

## **Comparison of Free-writing and Word-matching Activities as EFL Pre-reading Tasks**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study investigates the possibility of using a free-writing task as EFL pre-reading activity. It studies how the free-writing task to raise EFL readers' schematic knowledge compares with a more traditional pre-reading activity, i.e., pre-teaching of vocabulary. The participants, who were seventy-two Iranian upper intermediate EFL students majoring in English, were assigned into three homogenous groups that were randomly labelled as 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Two groups, namely, A and C, were randomly designated for free-writing treatment. These participants received specific instructions and practice on free-writing for 15 minutes. All the participants were then given a reading comprehension task, with a reading passage and subsequent comprehension questions. Group A was given 5 minutes to free-write about the topic of the passage before doing the test. Group B was treated with pre-teaching a list of vocabulary to be seen in the passage. Group C was treated with a combination of the free-writing activity and pre-teaching the list of vocabulary. The mean scores obtained by the three groups were submitted to data analysis using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) as the statistical test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the three groups. Results of the data analysis showed the importance of free-writing as a pre-reading task to activate the readers' background knowledge (schema).

*Keywords:* Background knowledge, EFL reading, free-writing, pr-reading task, schema activation

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 30 October 2011

Accepted: 28 August 2012

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Pre-reading or what Ringler and Weber (1984) call enabling activities, in addition to motivating students, are devised to facilitate reading by lightening students' cognitive burden. It is argued that given a chance to ease into the text, students

will be in a better position to make the best use of their knowledge and skills in their endeavour to reconstruct the writer's meaning. Successful L2 reading teachers use pre-reading tasks and activities for lexically preparing the students, introducing the topic, encouraging skimming and scanning to predict, activating already existing schemata or filling any anticipated or observed gap between students' background knowledge and the content of the reading material.

The bulk of research has demonstrated the role of conceptual and background knowledge in L2 reading comprehension and instruction (see Alderson & Urquhart, 1988; Barry & Lazarte, 1995; Carrell, 1992; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Floyd & Carrell, 1987; Hudson, 1982; Lee, 1986; Peretz & Shoham, 1990; Roller & Matambo, 1992; Tan, 1990). One of the issues in research on EFL reading is finding effective techniques for activating schemata. Brainstorming on titles or illustrations, discussing facts and listing questions are among the pre-reading activities frequently used in reading materials or suggested by research studies to activate L2 reader's content schemata (Tomlinson & Ellis, 1988). One rather innovative pre-reading activity proposed in this study to activate L2 readers' schemata is free-writing. An individualized brainstorming technique originally used in writing courses, free-writing is frequently used to generate ideas and improve students' writing fluency (see Zemach & Islam, 2005). During a free-writing activity, students are usually given a topic to write about continuously, without stopping. Furthermore, they are asked to

write everything they can think of, quickly, and without worrying about spelling, grammar, or word choice. Investigating the potential of free-writing as a pre-reading task to activate L2 readers' schemata is the focus of the present study.

This study set out to compare the effects of three pre-reading activities on L2 learners' performance in a reading comprehension task. The pre-reading activities included a free-writing activity about the topic of the reading passage, a word matching activity where the students were asked to match a list of vocabulary from the passage with their dictionary definitions, and finally a combination of free-writing and word matching activity. The research question of the study to compare the effect of these three pre-reading activities on EFL reading comprehension was as follows: What is the effect of three pre-reading activities, i.e., free-writing, word matching, and a combination of free-writing and word matching activities on Iranian EFL learners performance in an L2 reading comprehension task?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Subjects*

The participants in the study were 72 Iranian upper intermediate EFL students (52 females and 20 males) in their third year of studies in the four-year TESOL programme at Islamic Azad University, Saveh Branch, Iran. They were students of the researcher in three different classes who had been informed that they were taking part in a research study.

### *Materials*

The instruments for data collection in the study were a general English proficiency test and a reading comprehension task. Nelson English Language Test 350 A (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used to assess the general proficiency of the participants in order to assign them into three homogenous groups. The test comprised of 50 multiple choice items including items on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The reading comprehension task that was adapted from Brook-Hart (2004) comprised a reading passage and subsequent tasks. The Instructional material used for instructional groups (namely, groups A and C) was taken from the instructional unit developed by Zemach and Islam (2005).

### *Design*

Based on the results obtained from the English proficiency test, the participants of the study were randomly assigned into three homogenous groups of equal size ( $n=24$ ), namely, Group A, Group B and Group C. The participants in two groups (A and C) were given a 15-minute instruction about how to free-write. The procedure used for free-writing was that suggested by Zemach and Islam (2005), in which students are asked to write everything they can think of, quickly, and without worrying about spelling, grammar, or word choice. They were also asked to write continuously and without stopping. The three groups were then given the same reading comprehension task, with three different pre-reading activities. The participants in Group A were given

5 minutes to free-write about the topic of the passage before doing the test. Those in Group B were given a word matching activity to pre-teach a list of vocabulary to be seen in the passage. The last group, i.e., Group C, was treated with a combination of the free-writing activity and word matching activity prior to doing the test. The scores obtained by the three groups on the reading task were used as the data for the study. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used as the statistical test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the three groups. The statistical analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) with alpha set at 0.05.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Tables 1 and 2 show the description of the data and the comparison of the means for the three groups (one-way ANOVA), respectively. The highest mean score was observed in Group C (15.7500), followed by Groups A and B, with mean scores of 14.0000 and 13.7917, respectively.

The results show that while the mean score of Group A is slightly higher than that of Group B, the difference is not significant at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . However, the mean score for Group C is significantly different and the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) at alpha decision level set at 0.05 shows two subsets. This suggests that although there was no meaningful difference between free-writing and vocabulary presentation in their effect on the participants' reading comprehension, the combination of free-

writing and word matching activities enhances the reader's understanding of the passage.

In the three-phase framework for developing L2 reading (pre-, while, and post-reading), class time is spent on teaching cognitive strategies for reading (Eskey, 2005). In fact, most ELT materials and practices intended to develop L2 reading focus on cognitive strategies for reading (Palinscar & Brown, 1984, 1985; Wittrock, 1991). These strategies adhere to different processing models or views about how we make sense of a text as we read. Two processing models are recognized about the nature of reading with proponents falling somewhere across a scale between bottom-up processing and top-down processing (Hudson, 2007). Through bottom-up processing, the reader attends to - and uses - words and structures in the text in a linear fashion to build up an interpretation of the text (Horiba, 1996; Nassaji & Geva, 1999; Segalowitz *et al.*, 1998). This data-driven

model assumes that the meaning resides in the text itself. According to the conceptually driven top-down model, the reader brings to the text and utilizes his background knowledge to interpret its meaning. Closely associated with this approach is the schema theory (Schank, 1978; Schank & Abelson, 1977). First propounded by Bartlett (1932), schema theory holds that the reader uses a mental framework based on knowledge, emotion, experience and culture in order to understand what he sees on the printed page (Hampson & Morris, 1996; Brown & Yule, 1983). The current models of reading subscribed to by most researchers and teachers conceptualize it as an interactive process, where there is a great deal of interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing. In this model, which was first put forward by Goodman (1967), reading comprehension necessitates that after decoding the text (bottom-up processing), the readers relate the decoded information to the relevant schemata (top-

TABLE 1  
Descriptive Statistics for Groups A, B, and C

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Maximum	Minimum
A	24	14.0000	1.71945	18.00	10.00
B	24	13.7917	2.04257	19.00	11.00
C	24	15.7500	2.45392	20.00	11.00

TABLE 2  
Means for groups in homogeneous subsets

Group	N	Subset for alpha= 0.05	
		1	2
B	24	13.7917	
A	24	14.0000	
C	24	15.7500	
Sig.		0.731	1.000

down processing) so as to construct a meaning for the text (Nunan, 1999). These models of reading comprehension have been used as the cornerstone for teaching various L2 reading cognitive strategies. Pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading tasks and activities can now be associated with either of the above mentioned processing approaches (Eskey, 2005).

In the pre-reading phase, vocabulary building and schema building activities can be associated with bottom-up and top-down processing, respectively. Eskey (2005) reviews some research studies that show the reciprocal relationship between reading and knowledge of vocabulary, which he calls a classic chicken and egg situation: the best or possibly the only way to acquire the extensive vocabulary for proficient second language reading is reading itself, and a prerequisite for such reading is an extensive vocabulary. McDonough and Shaw (2003) contend that overloading learners with too many unfamiliar words and expressions may involve them in decoding vocabulary at the expense of reading for meaning. As Eskey (2005) argues, texts that are lexically beyond the students' proficiency will not meet Krashen's  $i+1$  standard for comprehensibility. Therefore, in the pre-reading phase, the bottom-up processing is taken care of by incorporating vocabulary building through various tasks and awareness raising activities. Schema building activities on the other hand are incorporated to foster top-down processing. As mentioned before, most reading researchers and teachers currently endorse

interactive views of reading. An implication of interactive models is that the readers who are able to activate the right content schemata may be able to overcome or rather bypass their linguistic deficiency and understand the texts beyond their current level of linguistic proficiency. Consequently, schema activation tasks are frequently used by teachers and material developers to facilitate comprehension process. This could explain why the participants in Group A performed slightly better than those in Group B, though the difference was not significant.

## CONCLUSION

Introducing free-writing as a pre-reading activity, the study has provide L2 reading teachers and material developers with not only an innovative schema activating task, but also a new way to integrate the reading and writing skills as suggested by research studies in both L1 and L2 reading contexts (Grabe, 2002). A final note is that there is clearly a need for further research in this area, particularly with students at different proficiency levels, as well as using more standard reading comprehension tests to compare different schema activating pre-reading tasks. There is also a possibility of the effect of the L2 learner's cognitive style on their preference for particular pre-reading activities and therefore their overall understanding of the texts as cognitive style may affect how individuals respond to learning tasks (McDonough, 1998).

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