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*Dynamic Assessment of Text Comprehension of
'Less Efficient' EFL High School Readers*

Thesis Advisor

S. Ghahremani Ghajar Ph.D.

BY

Fateme Nazari

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DEDICATION

To my dear husband, Amir,

the ever-shining star burning in my heart,

without whose inspiration and encouragement

I would never accomplish this study.

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Abstract

The present study is a qualitative research about some 'less efficient' junior high school readers who I prefer to call 'challenging' readers. They had difficulty with comprehending the text and answering comprehension questions.

Dynamic assessment as a method for practicing strategies is based on a test-teach-test paradigm in order to help 'challenging' readers and facilitate the process of comprehension for them. This research was done in a public high school in Lorestan Province. Participants of this study were twenty eight Human Sciences students and two Experimental Sciences students who got less than half the score in reading comprehension part of Khordad exam in 1385. They were interviewed after Khordad exam to say how they dealt with the reading comprehension texts and why they experienced difficulty. Interview showed that they did not know how to read. They did not know about reading comprehension strategies. Interview with teachers showed that the way they taught reading comprehension was different in different classes. Participants of the study took part in a mediation program in summer, 1385 and practiced helpful strategies. After Shahrivar exam, they were interviewed again. The interview indicated that mediation had been helpful. It enabled students to activate their potential abilities. Practicing strategies helped challenging readers in comprehending the texts and answering the questions in Shahrivar exam.

Tables

Table 1 (one)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the selected topic or the present research owes something to my experience as a student in high school. During the whole period when I was studying in high school, I suffered from something in my English classes. I didn't know how to deal with the Reading section in every lesson on order to comprehend the texts. I felt a need for someone to guide me how to overcome the feeling of failure I experienced while reading the texts. But my English teachers did not provide such a help. What they did was simply reading from the text, translating it word by word into Farsi, and asking the students to answer the questions that followed the text. The next session the teacher asked the students to come to the board, read from the text, and to translate it into Farsi. In this mechanical process of teaching there was no explanation of how to go through the passages and understand them. Perhaps the situation was somehow better in private schools or language institutes, yet it seemed to me a matter of great importance and a problem to be solved.

Later when I entered the university, studied different books, and got familiar with the world of researchers and methodologies, I noticed that this significant problem is not restricted to public schools or even to my hometown or my country; the problem has been highlighted by many researchers including Kozulin

and Garb, 2001; Maguire, 1998; Dole, Brown & Trathen, 1996; Brown, 1981, cited in Kozulin & Garb, 2001;

After graduating from university I began to teach in high schools. I had learned some methods, techniques and strategies in EFL/ESL language teaching and learning so what was going on in high schools seemed more tangible. As I had experienced a lot of problems with the reading section of English classes during my education in high school, it was important to me, as a teacher, to think how to teach this part in English classes.

The present study showed that sometimes teachers do not talk about reading strategies and do not teach them, so many students complain that they have difficulty with comprehending the texts in the book and on the exam, and also with the questions that follow them. In this way, it seems very necessary to attend more seriously to the problem of teaching efficient strategies of reading comprehension and a model for teaching them to the students who are not familiar with it.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Second language reading comprehension assessment has long relied upon classical quantitative, product-oriented measurement techniques in both research and classroom assessment. As Bernhardt and Deville (1991, cited in Heinz, 2004) clearly demonstrated, these product-oriented assessment methods traditionally employed are unable to capture the complex processes that take place between

learner and text. Bernhardt (1986, cited in Heinz, 2004) and others (e.g., Berkemeyer 1989, 1991; Brisbois 1992; Lee, 1986, Lidz & Elliott, 2000) have long championed the use of a dynamic model as a particularly efficacious measure of a learner-based L2 reading comprehension paradigm. That paradigm promotes a multifaceted reading comprehension research and assessment approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods in order to arrive at a more practical way to enhance learning abilities.

The structure of most foreign language learning, indeed most learning in classroom situations, requires a heavy reliance on reading comprehension. This is so for a number of reasons. One is the widespread use of textbooks or manuals based on the written word which form the basis for learning. Another reason is traditional teaching methods, passed on in classrooms from generation to generation, which include the teacher to use reading and writing rather than aural/oral methods to present content. Finally, one of the most influential factors must be the high teacher-student ratio per classroom which makes focusing on the written word more practical than oral communication. All these mean that many students have few alternative resources for language input, apart from reading, and that any problem with reading will probably result in poorer learning. In this way the unskilled reader's difficulties will be extended to writing and other abilities such as learning vocabulary, grammar and aural comprehension because they cannot place them within a large context. This is why one of the most important skills in learning any language, especially a foreign language, is that of being able to read in that language.

Failure to master reading comprehension will have further reaching consequences too. The unskilled reader will soon begin to think that since it is so difficult to acquire a foundation it is impossible to learn, particularly in a foreign language. This is a serious blow to personal self-esteem and self-confidence. It will mean that learning outside the classroom will be inhibited, principally because the student hasn't master the basic tools but also because of lack of self-confidence. Without solid reading comprehension skills it will be difficult for them not just to start learning the language but even more to continue learning.

Researchers asserted that students who lack the required skills to cope with reading comprehension tests receive low or failing grades in English as a core subject because they perform poorly on the reading comprehension parts of the tests (Deutsch, 2005; Song, 2001; Fashola & Slavin, 1997; ...).

The problem in this study was that some third-grade EFL high school readers lack the skills to cope with reading comprehension texts in the classroom and on the exam. Students who were assigned as less efficient readers, those who lagged their comprehension level and could not perform well in comprehending the texts in the English book and on the exam, suffered from their poor performance and complained that they don't know how to read.

Interview with 60 junior high school students revealed that those who are taught how to read efficiently perform much better in reading comprehension part in the book and on the exam, and answer the comprehension questions more easily. Less efficient readers, as Deutsch (2004a & b) has also noted, lacked efficient strategies to cope with the texts. Deutsch (2005) suggested that reading

efficiently needs practice and students who do not receive instruction on how to improve their reading do not perform efficiently.

Of course, I do not accept the term 'less efficient' since during the research, I came to the point that these students have the potential ability to comprehend the text. I could see that they were eager to challenge and cope with the difficulty of comprehending the text. Yet, the reason for using the term 'less efficient' in the title of my research is to bring your attention to the illusion that has been taken for granted. This is the term used by many researchers to refer to those students who have difficulty with comprehending the text. But when I personally talk about such learners, I like to call them '*challenging readers*'. The difficulty that these challenging readers experience with comprehending the text is dealt with in this study.

1.2 Significance and Justification of Study

Reading is one of the basic pillars on which self-development rests. It is through reading that we begin to extend our learning outside the classroom and so gradually develop the capacity to learn without a teacher. It is the beginning of our independence as learners. It means that if we learn to read effectively we will be able to learn efficiently. In short, 'reading efficiently will enable us to learn efficiently' (Maguire, 1998).

To help learners develop reading skills in a second or foreign language, the teacher must aid learners in developing strategies that will enable them to use their

knowledge in a way to compensate for lack of knowledge of the second language (Alvermann, 2003). It is important to teach students reading techniques to facilitate their reading comprehension especially under testing conditions. Huey (1968) highlighted this importance by introducing reading as a means by which the world does a large part of its work. He believed that the slightest improvement either in the page or in the method of reading means a great service to the human race.

Deutsch (2005) asserted that students are unaware of reading strategies that could help them access information. As she noted, the students feel lost and frustrated because they lack the tools necessary to succeed in reading comprehension tests. In recent years, a great deal of research in L1 and L2 fields has been conducted on practicing reading strategies. Practicing strategies comes from the assumption that success in learning mainly depends on appropriate strategy use and that 'unsuccessful' learners can improve their learning by being 'trained' to use 'effective' strategies (Dansereau, 1985; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989). Little research, however, has been done that relates to practicing reading strategies in an EFL classroom.

A number of researchers like Cioffi and Carney (1983, cited in Kozulin & Garb, 2001), Kletzien and Bednar (1990), and Kozulin and Garb (2001) attempted to adapt the dynamic assessment procedure for the needs of text comprehension assessment. Dynamic cognitive assessment procedures discover and actualize the students' propensity toward cognitive change (Kozulin & Falik, 1995). Vygotsky (1934/1986) believed that while the results of the static assessment show us the

already existent abilities of the students, dynamic assessment allows us to evaluate the students' ability to use a strategy for a specific purpose in a new situation.

Reading comprehension is an important part in high school English books. Nearly one-fourth of every lesson in the book and nearly one-fourth of the points in the final exams (11 points) is specified to reading passages followed by True-False, Multiple-choice, and explanatory questions. So much effort must be put in teaching helpful strategies for reading comprehension texts.

1.3 Research Questions

Considering the purpose of the study, the following questions are going to be answered:

1. How do efficient and challenging EFL high school readers deal with reading comprehension texts in the English book and on the exam and what are the reasons for the difficulty that challenging readers experience with text comprehension ?
2. How do challenging readers perform the reading practices in an extra-curricular English class?
3. How do high school teachers teach Reading Comprehension in different EFL high school classes and why?