On the comparability of strong and weak versions of task-based approaches to improving Iranian elementary-level EFL learners' reading comprehension

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an instructional approach that aims to develop learners' communicative competence and focuses on the use of tasks as the main unit of instruction. The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of strong and weak versions of TBLT approach over more traditional approaches in improving reading comprehension of Iranian elementary-level EFL learners. Moreover, the distinction between the strong and weak versions of this approach is taken into account in order to investigate which version is more beneficial over the other version. To achieve the objective, 90 male learners in the 15-17 age range who were studying in an institute in Rasht were selected. The findings showed that utilizing both versions of TBLT approach can provide tremendous opportunities for learners to enhance their reading comprehension compared to traditional language teaching methods. More specifically, the results of this study revealed that the use of the weak version of TBLT approach leads the learners to more proficiency in reading comprehension. It is worth pointing out that this study was conducted with Iranian male elementary-level EFL learners in the 15-17 age range studying in Soroush English Institute in Rasht, Iran. It indicates that a small size of population, a specific age range, and male gender were considered. Thus, for other researchers, more participants at different proficiency levels, with other ranges of age, and both genders may be considered in order to make broader generalization about the results.

Key words reading comprehension. strong version. task. task-based language teaching. weak version

Introduction

In the last few years, there has been a growing interest in TBLT approach (Ellis, 2009; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 2003; Willis, 1996). This approach has drawn the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum

developers, educational policy makers, and language teachers worldwide. Throughout history, massive changes have been taken place and enormous theories have been offered in the field of language teaching. Some of these theories were overwhelmingly rejected, some were changed, and some others were broadly welcomed. In the 1950s and 1960s, a vast number of language teaching methods and approaches were emerged that the audio-lingual method (ALM) and the situational method drew more considerable attention of many researchers among other methods and approaches. Clearly, the emphasis of the above-mentioned methods is on speaking and language learning is based on habit-formation. In the 1970s, with the advent of communicative approach, new approaches were developed with considerable emphasis on authentic and meaningful communication. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of these approaches with the focus on the use of communicative tasks.

Tremendous efforts have been devoted to the study of TBLT approach. Van den Branden (2006) defines TBLT as "an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes" (p. 3). According to Willis and Willis (2007), involving learners in real language use in the classroom is the most effective way in order to teach a language. It can be done through designing tasks, problems, games, and so on. Leaver and Willis (2004, p. 3) indicate that "TBI [task-based instruction] is not monolithic; it does not constitute one single methodology. It is a multifaceted approach, which can be used creatively with different syllabus types and for different purposes". It shows that TBLT is usually characterized as an approach, rather than a method. Willis (1996, p. 53) offers a definition of task-based learning approach as "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome … learners use whatever target language resources they have in order to solve a problem, do a puzzle, play a game, or share and compare experiences".

There is not a shadow of doubt that reading comprehension is an arduous process. Many learners may easily claim that they are experts in reading texts; however, the same claim cannot be applicable in their reading comprehension. It indicates the complexity of reading comprehension process. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) state that "reading is a two-pronged approach: it involves cracking the alphabetic code to determine the words and thinking about the meaning of the words" (p. 5). Unfortunately, a lot of Iranian EFL learners have severe problems with respect to their reading comprehension ability. There is strong likelihood that the underlying problem Iranian EFL learners are confronted by is their limited knowledge of using reading strategies. Reading strategies are mental operations that readers use when they read a text and try to understand it effectively (Barnett,

1988). Obviously, learners should be taught how to use reading strategies in order to help them improve their comprehension and recall.

Moreover, most of learners confine the concept of reading comprehension to answering obvious questions; however, reading comprehension concept is beyond this common belief. A teacher's primary duty is to find out whether learners have grasped the meaning of words in the text or not. However, meaning is not simply found in a text but is constructed by thinking critically about the possible interpretations and judging which seems most sensible. Thus, helping learners understand most of the words they read is not sufficient; teachers must teach learners to construct meaning by thinking and making judgments before, during, and after reading. Additionally, learners can construct meaning by relating the text to what they already know. The importance of prior knowledge in reading is based on schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Fortunately, by looking at the bright side, some teaching approaches (e.g. content-based approach, task-based language teaching approach, participatory approach) have been developed to resolve such problems. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the aforementioned approaches with a focus on tasks as the central means of instruction. The use of authentic materials in the form of task can improve learners' reading comprehension ability. Learners' varied exposure to the authentic language is one of the benefits of using such tasks. Widdowson (1990, p. 67) states that "It has been traditionally supposed that the language presented to learners should be simplified in some way for easy access and acquisition. Nowadays there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic". Peacock (1997) believes that authentic materials have been produced to fulfill some social purposes in the language community. On the contrary, non-authentic materials are designed for language learning purposes.

Admittedly, the role of teachers has been altered during the last decades. The existence of some constraints of the traditional Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) approach (Byrne, 1976; Harmer, 2001) has led to the emergence of some new approaches with more focus on social interaction. Willis and Willis (2009) state that in "a PPP methodology learners are so dominated by the presentation and practice that at the production stage they are preoccupied with grammatical form rather than with meaning" (pp. 3-4). TBLT is one of the new approaches, popularized by Prabhu (1987), with a focus on the use of authentic language. The development of learner-centered classrooms and language learning contexts give learners plenty of opportunities to communicate and interact and thereby they can develop their reading comprehension.

Task-based approach aims at presenting opportunities for learners to master language via learning activities designed to engage learners in the natural, practical, and functional use of language for meaningful purpose (Lin, 2009).

Rahimpour (2008) believes that TBLT is a response to a better understanding of a language learning process. In this approach, the emphasis of task is on meaning without any prior attention to form. Thus, any strategies can be used in order to perform the task and achieve the task goal (Willis & Willis, 2001). Teachers, as facilitators and guides, are in association with their learners. Consequently, there is less anxiety and learning is more effective. However, many scholars argue that if there is no focus on form, learners will attain a low level of language proficiency (Widdowson, 1998; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2003). Based on Widdowson's notion (1998), the attention should be paid to both form and meaning in both tasks and exercises. Widdowson (1998, cited in Ellis, 2009) argues that 'exercise' and 'task' differ with regard to the kind of meaning they convey. Whereas the former is concerned with 'semantic meaning', i.e. the systemic meanings of specific forms, the latter is concerned with 'pragmatic meaning', i.e. the use of language in context.

Skehan (1996) distinguishes between the 'weak' and 'strong' versions of TBLT approach. Zhao (2011) points out that "the distinction between a weak and a strong version of CLT parallels the distinction between task-supported language teaching and task-based language teaching" (p. 46). Against the traditional approaches that do not prepare learners for communicative purposes, task-supported and task-based approaches have a sharp focus on the development of learners' communicative abilities. Ellis (2003, p. 27) believes that, in both task-supported language teaching and task-based language teaching approaches, "tasks have been implemented to make language teaching more communicative; therefore, tasks are an important feature of *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT)". Actually, task-supported language teaching is a weak version of CLT that uses tasks in traditional teaching approaches. In regard to task-supported language teaching, Ellis (2003) states that "tasks are seen not as a means by which learners acquire new knowledge or restructure their inter-languages but simply as a means by which learners can activate their existing knowledge of the L2 by developing fluency" (p. 30). In the weak version of TBLT approach, tasks are viewed "as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way. They are only a necessary while not sufficient basis for a language curriculum" (Zhao, 2011, p. 46). In task-supported syllabus, "some methodologists have simply incorporated tasks into traditional language-based approaches to teaching" (Ellis, 2003, p. 27).

In the strong version of TBLT approach, tasks are considered as "the central component of syllabus design" (Butler, 2011, p. 38). Similarly, Zhao (2011) points out that "the strong version regards tasks as both necessary and sufficient for learning" (p. 46). In task-based syllabus, compared with task-supported syllabus, tasks are regarded as fundamental units of teaching and whole courses are designed around them (Ellis, 2003). With regard to the strong version of TBLT

approach, Skehan (2009) states that "In native-speaker communication, there tends to be major emphasis on the satisfactoriness of the flow of the conversation, not on the correctness, or completeness (or the usefulness for interlanguage development amongst learners) of what is said" (p. 86).

Enhancing learners' motivation has always been the primary and widespread concern of most of language teachers throughout the world. One of the best ideal and effective ways to motivate learners is to increase their reading comprehension ability. It is often argued that reading is a way to draw information from a text and to interpret that information appropriately. However, by thinking deeply, there can be no doubt that this definition is not a precise and absolute definition. Reading definition is beyond this simple definition. Grabe and Stoller (2011) state that "reading comprehension is remarkably complex, involving many processing skills that are coordinated in very efficient combination" (p. xvi). Alderson (2000, p. 28) defines reading as "... an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed".

The use of appropriate reading materials can assist learners in comprehending the meaning of text. Being familiar with diverse types of reading materials can also improve learners' reading comprehension through the construction of meaning from text. Task-based approach, via the use of authentic materials in the form of tasks, is different from the traditional language teaching approaches. In fact, the shortcomings of traditional approaches concerning reading comprehension stem from the sharp focus on form and apparent disregard of meaning. On the contrary, tasks, with the focus on meaning, can facilitate the construction process of meaning from text. Therefore, there is a need to adopt TBLT approach to improving learners' reading comprehension. It is hoped that the findings of the present study contribute to the use of either strong version or weak version of TBLT approach to improving learners' reading comprehension. More specifically, no research project in the Iranian context has ever sought to compare the effect of these two versions of TBLT (i.e. strong and weak) on Iranian elementary-level learners' reading comprehension.

Aims of the study

The aim of the current study was to explore the advantages of TBLT approach over more traditional approaches regarding Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability at elementary level. Moreover, it aimed at comparing the strong version versus the weak version of the TBLT approach in order to investigate which version has priority over the other version. It is worth pointing out that the distinction between the strong and weak versions of the task-based approach was taken into account.

Research questions

This study aimed to seek answers to the following questions:

1. Does the strong version of task-based language teaching have any statistically significant effect on Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension?
2. Does the weak version of task-based language teaching have any statistically significant effect on Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference in the reading comprehension ability of Iranian elementary EFL learners who experience three different approaches to language teaching, namely the strong version of task-based, the weak version of task-based, and the traditional approach?

Methods

Sample

The study was conducted with a sample of 90 male elementary-level EFL learners, in the 15-17 age range, studying English in an institute in Rasht, Iran. The total number of learners registered in the selected institute was 150 who were homogenized through QPT. The participants whose scores fell within the range of 18-27 were selected as the main sample of this study. The participants were randomly assigned to three different groups. They were divided into two experimental groups and one control group. Each experimental group contained two classes with 15 participants in each class. The control group also contained two classes with 15 participants in each class.

Procedure

At the outset, a homogeneity test in terms of the participants' general proficiency was administered. With regard to making a homogeneous group, the researcher used QPT (Version 1) for the overall number of 150 learners who were studying English as a foreign language in an institute in Rasht, Iran. Among the total number of learners who sat for this test, 90 learners got the scores within the range of 18-27 and were considered for being in the elementary-level and were selected as the participants of this study. The participants were randomly placed in three different groups. It is worth pointing out that the participants were randomized in order to control bias by all means. They were divided into two experimental groups and one control group.

Before giving a pretest to the main participants, a pilot study was carried out. The pretest was given to 10 elementary-level learners with the same characteristics of the target sample in order for the researcher to predict the potential problems of instruments and to make sure that the time was not being wasted with inappropriate participants. The estimated values of Cronbach's Alpha for both the pretest and posttest of reading comprehension exceeded .70 (α $_{Pretest}$

= .75, and $\alpha_{posttest}$ = .78). Then, a reading comprehension pretest was administered in order to find out the potential initial differences of the participants' reading comprehension ability between the experimental and control groups.

A one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was run to find out any possible initial differences between the performance of participants in the experimental and control groups in the pretest. After making sure of the homogeneity of the groups with respect to their reading comprehension, both experimental groups followed a task-based syllabus. The focus, however, was different. The experimental group (A) used the strong version of the TBLT approach in which completion of the task was the single focus. The experimental group (B) received the weak version of the TBLT approach with considerable attention to formal features of the task as well as task completion. Conversely, the control group used ALM as a structural syllabus which was based on grammatical structures. The courses lasted for 20 sessions, three hours a week.

After carrying out the treatments, a posttest, piloted before with a reliability index of .78, was given to the participants in order to scrutinize the results and to measure the progress from pretest to posttest and the effectiveness of the treatments in the experimental groups. Notably, the posttest was the same as the pretest except for the arrangement of the items. The aim of designing a small rearrangement of the items was controlling the potential testing effect. A one-way ANOVA was run again to compare the means of the three groups in the posttest with the alpha level set at 0.05. The scores for the pretest and posttest were between 0 and 35. Furthermore, three paired samples t-tests were run to compare the means of these groups from pretest to posttest.

Materials and instruments

Notably, QPT casts light on the learners' language level. In other words, QPT is a quick way to assess the learners' English level. In order to make up a homogeneous group in terms of the participants' general proficiency, QPT (Version 1) was administered. The test consisted of 60 items including vocabulary, grammar, and reading questions. A total number of 150 learners took QPT and among them 90 learners who got the scores within the range of 18-27 were recognized as being at the elementary-level and were selected as the participants of this study. The questions of the test were taken from 'Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate' The allowed time for this test was 30 minutes. A pretest was administered before the treatments to consider the initial differences existing among the groups with respect to their reading comprehension ability. The reading test that was administered to the learners as a pretest included 35 items and was the reading section of a sample of the Preliminary English Test (PET) taken from "Objective PET" (Hashemi & Thomas, 2010). This test was divided into 5 parts: Multiple choice (questions 1-5),

matching (questions 6-10), true/false (questions 11-20), multiple choice (questions 21-25), and multiple choice (26-35). In the end, a posttest that was equal in all respects to the pretest but with a slight rearrangement of the items was given to the participants. The aim of such rearrangement was controlling the possible testing effect. The allowed time for the pretest and posttest was 45 minutes.

Results

The purpose for administering the pretest at the beginning of the study was to establish a baseline measurement from which the EFL learners' achievements on the posttest could be checked out and explained. Tables 4.1. and 4.2. display the results of one-way ANOVA used to analyze the participants' scores in the pretest of reading comprehension.

Table 4.1: Group statistics for the pretest scores of the three groups

	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Mini mum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control	30	15.30	3.22	.58	14.09	16.50	8.00	20.00
Experi-mental A	30	15.06	3.19	.58	13.87	16.25	7.00	20.00
Experi-mental B	30	14.96	3.70	.67	13.58	16.35	6.00	20.00
Total	90	15.11	3.35	.35	14.40	15.81	6.00	20.00

The descriptive table provided descriptive statistics including group size, mean, and standard deviation for the three groups on the dependent variable that was the reading comprehension test. For the pretest of reading comprehension, the means for the experimental group (A), the experimental group (B), and the control groups were (X^- experimental group (A) = 15.06), (X^- experimental group (B) = 14.96) and (X^- control group = 15.30), respectively. They differed some points around their average. The mean score of the control group was (.24) points higher than that of the experimental group (A) and (.34) points higher than the mean of the experimental group (B). Furthermore, the mean score of the experimental group (A) was (.10) points higher than that of the experimental group (B).

Besides, the degree of variation of the scores for the control group (SD control group = 3.22) was nearly the same as the extent of scatteredness of the scores for the experimental group (A) (SD experimental group (A) = 3.19). However, the extent of

scattering of scores around the mean score for the experimental group (B) was higher than that of the control and the experimental group (A) (SD experimental group (B) = 3.70). Table 4.2. checked whether these differences in the mean scores of the three groups were statistically significant before presenting the determined treatments.

Table 4.2: One-way ANOVA for the pretest scores of the control and experimental groups

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.756	2	.878	.077	.926
Within Groups	997.133	87	11.461		
Total	998.889	89			

As it is displayed in Table 4.2., there was no meaningful difference between the mean scores of the three groups in the pretest of reading comprehension (p ≥ .05). This indicated that the groups were almost at the same level of proficiency regarding to their reading comprehension ability at the beginning of the study before introducing the specific treatment to the experimental groups.

Table 4.3: Descriptive statistics for the posttest scores of the reading comprehension

	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control	30	15.66	3.17	.58	14.48	16.85	7.00	21.00
Experimental A	30	21.13	3.12	.57	19.96	22.30	12.00	26.00
Experimental B	30	23.40	4.55	.83	21.69	25.10	14.00	31.00
Total	90	20.06	4.88	.51	19.04	21.09	7.00	31.00

The results of the posttest revealed that the mean of the group that received the strong version of TBLT $(X_{experimental\ group\ (A)}$ = 21.13), the mean of the group that practiced the weak version of TBLT $(X_{experimental\ group\ (B)}$ = 23.40), and the mean of the control group $(X_{control\ group}$ = 15.66) differed significantly.

Table 4.4: ANOVA for the results of the reading comprehension test (posttest)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	948.267	2	474.133	35.036	.000
Within Groups	1177.333	87	13.533		
Total	2125.600	89			

The ANOVA table showed that the overall *F* ratio for the ANOVA was significant for the posttest scores of the reading comprehension. The *F* ratio (35.036) was significant (p = .000) at the .05 alpha level. The null hypothesis that all three groups' means were equal was rejected, since $p < α$. The significance value of the *F* test in the ANOVA table was less than (.05). Thus, the hypotheses that average assessment scores of the reading comprehension test (posttest) were equal across the three groups were rejected (F 2, 87 = 35.036, Sig. = .000 ≤ .05).

It was concluded that at least one of the group means was significantly different from the others or that at least two of the group means were significantly different from each other. Consequently, a post-hoc follow-up test was conducted to determine which means differed from each other. In other words, multiple comparisons post-hoc test (Scheffe) was done to compare the means of the three groups.

As it is displayed in Table 4.5., the highest mean difference was reported between the experimental group (B) and the control group with mean difference of (7.73). In contrast, the lowest mean difference was shown for the experimental group (A) and the experimental group (B) with (mean difference = 2.26).

Based on the findings, the group who received the weak version of TBLT outweighed the other two groups in relation to their reading comprehension performance (mean $_{weak\ version\ of\ TBLT\ group}$ = 23.40; SD = 4.55). The next best the group who worked on the strong version of TBLT group performed better than the control group (mean $_{strong\ version\ of\ TBLT\ group}$ = 21.13; SD = 3.12). Finally, the participants in the control group performed lower than the other two groups (mean $_{control\ group}$ = 15.66; SD = 3.17).

Table 4.5: Multiple comparisons for the results of the posttest

Dependent Variable: Posttest Scores						
Scheffe						
(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	SE	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	experimental A	-5.46*	.94	.000	-7.83	-3.10
	experimental B	-7.73*	.94	.000	-10.09	-5.36
experimental A	Control	5.46*	.94	.000	3.10	7.83
	experimental B	-2.26	.94	.063	-4.63	.09
experimental B	Control	7.73*	.94	.000	5.36	10.09
	experimental A	2.26	.94	.063	-.09	4.63
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.						

Table 4.6: Paired samples statistics for the pretest and posttest scores of the reading comprehension test

Groups			Mean	N	SD	SE Mean
Control	Pair 1	Pretest scores	15.3000	30	3.22864	.58947
		Posttest scores	15.6667	30	3.17678	.58000
Experimental A	Pair 1	Pretest scores	15.0667	30	3.19410	.58316
		Posttest scores	21.1333	30	3.12645	.57081
Experimental B	Pair 1	Pretest scores	14.9667	30	3.70911	.67719
		Posttest scores	23.4000	30	4.55313	.83128

As depicted in Table 4.6., all the three groups progressed in the posttest. Based on the results of paired samples t-test, this development was significant from a statistical standpoint simply for the experimental groups (P ≤ .05). In other words, the two experimental groups made a considerable improvement in the posttest of reading comprehension. However, this gain for the weak version of TBLT group was higher than the other two groups. In comparison, the least amount of advancement between the results of pretest and posttest was reported for the control group that received instruction based on ALM (P ≥ .05). These results also rejected the null hypotheses that different types of task-based language teaching

(the strong version of TBLT versus the weak version of TBLT) do not affect Iranian elementary EFL learners' reading comprehension performance.

Discussion

The salient point this study clarified was to analyze the effectiveness of strong and weak versions of TBLT approach on Iranian elementary-level EFL learners' reading comprehension studying in an institute in Rasht, Iran. There was no significant difference among the groups at the reading comprehension pretest, whereas there were crucial differences among them at posttest. However, it is worth saying that the notable differences existed between two experimental groups and not in control group. Hence, the differences may be attributed to the use of the strong version or the weak version of TBLT approach between the groups. The mean score obtained by each of the three groups on the reading comprehension posttest indicated that both experimental groups obtained high mean scores; however, the second experimental group that used the weak version of TBLT approach achieved a higher mean score (23.40 versus 21.13 respectively). Therefore, the null hypotheses of this study were rejected.

The findings of the present study are in line with the results of numerous studies concerning the valuable use of tasks in improving language learning. In other words, the results of the present study corroborate previous findings in the field which have demonstrated the profound effect of TBLT approach on improving the learners' reading comprehension. Keyvanfar and Modarresi (2009) examined the impact of task-based activities on Iranian EFL learners' reading skill at the beginner level. The results showed that the learners who received TBLT as the instruction outperformed the learners who followed the traditional language teaching method. As a result, the findings of this study indicated that TBLT is an effective approach in reading comprehension development. The results are also in agreement with the one carried out by Poorahmadi (2012) who investigated the efficiency of TBLT approach in improving the reading comprehension ability in Iranian EFL students. She recommended the use of tasks in the classrooms to speed up the students' development in regard to the reading comprehension ability.

Moreover, this study is congruent with the one conducted by Chalak (2015) who examined the effect of task-based instruction on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension. She shed light on the significant impact of task-based approach in improving the reading comprehension ability. She stated that TBLT presents opportunities for the learners to interact with their classmates and increases their use of target language. According to Zhao (2011), the incorporation of form-focused activities into communicative classroom contexts is needed for efficient second language acquisition. The results of the present study are remarkably

consistent with the study carried out in regard to TBLT approach by Carless (2003) in Hong Kong. The results showed that utilizing the weak version of TBLT approach was more feasible and effective for the elementary-level learners. Notably, no study has been carried out in the Iranian context to compare the effect of strong and weak versions of TBLT on Iranian elementary-level reading comprehension.

In the present study, the progress was observed from pretest to posttest in all the three groups. Nonetheless, the participants in both experimental groups who received two different versions of TBLT approach (i.e. strong and weak versions) were able to comprehend the text more easily compared to the control group who received instruction based on ALM. More specifically, the participants who used the weak version of TBLT outperformed the other participants who received the strong version of TBLT and ALM. Hence, the results of the current study has revealed that implementing both types of TBLT approach are more fruitful compared to traditional language teaching method (i.e. ALM). Nevertheless, the study has shown that the experimental group (B) who received the weak form of TBLT outweighed the other two groups (i.e. strong version of TBLT and ALM) in terms of their reading comprehension ability. The reason might be the scarcity of comprehensible input in the Iranian EFL context, thereby the need for textbooks containing target grammar forms are felt.

Limitation

Certain limitations were involved in the present study. One limitation was that the study was conducted with Iranian elementary-level EFL learners studying in an institute in Rasht, Iran. It indicates that a small size of population was considered. Therefore, the study should involve more participants at different proficiency levels in order to generalize the results for larger groups. Another limitation of the present study was the age of the participants that ranged from 15 to 17. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to other learners with other ranges of age. Moreover, this study limited itself to consider only male students. Thus, for other researchers, both genders may be considered in order to make broader generalization about the results.

Directions for further research

Every useful study opens new directions for further studies. The strong and weak versions of TBLT approach are both significant that require more in-depth studies. Further research can be carried out on a larger sample in order to yield more accurate and credible results. This study dealt with male elementary-level EFL learners. A similar research can be replicated considering both genders and other proficiency levels. The data was collected from learners aged 15 to 17.

Further studies can examine various age groups. In this study, the effects of two versions of TBLT approach (i.e. strong and weak versions) on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension were analyzed. In further studies, researchers can check the effects of the two versions of this approach on the other skills and components of language (e.g. speaking, writing, grammar).

Conclusion

This study attempted to examine the effectiveness of strong and weak versions of TBLT approach in improving reading comprehension of elementary EFL learners. The findings of the study showed that both versions of TBLT approach have positive effects on the learners' reading comprehension. However, their effects are different from each other. Based on the results of this study, the experimental group (B) who received the use of the weak version of TBLT approach made more improvement in the posttest of reading comprehension. In other words, the use of the weak version of this approach leads to more proficiency in reading comprehension among Iranian elementary EFL learners. Hence, all the null hypotheses proposed at the beginning of the study were rejected. With regard to the results of the study, paying attention to the formal features in a text as well as task completion can lead the learners to more proficiency in reading comprehension compared to the sole focus on task completion. Based on the findings of this study, the use of the weak version of TBLT approach not only promotes the learners' communicative competence but also develops their linguistic competence since their attention is directed to formal features of language. All in all, this study recommends applying TBLT approach in EFL contexts where there are limited opportunities for learners to use the target language outside the classrooms. Furthermore, considering the learners' age, the study suggests using the weak version of this approach for elementary-level learners that helps them to acquire more proficiency in reading comprehension.

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