Collaborative Strategic Reading and Critical Reading Ability of Intermediate Iranian Learners

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Abstract—The purpose of this study was to determine how collaborative strategic reading may increase critical reading of EFL students at the intermediate level. Forty students majoring in English language literature at the University of Mazandaran participated in this study. In the experimental group, the students were taught collaborative strategic reading. The students in the control group were taught in the traditional way. The instruction of both groups lasted for 10 sessions and every session continued for 90 minutes. A pre test and post test were given to both groups before and after the treatment. A self designed questionnaire and interview were also administered to the experimental group only in order to examine the attitude of students toward CSR. A two-tailed independent sample t-test was applied to analyze the pre test and post test results of the experimental and control group to check if there was any significant difference between the students’ performance regarding their critical reading ability. The result indicated that students in the experimental group with CSR instruction outperformed the students in the control group. Therefore, the finding in this study indicated that CSR instruction improved students’ critical reading. The results of the self designed questionnaire and interview revealed that students had a positive attitude toward CSR.

Index Terms—collaborative strategic reading, critical reading, critical thinking, traditional reading instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is the most important academic language skill for second language students which can lead to their professional, social, and personal development. This skill, though, is a complex and dynamic phenomenon and is often considered as an important source of language input which involves a special interaction between the reader, the author and text (Berardo, 2006). To successfully read, comprehend and respond to the reading, therefore, the reader needs to be equipped with certain skills and ability types. Reading, itself, occurs at three different levels which are interconnected. In other words, the readers usually start to read the lines first to grasp the message put forth by the writer, then they should be able to read between the lines to get the implied message not directly given in the passage, and at a higher level, they should read beyond the lines. This last type of reading which involves some higher order thinking as Bloom (1956) states is what is often called critical reading. Critical reading is defined as the ability to evaluate the credibility of a piece of writing. All writers have a purpose in writing, and usually, a writer will choose to support his or her purpose on the basis of their own knowledge and conceptualization of the topic. Wallace (2003) and Sweet (1993) define critical readers as active readers who question, confirm, and judge what they read throughout the reading process. In other words, to read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze the evidence given by the author. The reader should also be able to recognize the author’s purpose, to understand tone and persuasive elements and to recognize bias. It is important to note that this is not going to be an easy task since not all of these goals actually refer to something found on the page; in other words, learners are required to make inferences from evidence within the text.

Decker (1993) points out that today most of the professional organizations and professional literature support the development of critical thinking in the classroom and ask teachers to guide their students in developing this higher-level thinking skill. However, Wallace (2003) asserts that despite the significance of critical reading in different areas of education, it is not taken as seriously as it should be. He recommended that schools must deal with controversial issues and that they should make it a goal to teach and develop learners’ critical reading skills. As far as university education is concerned, Crismore (2000) indicates that many students come to universities underprepared for tackling the requirements of such an atmosphere and many of these students are not familiar with the opportunities or experiences that require critical thinking and critical reading.

Reading critically, thus, plays an important role in students’ success in collage and the courses they undertake. To read critically, language learners should be given the chance to go through the text and focus on the author’s assumptions, viewpoints, purposes, and ideology (Khabiri and Pakzad, 2012). For reading effectively, the readers require to read with critical eyes which means that the reader should try to evaluate and read the text to find out what it says, and how and why it says it. Therefore, improving students’ critical thinking seems to be one of the key issues in enhancing foreign language reading. Collage for students is a place for expanding knowledge, and thinking critically is
one of the main factors that can lead to success at college levels. The ability to read critically is widely regarded as one of the main generic skills that should be gained through university education. But unfortunately, not enough attention has been given to training strategies that can enhance critical thinking in students. So usually students show poor reasoning and problem skills.

During the past few years, a large number of strategy instructions have been recognized in reading studies. Among various reading strategies, Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) rendered by Klingner and Vaughn (1998) has been widely used in different research studies. Many studies on CSR (Klingner, 1998; Standish, 2005; Fan, 2010; Ziyaeemehr, 2012; Novita, 2012; Karabuga, 2012) have shown that CSR has an effective impact on reading comprehension of EFL and ESL students. CSR provides the opportunity for readers to apply most of the strategies needed for the reading skill. Through the collaborative approach emphasized with CSR, student learning is supported by both teachers and peers (Vaghaun et al., 2011).

To date, most of the studies on CSR have examined the effect of this approach on reading comprehension, but there are some studies which have tried to examine the effect of CSR on other areas of language learning; for example, Standish (2005) examined how CSR in combination with direct instruction in persuasion, affected her six-grader’ persuasive writing. Or in another study by Lee (2003), he tried to consider the effect of CSR on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Due to the importance of critical reading and thinking, and the paucity of research in this particular skill, this study tried to shed light on the impact of CSR on the development of critical reading. This approach was selected since it was hypothesized that its positive effect on literal reading (or reading the lines) could also be transferred to a higher type of reading (reading beyond the lines). Since Iranian students are among those learners who come to the university with no or very little critical reading ability, it is highly important to examine whether this gap can be filled with a collaborative approach which involves interaction with other individuals.

Regarding the above mentioned need of Iranian students as EFL learners with little knowledge of critical reading, there is a need for empirically-based interventions that can (a) promote learners’ engagement in today’s classrooms and (b) facilitate critical reading by developing strategic behavior of students in EFL reading (c) and increase learner’s interest toward reading.

Additionally, this study has also tried to examine the attitudes of students toward CSR. This was done since group activities are not so easily accepted by Iranian language learners due to their unfamiliarity with such activity types. In other words, the traditional educational system that is dominant in schools emphasizes the teacher-fronted classrooms with little or no room for learner involvement and therefore the traditional memorization and regurgitation of teacher fed knowledge is more prevalent. This study, therefore, was guided by the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. Does collaborative strategic reading help improve the critical reading ability of the learners?
2. What are the attitudes of students toward CSR as a means which can help improve their critical reading?

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Design of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of collaborative strategic reading (CSR) instruction on EFL students’ critical reading and reading attitude. The current study used a quasi-experimental design in order to explore the effect of CSR on EFL students’ critical reading and their attitude both quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, the test of critical reading and the attitude questionnaire were administrated to investigate whether there were any significant differences in students’ performance after the instruction was over. For qualitative analysis, a semi-structured interview was conducted with students to learn about their perception of CSR instruction as well as their attitude toward this activity. The results were analyzed through SPSS and content analysis techniques.

B. Participants

Forty students participated in this study. In the experimental group, there were 20 students majoring in English literature in Mazandaran University. The other 20 students who majored in English translation were selected from Parsa University as the control group. The experimental group received Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) instruction while the control group had the traditional teacher-directed instruction. The proficiency level of both groups was determined via proficiency TOFL test at the beginning of the term. In the experimental group students were divided into several subgroups, every group having 4 or 5 members and every member had a special role which changed in the next class time. In the control group, though, students had a teacher-directed instruction. In both groups students took part in reading classes twice a week and every session lasted for 90 minutes. This study was conducted in their reading class (reading II) which met twice a week for a whole semester.

C. Instruments

The instruments in this study included: (1) English proficiency TOFL test to all the participants, (2) critical reading test as pre test and post test, (3) a questionnaire of student’s attitude toward CSR and critical reading, (4) six critical
reading texts in the experimental group (5) an interview on student’s perception toward CSR instruction. They were implemented before the study, during and after the study.

D. The Materials

The materials covered in the experimental group were selected according to the level of the students and the readability formula was applied to ensure that the texts were appropriate for this level. Six texts taken from different sources were given to the learners. The topics of the texts varied and they were selected based on the general ideas they developed. In fact, 15 topics were piloted with a group of students with the similar characteristics for ensuring that the ideas are not alien to the students and six of those topics were covered in the time slot of the class.

E. Procedure

Collaborative strategic reading is a comprehension strategy approach which is proposed by Klingner and Vaughn (1996). CSR is a combination of two instructional approaches of reciprocal teaching and cooperative learning. It is based on Vygotsky’ (1978) theories of learning and social constructivism (Rumerhart & Ortony, 1977, cited in Standish, 2005).

Klingner and Vaughn (1999) define CSR as a practice in which “students of mixed reading and achievement levels work in small, cooperative groups to assist one another in applying four reading strategies to facilitate their comprehension of content area text” (p. 29 as cited in Karabuga, 2012). Vaghun et al (2010) interpret CSR as a multi dimension strategy that addresses both content learning through teacher and student led conversation as well as strategic enhancement. The strategies included in CSR practice are: (a) preview (before reading), (b) click and clunk (during reading), (c) get the gist (during reading), and (d) wrap-up (after reading). Klingner & Vahun (1998) detailed every stage in the following order:

**Preview** is used only before reading. The goals of previewing are, a) introducing the text to students, b) activating their background knowledge, and c) helping them to make prediction about the text. Preview tries to motivate students and engage them in active reading. The questions used in this stage include: a. brainstorming: What do we already know about the topic? b. Predicting: What do we think we will learn about the topic when we read the passage?

**Click and clunk** is used during reading with the purpose of teaching students how to monitor what they are reading, and to identify the information that they know more about, and information that causes students to experience difficulties in understanding. **Click** refers to when the reader comprehends the word and text and **clunk** refers to comprehension breakdown or when the reader doesn’t know the words. It is designed for readers to pay attention to their understanding or their failure. Some questions in these stage are: a. Were there any parts that were hard to understand (clunks)? b. How can we fix the clunks? Use fix-up strategies.

**Get the gist** is used during reading with the purpose to teach readers how to identify the main idea of passage. The goal of getting the gist is to teach students to reproduce in their own words the most important point of the text. Some questions in this stage are: a. What is the most important person, place, or thing? b. What is the most important idea about the person, place, or thing?

**Wrap up** is an after reading strategy with the purpose of providing an opportunity for students to review what they read by formulating questions. The benefits of this stage are to improve students’ understanding, knowledge and memory. The questions in this stage are: a. Ask questions: What questions would show we understand the most important information? What are the answers to those questions? By summarizing and generating questions they check their understanding of the text.

In this study, the procedure for practicing CSR instruction was implemented as follows:

(a) a critical reading pre test was given to all participant, (b) CSR instruction was explained and implemented by the teacher (c) a critical reading post test was conducted at the end of the program, (d) a questionnaire of students attitude toward CSR and critical reading was administered in the experimental group (e) students were interviewed regarding their perception of CSR in the experimental group.

The teacher implemented CSR instruction with the experimental group for 10 sessions and every session lasted for 90 minutes and after the 10th sessions the teacher gave the critical reading post test to both experimental and control group. Additionally an attitude questionnaire and interview was conducted at the end of the program to discover students’ perception of and their willingness toward the activity.

F. Implementation of CSR in the Experimental Group

As mentioned above, before starting the treatment, teacher explained both the collaborative strategic reading and critical reading strategies to the students in 2 sessions. After assigning the roles by the teacher, they started the CSR activity. First the teacher started the preview strategy, the first stage in CSR, by asking some questions about the topic to brainstorm and make them ready for the activity. The purpose of preview stage was to activate prior knowledge and promote prediction about what they read. So, students talked to the whole class about their ideas and their experience on the topic. After that students did silent reading by themselves. Then the leader of the group read the text aloud to the members. After reading the text by the leader they had a time to discuss and reflect on the text collaboratively. This part was related to the second strategy in CSR, Click and Clunk which is a fix up strategy for locating the complicated words or sentences. This stage had a crucial role in trying to activate critical thinking in students. During this time clunk
expert recognized anycomplexity in the text and shared them with their group members first and received feedback from them and then later on they shared them with the whole class. The teacher provided feedback whenever necessary but left most of the discussion to the students and only intervened when they needed correction. During the CSR, the teacher also acted as the facilitator and checked the groups one by one and provided guidance when needed. In the third stage, the gist expert briefed the group with the main idea he/she had found and the most critical information the text was communicating. The other members listened and made modifications if necessary. This stage was the most important part that obligated them to read critically since the gist expert first verbalized the main idea and the most important message in the text to the whole class and then the other students in the other groups gave their ideas and lastly tried to criticize the author’s view points. The encourager’s role, as explained before was to encourage every member’s participation. They were also asked to take note of the most important points discussed in the group and write a report of that day’s activity for the teacher. The teacher got the role of the time keeper and was in control of everything that happened in the group activities. After finishing the passage, the teacher asked some questions and asked the groups to briefly wrap up their discussion and thus completed the last stage of CSR, the Wrap Up.

G. Control Group

In the control group the class had a teacher-centered instruction and kept to the traditional teaching technique. Thus, naturally, there was no group activity done by the students. First the teacher introduced the topic and he explained it further to activate students’ prior knowledge. Then one of the students read the passage and the teacher corrected their mispronunciations and finally, the teacher asked the meaning of the new vocabularies, and gave their synonyms and antonyms and also asked them if they had any problem in comprehension. In the control group there was no opportunity to discuss anything with someone else. And there was just teacher-student interaction.

III. DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

The data in this study was collected and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In order to answer research question one in the current study about the students performance in critical reading before and after the implementations of CSR instruction, participants in the experimental and control group were given critical reading pre test and post test. The results of critical reading pre-test and post-test were analyzed by statistical SPSS software (version 20). According to pre test and post, independent- sample t-test was run to analyze whether there were any significant differences between experimental and control group. The probability level of significance for t-test was set at .05 (P=.05).

In order to answer research question two, data collected from both questionnaire and interview were used to somehow triangulate and create more reliable results. They complemented each other and both of them intended to investigate students ‘attitude toward CSR and critical reading. Ten 5- Likert-scale questions were included in the questionnaire (see appendix A). Some questions were related to students’ attitude toward CSR and some questions were related to students’ attitude toward critical reading as linked to CSR activity. And the semi-structured interview included four main questions which were designed to complete the questionnaire purpose as well as elicit some extra information which could not be possibly given through the questionnaire analysis (see appendix B). In attitude questionnaire, the frequency of each item was analyzed separately. Additionally the frequency of which alternatives were selected by students was analyzed and the percentage of each item was calculated respectively. At last the content of the interview with the experimental group, which was transcribed before, was analyzed.

IV. RESULT

Before beginning the study, it was necessary to compare the critical reading performance of the students in the experimental and control group to make sure that they are not much different. Independent- sample t-test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences between the two groups in pretest. The result was shown that in table 1 and 2.

<table>
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<th>Group</th>
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Table 1 showed the statistical result of two tailed independent -sample t-test of the two groups. The mean score of experimental group was 2.6 with standard division .94032; and the mean score of control group was 2.5 with standard division 1.192. The gained t value was -.295 and p value was .770 >.05 , therefore there was no significant
difference between the two group \((p=770)\). The result showed that the two groups had similar critical reading performance.

To examine the effectiveness of CSR instruction on critical reading, the participants in the control group and experimental group were given critical reading post tests. The result was also analyzed by a two tailed independent-samples t-test to compare if the students in the experimental group performed better than the students in the control group after receiving different reading strategies instructions. After the intervention of CSR instruction, a critical reading post test was administrated to the students in both groups. The statistical results are shown in table 3 and 4.

In table 4, with the analysis of the two-tailed independent –sample t-test, the mean score of the experimental group was 3.55 with the standard division 0.887, and the mean score of the control group was 2.88, whit standard division 1.281. The t value was -2.151 and the p value according to equal variances was .038 < .05. It was revealed that there was a significant difference between the post test of the experimental group and control group. In summary, the result and discussion are addressed as follows. Before the experiment, there was no significant difference between the experimental group and control group in terms of their critical reading (see table 1). However after the intervention of CSR instruction, the result of critical reading post test showed that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control group (see table 4).

### V. Discussion

The results of the analysis of the students’ pre-test and pos-test scores derived from both the experimental and control groups indicate that CSR is found to be an effective strategy to help students improve their ability in critical reading. Findings of previous studies have confirmed that CSR approach had a positive effect on the reading comprehension in the experimental groups. In the study by Kelingner (2004) CSR was examined in 5 schools by 5 teachers in experimental group and also 5 other schools were used as the control group. In total 309 students participated in this study. The results of students and teachers measurement showed that students in CSR classrooms showed greater improvement in reading comprehension than students in classrooms where CSR was not implemented. And also the results show that the students in the class with a teacher who was more experienced than others, showed greater gains on the CSR.

Fan (2009) conducted a study on 110 students from two intact classes who had low-intermediate to intermediate level of English; the findings indicated that CSR had a positive effect on the Taiwanese university learners’ reading comprehension particularly in relation to the comprehension questions on getting the main idea and finding the supporting details. According to results in Novita (2012), she claimed that CSR was a way to help second language learners engage with difficult text and use the key reading strategies to improve comprehension.

In another study done in Iran by Ziyaemehr (2012), on forty ESP learners, the result confirmed the effective role of CSR. Students in the experimental group outperformed the students in the control group in reading comprehension. Thus the results of the present study are in line with previous research in terms of the positive benefits of CSR, yet the strength of this approach was sought in a novel aspect of reading. Due to the paucity of research on the effect of CSR on enhancing the critical reading ability of the learners, the results of the present study seem promising and a new contribution to the field.

The study was also concerned to discover the students’ attitude toward this approach; an attitude questionnaire as well as a semi-structured interview was also conducted to reveal how students themselves felt about CSR as a new activity in a reading class. According to Brown (2007) positive attitude increased motivation, input and finally successful attainment of proficiency. Group work activities usually reduce anxiety inside the classes and enable learners to develop positive attitudes towards reading. The result of questionnaire indicated that students in total had a positive attitude toward their reading course during this term. Students believed that their engagement in group work activity enabled them to grasp the author’ purpose better. According to the findings, the purpose of the text was clearer for the learners during group work activity and they believed that this class guided them to pay more careful attention to the details. In general, CSR as a new technique attracted students’ attention and was evaluated as an interesting activity type.
The results of questionnaire are consistent with some previous studies on CSR. In a study by Huang (2004), who tried to find the effect of inquiry-based pedagogy via CSR instruction on the 42 students in Taiwan, the results indicated that students in the experimental group reported much more positive attitude toward learning English after the instruction. They found CSR as an effective approach for improving their autonomy and social skills. Or in another study, Liang (2002) tried to investigate the effect of cooperative learning on the on EFL junior high school learners' language learning and their motivation toward learning English as a foreign language. Findings in the experimental group on the motivational questionnaires indicated that, cooperative learning helped to enhance students’ motivation toward learning English.

The findings related to the interview revealed that students generally perceived CSR as helpful and different from their other classes in a positive way. Many of the students also perceived that their critical reading improved as a result of CSR and expressed their desire to continue with CSR.

An analysis of student interviews also provided an important insight into what attributes of CSR were perceived as helpful or as not helpful by students. Students identified “click and clunk” and “get the gist” as two important stages that were helpful in drawing their attention to details. Jean Piaget and Vygotsky in Richard and Rodger (2001) emphasize the important role of social interaction in learning and they believe that cooperative learning is an integral part of creating deeper understanding. Parallel to this suggestion, the present study indicated that students found CSR as a facilitating tool for criticizing, discussing and finding the clunks which led to better understanding. One of the positive features of CSR mentioned by the students was that it enabled the group members to share their knowledge with each other and generally speaking, they found CSR as an efficient and applicable approach.

The results of the interview are consistent with some previous studies on CSR. Fan (2010) considered the learners perception toward CSR in group discussion, and the result of the study showed that students gave positive feedback to CSR. In another study by Hsu (2010) on the 60 third grader of an elementary school in Taiwan, the effect of CSR on the reading comprehension and learning interest was investigated. In the qualitative aspect of her study, an interview on students' perception of CSR instruction was conducted and the results of interview indicated that students expressed a positive attitude toward CSR.

VI. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study have some pedagogical implications for teaching and materials designing. There are many studies which have examined the implementation of reading strategies in EFL educational setting (Lee, 2003; Fan, 2009; Karabuğaa, 2012; Ebrahimi, 2012;). Empirical evidence indicates that strategy instruction in research-based comprehension strategies would help students enhance their comprehension difficulties. Cooperatives Learning is a valuable tool for developing critical thinking, because it creates a warm classroom environment in which the learners experience “psychological safety, intellectual freedom, and respect for one another as persons of worth” (Klimovienė, Urbonienė, Barzdžiukienė, 2006). Liang (2002) also claimed that, “A possible strategy to address the problems of low English proficiency and low motivation in EFL teaching would be the implementation of cooperative learning because cooperative learning methods hold great promises for accelerating students’ attainment of academic learning, motivation to learn, and the development of the knowledge and abilities necessary for thriving in an ever-changing world” (p.153)

Consequently, it seems useful for the students' learning that the teachers integrate reading strategies like CSR by Klingner (1998) in students’ reading classes and create an opportunity for the students to become familiar with and apply some of these strategies in their own reading as well. Another implication is about the attitudes of the students towards reading in a foreign language. Many studies support that negative and positive attitudes strongly affect the success of language learning (Brantmeier, 2006; Çelik, 2010; Ives, 2010; Clark & De Zoysa, 2011). According to Setz (2010), motivated readers have a positive attitude about themselves as a reader and conversely, struggling readers assume they are responsible for their reading difficulties. CSR can enable students to learn a collection of definite reading strategies through group activity, and assist the students in improving their critical reading, which in turn leads to development of positive attitudes towards reading in a foreign language.
APPENDIX A. READING ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear students:

1. I understand the main idea of the text better in collaboration with others.
2. I can get better author purpose during group work activity.
3. Reading classes are interesting to me during collaborative strategic reading.
4. I feel fine during collaborative strategic reading.
5. I understand what is expected of me when I am reading during CSR class.
6. I try to find the relationship between the text and my background experience.
7. I try to criticize the author's idea during reading.
8. I can acquire how to examine and draw conclusion about elements in CSR classes.
9. During reading I am evaluating the details of the text all the time.
10. I feel free during collaborative strategic reading.

Class: name: Date:

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APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about CSR in comparison to your ordinary reading classes?
2. What are the positive points of CSR?
3. What are the negative points of CSR?
4. How did CSR help you in improving your critical reading?

REFERENCES


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What does "Remedial and reflective teaching.

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