

EMPLOYING PERSONAL READING LOGS SHORT STORIES TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' L2 READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate whether the use of six selected short stories throughout the duration of a 14-week course could enhance students' reading comprehension achievement at the end of the semester. Out of the six short stories read, three were chosen as in-class assignments known as 'Personal Reading Logs' (hereafter, PRLs). One group of semester two Diploma students taking a reading skills course was selected through a convenience sampling method. A pre-test was conducted by having the students answer a past semester reading quiz of which the results would then be compared to their post-test (final reading exam) results. A paired samples t-test revealed no significant difference in the reading scores of the pre-test and the post-test, $t(17) = -.265, p > .05$. Since the p-value was bigger than 0.05, this indicated that the mean reading score of the post-test ($M = 50.556$) was not significantly higher than the mean reading score of the pre-test ($M = 49.722$). Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that there was no difference in the mean score of the pre-test and post-test was retained. Overall, the result refuted the findings of other studies promoting the effectiveness of using short stories to enhance L2 reading comprehension achievement.

Keywords: *personal reading logs, short stories, L2 reading comprehension achievement*

Introduction

Extensive research has been made by many researchers and educators to come up with effective and efficient methods to increase the proficiency of reading comprehension skills among second language learners (L2) (Parvin & Rasool, 2011). One similarity that most research has found is that the concept of reading comprehension involves going through a process whereby readers are required to extract information and construct meaning based on background knowledge, re-calling information from the text, using imagination to visualize what the author is saying and other higher order thinking skills that should be exercised to comprehend what is being read (Santos, Cadime, Vi-ana, Chaves-Sousa, Gayo, Maia, & Ribeiro, 2017; Ness, 2016; Parvin & Rasool, 2011).

Ness (2016) claims that the right strategies of reading comprehension instruction is vital for any student of all levels. In order to improve reading levels, guided and independent practice by the instructor should be given. One of the core subjects which is compulsory for semester two Diploma students in UiTM is an integrated language skill for reading course. The course syllabus aims to raise students' proficiency from basic intermediate to high intermediate level by exploiting a variety of short stories while introducing extensive reading strategies (UiTM, 2016). Students' interpretations of the literary texts are given by responding to questions related to the short stories in written form known as 'personal reading logs'. Towards the end of the semester, students should be able to apply the skills they acquired in a reading comprehension achievement test. The present research aims to investigate whether using short stories would actually help improve students' reading comprehension achievement results through a pre-test and post-test analysis (refer to 'Methodology'). The significance of this research is to provide insight for instructors teaching the course on future modifications that can be made in the method of instruction on the use of short stories to enhance students' reading comprehension achievement.

Literature Review

Personal Reading Logs (PRLs)

Reading log is not a new teaching and learning material used to increase the proficiency of reading comprehension. Hurst (2005) and Lombardi (2017) both share the same perception on the effectiveness of keeping reading logs as part of a reading strategy that helps students learn through a combination of their own schemata (background knowledge) and new knowledge acquired from the text. The purpose of keeping reading logs is to enable students to explore their own emotions toward the content of the text. The different texts they read allow them to gain multiple insights that they have either experienced or never been exposed to in the real world. As a result, students develop a high interest and enjoyment of reading literature. Hurst (2005) further added that reading logs integrate both reading and writing skills to boost students' comprehension of the text which allow them to use their critical thinking skills. Reading logs then, can be considered as a critical thinking tool for remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating starting from LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills) and developing to HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) which are the key components of Bloom's Taxonomy (Crocket, 2017). Therefore, reading logs provide tremendous value to the teaching and learning process in class.

Narrative Short Stories vs. Academic Expository Texts

Research on the comparison between narrative and expository texts have long been carried out. The definitions of narrative and expository texts are different. The former is written with the purpose of providing entertainment through examples of short stories and novels. Narrative texts are simpler in context whereby common, everyday words are organized in simple-structured sentences (Weaver & Bryant, 1995). On the other hand, the latter is written to convey information, explanations, or descriptions regarding facts from reading materials like newspaper articles, documentaries, and text-books. Expository texts

are usually written in an organized and academic structure (Weaver & Bryant, 1995; Erasmus, 2014). Weaver and Bryant (1995) performed an experiment to determine whether narrative texts were easier to read compared to expository texts. An analysis using the Flesch-Kincaid readability index revealed that the narrative texts selected as reading materials for their experiment proved to be four grade levels easier to read than their expository texts. Nearly a decade later, Sáenz and Fuchs (2002) carried out a similar study on 111 high school students by administering two narrative and two expository texts in class and the result of their study was concurrent with the study by Weaver and Bryant (1995) whereby students found the narrative passages less difficult to read compared to the expository passages in terms of reading fluency and comprehension. The results of the two previous studies also matched the findings of another research by Brown (2011) on semester two Hispanic English Language Learners' (ELLs) reading comprehension achievement. Students' instructional and frustration levels were analysed and found to be significantly higher after reading expository texts than when they read the narrative texts. The paralleled results across a period of two decades show that while the exposure to various narrative texts (short stories) may help to inculcate the habit of reading for pleasure, extensive reading strategies to enhance comprehension of the expository text should be highlighted in the classroom.

Improving Reading Comprehension Achievement in L2 using Short Stories

Reading comprehension is defined as a process that help students build meaning on the basis of reading the text, having the knowledge of words in the text, understanding the organization of the text, utilizing the right reading strategies and combining all these with experiential background knowledge of the content (Mina, Ehsan, & Mas-soud, 2017).

Short stories have always been used as a reading material to increase reading comprehension. Recent studies in different parts of the Asian region have been conducted to prove this. A study performed by Merli (2013) on one class of a junior high school in Bandung, Indonesia revealed that children's short stories assisted in giving a slight boost on students' average reading scores. Another similar research conducted on two classes of second year high school students in Kota Bengkulu, Indonesia also revealed that students' score in a reading comprehension test increased significantly after incorporating short stories in classroom lessons (Amelia, 2015). Nowadays, it is normal for technology to be used as a learning tool to create an interactive teaching and learning environment in order to sustain students' interest in class. Elaheh and Ehsan (2015) used online short stories to determine whether the online reading technique could have a significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension. The results turned out to be positive in increasing their reading scores. Meanwhile, Dewi (2016) experimented with Wattpad, a website containing different genres of electronic literary texts made available and free for students to access at any time. 60 non-English students from a university in Indonesia were selected for the study and went through an online short story through Wattpad to investigate their reading comprehension achievement. Corresponding to the results of other studies, the short story created significant improvement on the students' reading test results. Based on all these highlighted studies, it can clearly be observed that short stories produce an overall significant impact on reading comprehension achievement whether they are taught using the traditional printed or online method.

Problem Statement

PRLs were introduced as an assessment to build students' essential reading skills while simultaneously develop their pleasure for reading. The different types of short stories given are presumed to enable students to analyze general/academic texts in a reading comprehension achievement test at the end of the semester. However, the nature of both text types differ from one another. While short stories have a narrative format, the academic texts used to test students' reading comprehension skills is of an expository format. Thus, one's preference towards the types of short stories varied among the students.

Methodology

The participants were a class of 18 students in semester two Diploma taking an obligatory English reading course (Integrated Language Skills II) which were selected using the convenience sampling method due to their convenient accessibility and proximity (Lavrakas, 2008) by one of the researchers who was teaching the class for the semester. The method process was three-fold:

Pre-Test

Prior to the short stories reading task, the participants were given a pre-test of a reading comprehension quiz. This pre-test comprised word meaning questions, reference word questions, open-ended questions, true/false questions, and linking of ideas questions. The purpose of this test was to find out the level of students' reading scores before they started the short stories reading task.

On-going Assessment of the Short Stories using Personal Reading Logs

Six short stories of intermediate to upper intermediate level were given to the students throughout a 14-week course duration. Since there were three personal reading logs to complete, students were instructed to read two short stories prior to writing their responses in every personal reading log. The first short story provided as a warm-up exercise to the second short story, which would be used for the first personal reading log assessment. This procedure pattern was repeated for the second and third personal reading logs until the students had read all six short stories.

Post-Test

After all short stories and personal reading logs assessments were completed, the students sat for their reading comprehension exam (post-test). Similar to the pre-test, the exam comprised of word meaning questions, reference word questions, open-ended questions, true/false questions, linking of ideas questions and other types of additional questions testing the reading comprehension skill. The scores accumulated from the exam would be used to compare with the scores of the pre-test (reading quiz). A paired-samples t-test was conducted using SPSS Statistics version 24 to compare the two sets of scores. Suggested null and alternative hypotheses are:

H0: There is no difference in the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test.

H1: There is a difference in the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test.

The quantitative analysis of the statistical results is explained in the next section

Findings

Examination of the two means in Figure 1 suggests that the average reading performance score is slightly higher in the Post Test. A t-test was further conducted to determine whether to reject the null hypothesis (H0) in favour of the research hypothesis (H1).

	Mean	N	Std. Devia- tion	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 PreTest	49.722	18	11.4368	2.6957
PostTest	50.556	18	14.3598	3.3846

Figure 1. Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	Std. Devia- tion	Paired Differences		df	Sig. (2-tailed)
			Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper		
Pair 1 PreTest - PostTest	- .833 3	13.358 2	3.1486	- 7.4762	5.8095 .265	17 .794

Figure 2. Paired Samples Test

A paired samples t-test (Figure 2) revealed no significant difference in the reading scores of the pre-test and the post-test, $t(17) = -.265, p > .05$. Since the p-value is bigger than 0.05, this indicates that the mean reading score of the post-test ($M = 50.556$) was not significantly higher than the mean reading score of the pre-test ($M = 49.722$). Therefore, we must retain the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the mean score of the pre-test and post-test.

Discussions

Based on the findings of the analysis, we can sum up that employing personal reading logs through short stories does not necessarily enhance students' L2 reading comprehension achievement. This study counters previous studies (Merli, 2013; Amelia, 2015; Elaheh & Ehsan, 2015; Dewi, 2016) which support the use of short stories to improve reading comprehension achievement. However, the result of this present study is limited to only a small group of students and the result could alter if the scope of research is widened to a more optimum number of samples. In addition, the outcome could be affected by the difference in the types of texts between the narrative short stories and the expository academic passages that are in the pre-test and post-test. Hence, this reinforces findings by Weaver and Bryant (1995), Sáenz and Fuchs (2002) and Brown (2011) who encapsulated that expository texts are proven to be more difficult to understand compared to narrative texts. As educators teaching the reading course and concerned about students' academic performance, the recommendation is to focus instruction on extensive reading techniques and strategies of expository texts in the classroom to improve students' reading comprehension achievement.

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