOEFL Proficiency Test.

1. TOEFL iBT Proficiency Test

The TOEFL proficiency test is adapted from Sharpe (2010), and is used to test students' English proficiency in four skills of speaking, reading, writing and listening. This test is of interest to the researcher as it can be applied to make the students homogeneous. Some items of the test are created by the researcher, and others are taken from Sharpe (2010) TOEFL test. The test is divided into two sections: Reading Comprehension and Morphological Structure.

Reading Comprehension Test measures students' ability to understand the text. It is comprised of a reading passage and 8 related questions. Students are asked to read the passage and select the most appropriate alternatives. The Morphological Structure Test measures students' morphological knowledge. The test consists of 12 four-option items. These items are created by the researcher. All of items are embedded in a sentence frame. Again the students are asked to choose the appropriate alternatives.

2. Reading Comprehension Test "as Pretest"

This test consists of two reading passages. These passages are recruited from Active Reading by Anderson (2007). These passages are selected as to best suit the students' age and level. The test is comprised of 15 two-option questions. Almost all of the questions are designed to measure the participants' morphological knowledge and its effects on their overall comprehension of the texts. The participants are asked to read the passages and select those choices that are appropriate.

3. Reading Comprehension Test "as post test"

This test consists of the same reading passages as the pretest, but it is comprised of somewhat different items as questions; in fact, parallel-forms method is applied. The post tests' items are designed so as to have the same level of difficulty of the pretest items and again they are used to measure the participants' morphological knowledge and its effects on their understanding of the texts.

C. Procedure

First, the TOEFL proficiency test was administered to the sixty students who participated in the study. The goal of delivering this test was choosing the homogeneous students of the same level of language proficiency for the subsequent stages of the study. The proficiency test was divided into two parts; reading comprehension test and morphological structure test. The students were asked to read the passage, questions, and other test items and choose the

best possible responses. Then, those thirty students whose grades were lower than average and had the lower level of proficiency were selected by the researcher as the main participants of the study.

Then, these resulting thirty students were randomly assigned to two groups of fifteen as one control group and one experimental group. First of all, students in both groups took a reading comprehension test as pretest. This test was designed to measure morphological knowledge of students and its effects on their total reading comprehension of passages. Then, the treatment of the researcher started and all students in both groups received a six-sessions reading comprehension training, but the experimental group also received explicit morphological practice during reading comprehension classes. The reading material that was selected from *Active Reading* by Anderson (2007), included six reading passages. Each session, the researcher taught one passage. In the experimental group, the participants received reading comprehension training and at the same time, morphological features of the passage was explained by the researcher and practiced in the classroom. In other words, the participants received morphological training beside of reading comprehension practice. In the case of the control group, students only received reading comprehension practice in the whole sessions.

After finishing the treatment, all the participants took a post test that was designed so as to be the parallel form of the pretest. The aim of the researcher was to measure the changes, if any, in the performance of both experimental and control groups after receiving their own specific trainings.

D. Data Analysis

The data collected in this study is quantitative. In the case of the first hypothesis “explicit morphological practice has no effect on reading comprehension of Iranian students”, the mean of the scores of the participants in pretest and posttest will be calculated. Then, a t-test will be used to determine if the means of two groups in both pretests and posttests are significantly different from one another. For the second and third hypotheses, the ANCOVA will be carried out to investigate any kind of progress in the comprehension ability of experimental group from pretest to post test and reading score of control group from pretest to post test.

III. RESULT

A. Data Analysis and Findings

1. Descriptive Analysis

The following tables provide some information about the number of students in each group (experimental group and control group), the mean, standard deviation, and variance of participants' scores in pretests and posttests in both experimental group and control group

TABLE 4.1
PRETEST OF CONTROL GROUP

N	Valid	15
Mean		5.8000
Std. Deviation		1.56753
Variance		2.457
Sum		87.00

Table 4.1 reports the number of participants in reading comprehension pretest, mean, standard deviation, and variance of scores of control group students. As the table 4.1 shows, the number of the students participating in the pretest of the control group has been 15. The mean of pretest scores of control group is 5.8000. Standard deviation of pretest scores of control group has been 1.56753 and the variance of scores is reported as 2.457.

TABLE 4.2
PRETEST OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

N	Valid	15
	Missing	0
Mean		5.3333
Std. Deviation		1.63299
Variance		2.667
Sum		80.00

As it can be seen, the number of participants in reading comprehension pretest, mean, standard deviation, and variance of scores of experimental group are provided in Table 4.2. The number of participant in pretest of experimental group is 15. The mean of pretest scores of experimental group is 5.3333, and the standard deviation is 1.63299. The variance of scores is 2.667.

TABLE 4.3
POSTTEST OF CONTROL GROUP

N	Valid	15
	Missing	0
Mean		6.3333
Std. Deviation		1.38444
Variance		1.917
Sum		95.00

Table 4.3 shows that the number of students participating in the posttest of control group was 15. The mean of posttest scores of control group is reported as 6.3333 and the standard deviation is 1.38444. The variance of scores will be 1.917.

TABLE 4.4
POSTTEST OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

N	Valid	15
	Missing	0
Mean		9.8667
Std. Deviation		2.06559
Variance		4.267
Sum		148.00

Table 4.4 reports that the number of participants in reading comprehension posttest of experimental group was 15. The mean of posttest scores of experimental group is 9.8667, and the standard deviation of scores is 2.06559. The variance of scores will be 4.267.

2. Inferential Analysis

The data collected in this study is quantitative. In the case of the first hypothesis “explicit morphological practice has no effect on reading comprehension of Iranian students”, posttests’ scores of participants in both experimental and control groups will be compared. Then, a t-test will be used to determine if the means of two groups in posttests are significantly different from one another. For the second and third hypotheses, the ANCOVA will be carried out to investigate any kind of progress in the comprehension ability of experimental group from pretest to post test and reading score of control group from pretest to post test.

A t-test statistics are shown in the table below.

TABLE 4.5
GROUP STATISTICS

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
reading	morphological practice	15	9.8667	2.06559	.53333
	no morphological practice	15	6.3333	1.38444	.35746

TABLE 4.6
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES 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	
3.370	.077	5.503	28	.000	3.53333	.64205	2.21816	4.84850
		5.503	24.466	.000	3.53333	.64205	2.20955	4.85712

As the table 4.5 reports, the number of participants in posttest of both control group and experimental group were 15. The mean of posttest scores of control group is 6.333, and the mean of posttest scores of experimental group is 9.8667. The standard deviation of experimental groups’ scores is 2.06559, and their standard error of mean is .53333. The standard deviation of control groups’ scores is 1.38444, and their standard error of mean is .35746.

TABLE 4.7
THE COVARIANCE BETWEEN PRETEST AND POSTTEST SCORES OF CONTROL GROUP

x	x-x	y	y-y	Cov xy
5.8	-3	6.333	-2.5	.25

As the table 4.7 reports, the mean of pretest scores of control group is 5.8, and the mean of posttest scores of control group is 6.333. The resulting covariance between pretest and posttest scores of control group will be .25.

TABLE 4.8
THE COVARIANCE BETWEEN PRETEST AND POSTTEST SCORES OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

x	x-x	y	y-y	Cov xy
5.3333	-2.5	9.8667	-2	.17

As the table 4.8 shows, the mean of pretest scores of experimental group is 5.3333, and the mean of posttest scores of experimental group is 9.8667. The resulting covariance between pretest and posttest scores of experimental group will be .17.

B. Hypothesis Analysis

This study tested the following null hypotheses:

- H 1: Explicit morphological practice has no effect on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate level students.
- H 2: There is no progress from pretest to posttest in the reading comprehension ability of experimental group.
- H 3: There is no progress from pretest to posttest in the reading score of control group.

1. Hypothesis 1:

Based on the above- mentioned tables and statistics, the observed value of t is more than the critical value of t ($5.503 > 2.048$). So the first hypothesis is rejected. This rejection of the first hypothesis is expressive of the fact that explicit morphological practice is significantly effective on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate level English language learners.

2. Hypotheses 2 and 3:

Based on the tables 4.7 and 4.8, the resulting ANCOVA numbers for control group and experimental group are consecutively .25 and .17. Since the ANCOVA number in experimental group is less than control group, it means that the students' marks in experimental group are less nearer to each other. This shows that morphological practice task with experimental group has been much more effective than reading task with control group and the second hypothesis is rejected. The students' marks in control group are nearer to each other than the experimental group and this demonstrates that the control group's task has been less effective in comparison with the experimental groups' task. Thus, the third hypothesis is supported.

IV. DISCUSSION

The current study concentrated on determining the effectiveness of explicit morphological practice on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate level English language learners. The control group only received reading comprehension training, but the experimental group was exposed to both reading comprehension and morphological knowledge training.

Using the data collected, it can be determined that the experimental group's students had a significantly better performance in posttest than pretest. Almost all of these students showed significant progress throughout six weeks in their ability to respond to reading comprehension questions. However, the control group's student's performance in posttest was not significantly different from pretest.

The first finding was that explicit morphological practice is really effective in improving reading comprehension of Iranian students. Based on the t-test done between posttests of control and experimental groups, the t value was less than the critical value (2.048) in Fisher and Yates table. So, the first null hypothesis can be rejected and it can be concluded that explicit morphological practice has effect on reading comprehension of Iranian students.

The second finding was that experimental groups' students showed a progress in their reading comprehension ability from pretest to posttest. Based on the ANCOVA done between pretest and posttest of experimental group, the covariance between pretest and posttest scores of experimental group was .17. So, the second null hypothesis can be rejected. This rejection indicates that experimental group's students had a significantly better performance in posttest than pretest as a result of the treatment made.

The third finding was that there has been no progress in reading score of control group from pretest to posttest. Based on the ANCOVA done between pretest and posttest scores of control group, the covariance between pretest and posttest of control groups' scores was .25. As a result, the third null hypothesis is not rejected based on statistical measurement. So, it can be inferred that there is no meaningful progress in reading score of control group from pretest to posttest.

APPENDIX A TOEFL IBT PROFICIENCY TEST, FROM SHARPE, 2010

Part A

Attention: You will have 15 minutes to read this passage and answer the relevant questions.

"Beowulf"

Historical Background

P1: The epic poem Beowulf, written in Old English, is the earliest existing Germanic epic and one of four surviving Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. Although Beowulf was written by an anonymous Englishman in Old English, the tale takes place in that part of Scandinavia from which Germanic tribes emigrated to England. Beowulf comes from Geatland, the

southeastern part of what is now Sweden. The Beowulf epic contains three major tales about Beowulf and several minor tales that reflect a rich Germanic oral tradition of myths, legends, and folklore.

P2: The Beowulf warriors have a foot in both the Bronze and Iron Ages. Their mead-halls reflect the wealthy living of the Bronze Age Northmen, and their wooden shields, wood shafted spears, and Bronze-hilted swords are those of the Bronze Age warrior. Beowulf also orders an iron shield for his fight with a dragon. Iron replaced bronze because it produced a blade with a cutting edge that was stronger and sharper. The Northman learned how to forge iron in about 500 B.C. Although they had been superior to the European Celts in the iron work, it was the Celts who taught them how to make and design iron work. Iron was accessible everywhere in Scandinavia, usually in the form of “bog-iron” found in the layers of peat in peat bogs.

P3: The Beowulf epic also reveals interesting aspects of the lives of the Anglo-Saxon who lived in England at the time of the anonymous Beowulf poet. The Germanic tribes, including the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes, invaded England from about A.D. 450 TO 600. By the time of the Beowulf poet, Anglo-Saxon society in England was neither primitive nor uncultured.

P4: The identity of Beowulf poet is also uncertain. He apparently was a Christian who loved the pagan heroic tradition of his ancestors and blended the values of the pagan hero with the Christian values of his own country and time. Because he wrote in the Anglian dialect, he probably was either a monk in a monastery or a poet in an Anglo-Saxon court located north of the Thames River.

P5: Beowulf interests contemporary readers for many reasons. First, it is an outstanding adventure story. Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon are marvelous characters, and each fight is unique, action-packed, and exiting. Second, Beowulf is a very appealing hero. He is the perfect warrior combining extraordinary strength, skill, courage, and loyalty. Like Hercules, he devotes his life to make the world a safer place. He chooses to risk death in order to help other people, and he faces his inevitable death with heroism and dignity. Third, the Beowulf poet is interested in the psychological aspects of human behavior.

P6: Finally, the Beowulf poet exhibits a mature appreciation of the transitory nature of human life and achievement. In Beowulf, as in major epics of other cultures, the hero must create a meaningful life in a world that is often dangerous and uncaring. He must accept the inevitability of death. He chooses to reject despair; instead, he takes pride in himself and in his accomplishments. And he values human relationships.

1. According to paragraph 1, which of the following is true about Beowulf?
 - A. It is the only manuscript from the Anglo-Saxon period.
 - B. The original story was written in a Germanic dialect.
 - C. The author did not sign his name to the poem.
 - D. It is one of the several epics from the first century.
2. The word which in the passage refers to
 - A. Tale
 - B. Scandinavia
 - C. Manuscripts
 - D. Old English
3. Why does the author mention “bog-iron” in paragraph 2?
 - A. To demonstrate the availability of iron in Scandinavia
 - B. To prove that iron was better than Bronze for weapons
 - C. To argue that the Celts provided the materials to make iron
 - D. To suggest that 500 B.C. was the date that the Iron Age began
4. Which of the sentences below best expresses the information in the underlined statement in the paragraph 3 ?
 - A. Society in Anglo-Saxon England was both advanced and cultured.
 - B. The society of the Anglo-Saxons was not primitive or cultured.
 - C. The Anglo-Saxons had a society that was primitive, not cultured.
 - D. England during the Anglo-Saxon society was advanced, not cultured.
5. Why does the author of this passage use the word “apparently” in paragraph 4?
 - A. He is not certain that the author of Beowulf was a Christian.
 - B. He is mentioning facts that are obvious to the readers.
 - C. He is giving an example from a historical reference.
 - D. He is introducing evidence about the author of Beowulf.
6. The author compared the Beowulf character to Hercules because
 - A. They are both examples of the ideal hero
 - B. Their adventure with a dragon are very similar
 - C. The speeches that they make are inspiring
 - D. They lived at about the same time
7. The word exhibits in the passage is closest in meaning to
 - A. Creates
 - B. Demonstrates

- C. Assumes
- D. Terminates

8. The word reject in the passage is closest in meaning to
- A. Manage
 - B. Evaluate
 - C. Refuse
 - D. Confront

Part B

Attention: you will have 5 minutes to read the questions and select the proper alternatives.

1. Did you hear the?
 - a) announce b)announcing c)announced d)announcement
2. He listened carefully to the?
 - a) directs b)directions c)directing d)directed
3. It was thesky of the winter.
 - a) darkful b)darkles c)darkest d)darkly
4. She hoped to make a good
 - a)impressive b)impressionable c) impression d)impressively
5. He was blinded by the
 - a) bright b)brighten c)brightly d)brightness
6. The census is a count of the
 - a)popular b)population c)populate d)popularize
7. I could feel the
 - a)froodly b)froodful c)frooden d)froodness
8. He wants to the moon!
 - a) colonist b)colonization c)colonial d)colonize
9. She ignored the feeling of in her feet.
 - a) dead b)deadly c)deadness d)deaden
10. The sunrise was so
 - a) gloriousness b)glorify c)glorification d)glorious
11. Please do not be so
 - a) critical b)critically c)criticism d)criticize
12. Those two dogs are almost
 - a) identical b)identity c)identification d)identity

APPENDIX B PRETEST, TOEFL iBT, SHARPE 2010.

Please read the following passages and answer the related questions accordingly.

Passage 1:

Mystery Tours

It's really interesting to take a trip to some mysterious locations that still **baffle** archeologists to this day. The spectacular places like the Easter Island in the South Pacific and Stonehenge in England hold **extraordinary** impressive, ancient structures created by **prehistoric** civilizations. Scientists can only **speculate** as to how they were made.

The Moai of Easter Island

Located in the South Pacific, Easter Island is one of the most **isolated** places on earth and is famous for the large **intriguing** statues, which were carved by ancient people to bear **resemblance** to human heads. Archeological research is **indicative of** the point that Easter Island was first inhabited by Polynesians. Scientist believe these early inhabitants carved the Island's moai-believed to be religious symbols- from volcanic rock, and then pulled them to their different locations.

Stonehenge

This ancient English site is a collection of large stones arranged in two circles-one inside the other. Research suggests that it may have been designed and built by an ancient religious group for one of two purposes: either as a sacred temple or as an **observatory** to study the sky. Scientists believe that the enormous stones were transported from places around the country to their present site. Engineers estimate that approximately 600 people were needed to transport each sarsen stone from its point of origin to Salisby. Scientists consider this a remarkable feat in that time that is not accounted **significant** regarding today's equipments.

A. Read each question or statement and choose the correct answer.

1. A *baffling* custom of a country is to outsiders.
 - a. Easy b. difficult
2. What civilizations created the mentioned spectacular places?
 - a. Those who lived in the period of time in history before information was written down
 - b. Those who lived in the period of time in history that information was written down

3. Archeological research
 - a. Proves that Easter Island was first inhabited by Polynesians
 - b. Rejects that Easter Island was first inhabited by Polynesians
4. What is not meant by the word *observatory*?
 - a. A special building for observation
 - b. A tool for observation
5. What is meant by the word *approximately*?
 - a. almost correct
 - b. completely correct
6. What is meant by the word *intriguing*?
 - a. shocking
 - b. interesting
7. If people *speculate* that the earthquake will occur, they.....
 - a. Think it might happen
 - b. are sure it will happen
8. Travelling to moon has been improvement for human beings.
 - a. a Significant
 - b. an insignificant
9. The between the two structures was remarkable.
 - a. resembling
 - b. resemblance
10. Elderly people easily become socially
 - a. isolation
 - b. isolated

Passage 2:

Endangered Species

Like individual animals, animal species also eventually **die out**. It is estimated that, until the 18th century, one species disappeared from the earth every four years. By 1975, it was 1000 species per year, and today animals are disappearing at the **appalling** rate of more than 40000 species per year. Most species are threatened by pollution, habitat destruction, and unreasonable **exploitation** caused by humans.

Species that have a high, but not immediate, risk of dying out are simply labeled **endangered**. A **vulnerable** species is in less trouble than an endangered one, but its numbers are still certainly declining. Introducing a non-native species to an environment can also cause species endangerment. A non-native species can be introduced into a new environment by humans, either intentionally or by accident. Organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund try to raise awareness of threatened animals and plants.

B. Choose the correct response.

1. Those species that are labeled as *endangered*, are the ones that
 - a. Threat humans and other animals
 - b. Could be harmed
2. *vulnerable* species are the groups of animals that?
 - a. Will live a long time
 - b. will disappear soon
3. The Iranian tigers are exposed to extinction due to excessiveof them for their meat and leather.
 - a. Elimination
 - b. exploitation
4. Unable to adapt to the new conditions of life, the dinosaurs
 - a. Continued living
 - b. died
5. The prisoners were living in conditions.
 - a. appalled
 - b. appalling

APPENDIX C POSTTEST, TOEFL iBT, SHARPE 2010.

Please read the following passages and answer the related questions accordingly.

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3. The Iranian tigers are exposed to extinction due to excessiveof them for their meat and leather.
a. Elimination b. exploitation
4. Unable to adapt to the new conditions of life, the dinosaurs
a. Continued living b. died
5. The prisoners were living in conditions.
a. appalled b. appalling

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