

The Comparative Impact of Content-Based and Task-Based Teaching in a Critical Thinking Setting on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT: This study was an attempt to investigate the comparative impact of two types of teaching approaches, namely content-based (CBI) and task-based (TBLT) instruction on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, sixty intermediate students from a pool of eighty five students studying at a private language school were chosen using a piloted PET. The students were then randomly assigned to two experimental groups: CBI and TBLT. These teaching approaches were coupled with critical thinking activities. A piloted PET reading was administered as the posttest of the study after each group was exposed to the treatment for 18 sessions in six weeks. The mean scores of the two groups on this posttest were compared. The result of this study depicted no significant difference concerning the impact of CBI and TBLT on EFL learners' reading.

Keywords: content-based teaching, task-based teaching, critical thinking, reading comprehension.

Psychologists, language learning specialists, and language teachers have been interested in reading comprehension for a noticeable stretch of time. As a result of this interest, numerous studies have been conducted to compare the effects of different methods of teaching reading (e.g., Grabe, 1993; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Hedge, 2000; Perfetti, 1984; Wallace, 1992).

With the expansion of communication technology around the world and the increase in the volume of the available texts written in different languages especially in English, the need to improve learners' ability to read English texts is gaining more and more importance. These learners are faced with the growing need to read more authentic materials in their real-life practice of L2. To do so, they should interact with the reading materials to extract meaning even though the materials may not seem meaningful at first glance (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

As this need continues to grow, the consequence would perhaps be that investigation into various aspects of L2 reading skill would attract the attention of more and more researchers (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Among the many proposed methods and techniques of teaching L2 (with reading being one of the skills emphasized), which are currently used in some educational settings, are content-based and task-based teaching. These teaching approaches have been gaining huge interest in both foreign language and L2 instructional settings (Davies, 2003; Deunas, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Kasper, 2000).

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Content-based instruction

Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) define content-based instruction (CBI) as “the integration of a particular content (e.g., math, science, social studies) with second language aims or the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (p. 2). Students in CBI can be exposed to the natural acquisition of L2 in a way that it reflects the L1 acquisition (Troncale, 2002). In CBI, content and information are converged in language learning; that is, no efforts are made to separate them from each other (Krahnke, 1987; Mohan, Leung, & Davison, 2001; Snow, 2005; Stoller, 2004).

CBI has become overwhelmingly popular all over the world as a means of developing the linguistic ability of L2 learners because it encompasses mostly a wider scope and is used in almost all educational levels, from primary to academic; moreover, it has been employed both in L1 and L2 settings (Kavaliauskiene, 2004; Stryker & Leaver, 1997). CBI fits very well in the broader principles of language learning and teaching; therefore, it can be applied to different situations, including ESL and EFL classrooms (Kasper, 2000).

This teaching approach, depending on the skills being taught, can be manifested in different ways. According to Crandall (1999), CBI may vary in relation to the procedures it adapts from both traditional teaching methods and contemporary approaches. Crandall further states that CBI emphasizes “learning about something rather than learning about language” (p. 604). In fact, it is beneficial in two ways. Firstly, it can help learners develop their language skills, essential for successful academic performance. Secondly, it can help learners get access to new concepts through the meaningful content.

According to Stryker and Leaver (1997), CBI can be indeed a challenging and demanding approach for both teachers and students. Yet, many teachers prefer to organize their teaching around content in order to shift their language instruction to more meaningful ways. It is argued that using language as a means for learning content may lead to the acquisition of both content and language.

A further advantage of content-based course is that it creates motivational and cognitive base for learning and makes the lessons more interesting to the learners. By incorporating a highly contextualized content, CBI can provide ample opportunities for learners to learn the language (Crandall, 1987; Troncale, 2002). It is this aspect of CBI that provides justification for why the findings of various studies have documented the success of CBI in most educational settings (Davies, 2003; Kasper, 2000; Kavaliauskiene, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Task-based language teaching

Alongside CBI, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained a considerable degree of attention around the world. In this approach, learners are given a chance to explore the language (Feez, 1998; Rooney, 2000; Skehan, 1998). According to Cook (as cited in Robinson, 2011), TBLT “sees second language learning as arising from particular tasks that students do in the classroom... in a sense it reconceptualizes communicative language teaching as tasks rather than language” (p. 4). Nunan (2006) argues that TBLT extracts its notion from the process syllable and that the tasks are the focal point of the methodology.

Various scholars have tried to define the concept of task in TBLT (e.g., Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Nunan, 2006; Rodgers, 2009). Tasks have been categorized into two types: tasks that focus on form and tasks that focus on meaning. As Long and Norris (as cited in Van den Branden, 2006) point out, the use of these types in combination is one of the key features of TBLT in which the learners’ attention is focused on form in the context of meaning-based instruction. This position is warranted by the ample research conducted showing that the integration of both explicit and implicit instruction of form in a meaning-based context is more efficient than using each of them in isolation (de la Fuente, 2006; Ellis, 2011; Fotos, 1998; Spada, as cited in Long, 2000; van den Branden, 2006).

Ellis (2003) further argues that one of the attractions of TBLT is that it tries to erase the traditional distinction between the syllabus and methodology through the incorporation of processes that involve the specifications of both what and how. In doing so, as argued by Cobb and Lovick (2007), TBLT promotes collaborative learning, learners’ motivation, integration of the four language skills and

production of more language by learners, and use of more mental effort and processing of linguistic items by learners.

As Stone (1991) claims, the role of TBLT is to encourage the use of contextualized target language activities for students through tasks. When learners are engaged in tasks, they are provided with a more realistic and thus a more encouraging context to activate the learning processes; consequently, they stand a higher chance for enhancing language learning (Kawachi, 2003; Klapper, 2003; McDonough, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Szymanski, 2002).

Critical thinking

Regardless of the specific language teaching method adopted to teach certain content, fostering a critical perspective on texts has been extensively advocated through research (Clark, 1993; Clarke & Silberstein, 1979; Cohen, 2010; Faccione, 1990). Through critical reading, learners are encouraged to further participate in an active process and inner dialogue with the writer of the text.

The roots of critical thinking may date back to the time of Socrates--2500 years ago-- when he found, through a method of probing questions, that people could not rationally justify their confident claims to knowledge. This tradition of Socratic questioning, in the words of Paul, Elder, and Bartell (1997), "is the best known critical thinking teaching strategy" (p. 3) followed by Plato, Aristotle, and other scholars who emphasized that entities are often not at all what they appear to be.

In modern times, studies on critical thinking have been very much inspired by the Frankfort School of Critical Theory (Rogers, 2004), and many have attempted to define or describe critical thinking on the premises laid by that school. One such definition is provided by Greenbaum (2000):

Critical thinking is an integrative process of systematically analyzing and evaluating what you hear or read. Critical thinking is a search for truth. It is reasonable, reflective thinking that impacts one's decisions about what to do or believe. To engage in successful critical thinking, one must remain open-minded, inquisitive, and actively involved in the thinking process. (p. 20)

As Hedge (2000) states, a critical reader realizes that reading is the connection to the point of view of the writer rather than his/her own point of view. A critical reader, in order to precisely interpret the text concept, should search for the key concepts, try to find similar experiences and match them to the reading text, be familiar with the structures of the text, and look for assumptions. Moreover, the critical reader should "challenge the ideology of the text through this critical perspective" (Hedge, p. 213).

According to Kanar (1991), critical thinking is the process of extracting and also evaluating the meaning. There are different ways of constructing meaning but one of them is through interpreting what the writer is going to convey. Critical thinking is the higher level of thought while critical reading is the recognition of information; hence, for the readers, it is vital to first evaluate all the different viewpoints and then come to a conclusion.

In the same vein Mackay (2000) asserts that if the reader wants to have a critical stance on reading, he/she should have an active role rather than being just a passive receiver of the information. In other words, when readers are reading, they should not accept every word or claim of the writer; rather, they should consider that the writer must have enough reasons for his/her claim. Therefore, the readers themselves should base their judgments on sufficient reasons. This active stance of the reader is taken one stage higher by Spolsky (1989) where he emphasizes that the ultimate goal of critical reading is resisting what one reads.

In line with what has been discussed so far and the suggestions made by the previous studies conducted by one of the researchers on CBI (Marashi & Hatam, 2009) and critical thinking (Marashi & Jafari, 2012; Marashi & Jodeiri, 2006), the purpose of the present study was to compare the impact of CBI and TBLT in a critical thinking setting on EFL learners' reading comprehension. Accordingly, the following null hypothesis was raised:

H₀: There is no significant difference between the effect of content-based and task-based reading instruction in a critical thinking setting on EFL learners' reading comprehension.

Method

Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, 85 female students of a private language school in Karaj, who were at the intermediate level and their ages ranged from 17 to 30, were given a Preliminary English Test (PET) and 60 of them were chosen and divided randomly into two equal groups of 30 students for the two types of treatment. The PET was piloted on 30 students with almost the same language proficiency level as the groups prior to its administration. The reliability of the test was found to be 0.87.

Instrumentation

Two tests were used in this study: A piloted PET, used to homogenize the students based on their general English prior to the treatment, and a piloted reading posttest, obtained from the reading part of another PET. This test contained 35 items aimed at measuring and comparing the reading achievements of the two groups.

Throughout the experiment, a series of reading texts with critical thinking activities were used as the treatment in both groups. A total of five passages along with their tasks from “Interchange 2” (Richards, 2005) were taught in the TBLT group. These passages were: *Nicole Kidman: New Hollywood Royalty*, *New Ways of Getting around*, *Break Those Bad Habits*, *Food and Mood*, and *Getting away from It All*.

For the CBI class, five content-based passages from “Active Skills for Reading: Book 3” (Anderson, 2008) were selected. These passages were: *Endangered Species*, *Human Adaptation to Space*, *Pioneers of Flight*, *How Good is your Memory?* And *Is Spontaneous Human Combustion Possible?*

Procedure

As stated above, prior to the study, a piloted PET was administered to 85 students, and 60 of them, who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean, were chosen for the study. These 60 students were then randomly assigned to two experimental groups with 30 students each. Both groups were taught by the same person (one of the researchers) to minimize the impact of teacher variability during the 18 sessions of instruction which lasted for a month and a half (three sessions a week).

Each of the five texts specified in the instrumentation section were taught through certain creativity exercises in both groups. They were used to provide open-ended questions, interactions, and small group cooperation through the following 10 critical reading strategies: making inferences, challenging the ideology of the texts, annotating, comparing and contrasting, evaluating, contextualizing, reflecting, outlining and summarizing, questioning, and previewing. While the reading passages and their follow-up tasks and exercises differed in the two groups, the critical reading pedagogy remained the same in both groups.

TBLT group

In the TBLT group, the teacher began teaching the first text (*Nicole Kidman: New Hollywood Royalty*) by drawing the attention of the students to the picture and asked them to express their ideas and feelings about Nicole Kidman. Through this warm-up activity, the students started interacting with each other while the teacher was just listening. The learners were then given some time to read the text in pairs in order to get the gist only and guess the meanings of the new words. They, subsequently, discussed their questions about the meanings of the new words in groups (the whole class). This way they solved most of their language problems (vocabulary, grammatical points, etc.). The remaining problems were answered by the teacher.

Once the text was clarified, the teacher asked them to evaluate the text by comparing and contrasting it with what they had already heard about this actor—this of course is very much a critical reading procedure. Following this activity, the teacher asked the learners some open-ended questions about their favorite actors and also interesting details about them.

In the next phase, the students were engaged in tasks which included a few questions about the new vocabularies in the text with two different meanings. The students were required to find the words in

the text and choose the correct meaning. There was also a question that asked the learners to put the activities of this actor in a chronological order, followed by a last open-ended question about acting. The critical thinking activities thus employed through this text were interacting, doing small group cooperation, raising open-ended questions, evaluating, comparing and contrasting, previewing, and questioning.

In order to teach *New Ways of Getting around*, which was about four new inventions regarding transportation on land and sea, the teacher asked the students to read the title, look at the picture, and give their own experiences and information about the title and the pictures. The teacher read the text aloud twice or had the students read the texts individually without reading them aloud and then asked them to underline the parts or the words that they had problems with or did not have any information on during the second reading.

During the next phase, the students were encouraged to ask questions from both the teacher and other students and express their views and also personal experiences regarding the inventions. Once this stage was over, the teacher raised some open-ended questions concerning the usefulness of these inventions and asked the students if they were interested in using them or not. Subsequently, the students did the tasks which appeared after each text. Accordingly, the students were asked to read the text again and decide from where the article was extracted. In another task, they were asked to answer eight questions about the text, and just like the previous text, these tasks ended with an open-ended question asking whether they wanted to have any of the inventions mentioned in text. The critical reading activities practiced through this text included previewing, contextualizing, questioning, annotating, reflecting, interacting, asking open-ended questions, and challenging the text.

The text *Break Those Bad Habits* was organized around the bad habits of people, their problems with those habits, and the ways to break them. In this text, the teacher herself started to read the title and then asked if the students had any bad habits or if they had been successful in overcoming them. Once the interactions were over, the teacher gave the students a few minutes to skim the article and write their questions.

Participants were given time to solve their language problems in groups and summarize the text. When the time was up, the learners were asked to read their summaries and evaluate the text in terms of the practicality of the solutions proposed. As usual, the lesson ended with the students doing the tasks that followed the reading passage. One such task asked them to find the best description of the text through three given choices while another task drew the attention of the students to some sentences in order to find the paragraph which they came from. The last task was again an open-ended question about other ways of breaking those bad habits. Previewing, questioning, summarizing, interacting, contextualizing, doing small group cooperation, and making inferences were the critical reading activities practiced through this reading text.

The title of the next passage was *Food and Mood*. The teacher gave the students some time to read the text in groups and try to understand the new words before asking the ones that they could not figure out from the teacher. Prior to responding, the teacher asked other groups to answer the questions, allowing more extended interactions. Later on, the teacher asked some open-ended questions about the effects of food on their health. At this stage, in an attempt to encourage extensive reading, the teacher assigned the learners to find more information about the topic, compare and contrast different texts on the effects of food, write summaries on them, and bring them to class.

The next session, the students discussed their summaries in class and challenged the information that their classmates had brought. Again, the lesson ended with the students doing the tasks accompanying the reading passage. These tasks were eight wrong and right sentences and the students were asked to find the wrong ones and correct them. Finally, there was an open-ended question about how they felt when they ate the food that they liked. The critical reading activities employed in this text were doing group work cooperation, summarizing, making inferences, annotating, questioning, challenging the ideology of the text, and reflecting.

The last text for the TBLT group was *Getting away from It All*. This text was full of different tips for backpacking. The teacher first asked the students some general questions about backpacking and then read the text for them twice. During the second reading, the students were required to underline the parts which were problematic for them.

After the second reading and answering the learners' questions, the teacher asked them to evaluate the tips in groups, providing opportunity to interact with one another. They, then, were asked to choose the sport or activity that they knew very well and outline certain tips for it in discussion groups. The teacher monitored and helped them with the language issues. As usual, the class ended with students doing the tasks that came after the reading passage, including filling the blanks of the text at the beginning of each paragraph which were about the questions during the interview with an expert about backpacking. Another task was a summary which had to be filled by the students from the article and the last one as usual was an open-ended question on giving tips about one kind of sport. Contextualizing, outlining, questioning, doing group cooperation, reflecting, previewing, and interacting were the critical reading activities employed in this lesson.

CBI group

In the CBI group, the first text was *Human Adaptation to Space*. At first, the teacher started to ask about the students' background knowledge on space while mentioning the name of the movie in the text (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) and the name of the person who first traveled to space (Yuri Gagarin). The students then talked about the books that they had read in their science course at school, the space movies they had seen, the space news they had heard of, and other general ideas about space. They were then given time to read the text in pairs in order to get the general meaning.

After reading the text, the teacher asked the learners to help one another with the new vocabulary before clarifying the remaining language problems herself. The teacher, subsequently, asked the students to evaluate the text by comparing the new pieces of information with their previous knowledge. Then, the teacher posed some open-ended questions about space travel and the life of astronauts in space (e.g., their nutrition).

Once the reading was over, the students did the exercises that followed the text. These exercises included five true or false sentences and four multiple-choice questions about the new vocabularies in the text; moreover, there was an open-ended question about whether humans could build a city on Planet Mars. The critical reading activities in this text were doing group cooperation, asking and answering open-ended questions, interacting, comparing and contrasting, previewing, questioning, and evaluating.

The next passage was *Pioneers of Flight*, which was related to three pioneers of flying and making airplanes. The teacher first asked the students to read the title and then drew their attention to the two pictures in the text. She asked if they had any information about the first pilots. Then, the teacher started to read the text twice and asked them to underline some of the parts or concepts they had problems with or write the questions that occurred to their minds while she was reading for the second time. This phase was followed by discussions.

The teacher then asked some questions about the flight pioneer that appealed to them most. To end the lesson, the students did some true/false exercises, practiced vocabulary, and answered an open-ended question: *If the author wanted to add another name, who that person would be*. The teacher used previewing, contextualizing, questioning, annotating, reflecting, interacting, asking open-ended questions, and challenging the ideology of the text as critical reading activities with this text.

How Good Is your Memory? was the next passage used in the CBI group. This text gave a lot of information to students about the hippocampus, creation of memories, and memory loss. The teacher first read the title and had the students talk about it.

Once this stage was over, the teacher gave them time to skim the text and write their questions. Then, they were given more time to answer their questions and solve their problems in groups with the teacher ultimately helping them out with the remaining language problems. The learners then started to summarize the text and read the summaries to class. Following this stage, the students were encouraged to comment on the part of the text that dealt with improving memory and deciding whether the suggestions were useful or not. To end the lesson, they did the accompanying exercises along with an open-ended question asking about why scientists had only limited information about human memory. The critical reading activities employed in this reading passage were previewing, questioning, summarizing, interacting, contextualizing, doing small group cooperation, and making inferences.

The next reading passage was *Endangered Species*. To begin with, the teacher divided the students into groups and asked them to read the text and answer each others' questions in groups. As always, the teacher eventually answered the remaining questions. Then, the teacher started to ask some questions about protecting endangered species.

Similar to what the researcher did for the TBLT group with the *Food and Mood* text, the teacher assigned the students in this group to search for more information about endangered species, write summaries of what they could read, and present them in class the next session. They did this while comparing and contrasting each other's work and challenging them. Following this phase, they did the accompanying exercises and answered an open-ended question that asked whether most people were concerned about endangered species. The critical reading activities involved here were doing group work cooperation, summarizing, making inferences, annotating, questioning, challenging the ideology of the text, and reflecting.

Is Spontaneous Human Combustion Possible? was the last text which was used in the CBI group. This passage was about combustion. The teacher asked the students about the title and then read the text twice. As usual, the students underlined the parts they had problems with during the second reading.

After reading the text and solving the students' problems, the teacher had them evaluate the texts in groups, discuss them together, and outline the points in the text that they agreed with. The teacher monitored the groups while they were talking.

To end the lesson, the class did the exercises that came with reading and answered an open-ended question asking whether they believed in spontaneous combustion. The critical reading activities practiced through text were contextualizing, outlining, questioning, doing small group cooperation, reflecting, previewing, and interacting. On the 18th and final session, the reading posttest (described in the instrumentation section) was administered for the two groups.

Results

All the data analysis procedures and results are presented in the chronological order of participant selection, posttest administration, and hypothesis testing.

Participant selection

The piloted PET was administered for participant selection. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics with the mean and standard deviation values of 78.29 and 7.82, respectively.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the PET*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PET Administration	85	58	95	78.29	7.819
Valid N (listwise)	85				

The writing and speaking sections of the PET were scored by two raters. Consistency of scoring or inter-rater reliability was found to be $r = 0.711$, $p = 0.000 \ll 0.05$ for writing, and $r = 0.794$, $p = 0.000 \ll 0.05$ for speaking.

Dividing the participants into two groups

From the 85 students who took the PET, the 60 who scored between one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen. To make sure that the 30 learners in each of the two experimental groups bore no significant difference in terms of their reading ability prior to the treatment, the researchers checked whether the mean scores of the two groups on the reading section of the PET administered during pretest were significantly different or not. The descriptive statistics of the scores obtained by these 60 learners on the PET reading section is presented in Table 2. As it is evident, the mean and the standard deviation for the CBI group were 16.83 and 2.949 and those for the TBLT group stood at 17.47 and 3.014, respectively.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Reading Scores of the Two Groups on the PET

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Group 1 – CBI	30	10	22	16.83	2.949	-.422		.427
Group 2 – TBLT	30	13	24	17.47	3.014	.254		.427
Valid N	30							

Referring back to Table 2, the skewness values for both groups (-0.99 and 0.60) fell within the acceptable range of ± 1.96 , thus signifying that the score distributions in both groups represented normality. Therefore, running an independent samples t-test was legitimized. As Table 3 below indicates, with F and P values of 0.170 and 0.681, it could be concluded that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of their variances. The results ($t = -0.823$, $p = 0.414 > 0.05$) indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups at the outset of the study; consequently, any probable difference at the end of the treatment could be attributed to the effect of the treatment.

Table 3. Independent Samples t -test of the Mean Scores of Both Groups in Their Reading Prior to the Treatment

	Levene's Test		t -test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.170	.681	-.823	58	.414	-.633	.770	-2.174	.908
Equal variances not assumed			-.823	57.98	.414	-.633	.770	-2.174	.908

Posttest

Once the treatment in the two groups was over, the posttest was administered. The test was first piloted and the reliability index was estimated through the Cronbach alpha which was found to be 0.85. Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics for both of the experimental groups on the posttest.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the Posttest in Both Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
CBI Posttest	30	9	23	17.30	3.237	-.671		.427
TBLT Posttest	30	13	24	17.40	3.014	.245		.427
Valid N (listwise)	60							

As Table 4 reveals, the mean difference between the two groups is negligible. However, further statistical analysis was required to see whether this difference was statistically significant or not.

Testing the hypothesis

Reading the skewness columns in Table 4 revealed that the skewness ratios for both groups fell within the acceptable range (1.57 and 0.57), signifying that a parametric test (e.g. an independent samples t -test) could be used.

As Table 5 below indicates, with the *F* value of 0.198 and the *P* value of 0.655, the two groups proved not to be significantly different in terms of their variances. Therefore, the results of the *t*-test analysis with the assumption of homogeneity of the variances ($t = 0.206, p = 0.837 > 0.05$) indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups at the posttest.

Table 5. Independent Samples *t*-test on the Posttest Mean Scores of the Both Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>t</i>	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.198	.655	-.206	58	.837	-.167	.807	-1.783	1.450
Equal variances not assumed			-.206	57.71	.837	-.167	.807	-1.783	1.450

Based on the data presented in Table 5, the proposed null hypothesis was not able to be rejected, meaning that CBI and TBLT in a critical thinking setting did not differentially impact the reading comprehension of the participants in this study.

Discussion

Numerous studies have shown that CBI and TBLT bear positive impact on comprehending reading texts, although in these studies a critical thinking setting was not incorporated (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Krahnke, 1987; Long & Crookes, 1992; Stryker & Leaver, 1997; Troncale, 2002). At the same time, studies demonstrate that critical reading is one of the most effective ways of facilitating the comprehension of various reading texts as the readers take an active role rather than being passive receivers of information (Auerbach & McGrail, as cited in Benesch, 1993; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008; McKay, 2000; Rfaner, 2006; Vesely & Sherlock, 2005).

The result of this study depicted no significant difference concerning the impact of CBI and TBLT on EFL learners' reading. This finding may perhaps indicate that it is not necessarily the teaching approaches that make a difference (i.e., CBI or TBLT), but it is the employment of a critical thinking setting that matters. The only possible explanation, given the fact that both groups were the same in terms of their overall language proficiency and reading ability, is that similar critical reading strategies and exercises cancelled out the differences between the two groups, thus resulting in similar outcomes. In other words, the weight of critical reading activities perhaps served more of an independent variable in this study compared to the application of CBI and TBLT.

Accordingly, the researchers observed that using critical reading activities and exercises provided learners with an opportunity to have a more in-depth view when dealing with different texts; this was evident in the kind of comments and questions they raised in both classes since their interactions both among themselves and also with the teacher were extensively beyond the normal discourse of a typical ELT classroom. Rather than simply resorting to asking what this word meant and what that structure was (which of course was part of the classroom procedure), the learners were actively engaged in understanding issues beyond the text and reading between the lines. It was very much evident that during the critical thinking activities and exercises, the learners in both CBI and TBLT groups were very much enthusiastic and took a proactive role in comprehending the texts. They were involved in challenging the views of their peers both in small groups and the whole class in general during the group work activities; this even extended to challenge the views of the teacher/researcher and also the text itself.

The participants in this study in both the CBI and TBLT group did the exercises after each reading text but they mostly enjoyed and were motivated by the critical thinking activities which were deployed after the exercises of each text. These strategies made them more active and interested.

The above trend has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Cohen, 2010; Tittle, 2010; Wallace, 1992). The literature shows that critical reading activities and exercises (such as the ones employed in this study) enable readers to identify the values underlying the texts.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that although previous studies mainly supported that one of CBI or TBLT approaches was effective in reading skill development, the setting of learning can also be effective especially when dealing with various types of critical thinking strategies and exercises. The studies carried out earlier had mostly tried to show the effect of these two approaches on the reading skill with no focus on the critical setting and its effect on reading comprehension.

One major challenge in the classroom for teachers is how to face and deal with reading texts. Many teachers may focus on new vocabularies or the grammatical structures of the text which are important factors in comprehending but not sufficient ones. A sizable fraction of teachers' focus would thus go mostly toward the reading strategies or exercises that the teaching approach dictates upon them, while the critical thinking strategies are neglected. In this study, the researchers focused on some critical reading strategies which trigger the participants' prior knowledge and help them have better connection to the text. Also there were other strategies, especially the creativity exercises which lead participants to better comprehension. Therefore, by deploying these strategies, teachers can mostly overcome the challenge of how to teach and deal with the reading skill. To this end, the critical reading setting should be emphasized in teacher training workshops as an effective feature facilitating reading comprehension.

Teachers are not the only characters who play the major role in the learning process; syllabus designers and materials developers have probably the same importance in this regard. A suggestion for them hence would be to provide the content of teaching materials with the proper exercises with critical reading strategies and lead learners toward their goal which is reading comprehension. Moreover, they could provide some handbooks for teachers in order to make them familiar with critical thinking setting. This will allow teachers to teach effectively and students to be more autonomous in language learning process which undoubtedly is the ultimate goal of any language teaching program.

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