**The Effect of Advance Organizers on Enhancing the Reading Comprehension of Pre-intermediate Iranian EFL Learners**

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**Abstract**

Reading is one of the important skills in foreign language teaching /learning. Now rending considers as an interactive process with a dynamic interaction with background knowledge. Shifting from passive to active reading brought new strategies to increase reading comprehension skills. Specifically, advanced organizers, as instructional reading strategies, are identified as a useful strategy to activate background knowledge of learners prior to study reading texts. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of Advance Organizers on increasing reading comprehension of students of English as a foreign language. To carry out this study, two intact classes consisting of 20 pre-intermediate students studying English in an English Institute in Ahvaz, Khuzestan, Iran were selected. On class assigned as experimental group and received instruction with advance organizer and one class assigned as control group and received no treatment. Results showed an increase in students’ performance in reading comprehension due to the effect of background knowledge activation strategy. Although the experimental group performed better than the control group but findings show no significant differences between two groups. The findings can be implemented by syllabus designers, English language teachers and the learners.

**Key words:** Advanced organizer, Background knowledge, Reading comprehension

**Introduction**

Among four skills of foreign language teaching/learning, reading is considered as one of the most important one for EFL learners. Traditionally, reading has been considered as a passive or decoding skill, and given insufficient attention. But, new view considers this skill as an interactive and complex process in which readers create meaning based on dynamic interaction of background knowledge, text information, and reading context (Carnine et al., 2006). The gradual change from passive to active reading has drawn attention to the use of strategies to improve reading comprehension skills. If second language learners want to be proficient readers, they can benefit from using various reading strategies in reading an academic text (Noorizah, 2006).

More specifically, instructional reading strategies, such as advance organizers can be useful in reading classes. Advance organizer has a lot to do with giving a set of information to learners before learning to help them in organizing and interpreting new incoming information (Mayer, 2003). Advance organizers can take many shapes including verbal descriptions (Chuang & Liu, 2014), graphics (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006), questioning (Osman & Hannafin, 1994), and aural descriptions (Chung & Huang, 1998). Two famous such organizers are question organizers and descriptive organizers.

Ausubel’s theory of meaningful learning provides theoretical justification for advance organizers. According to Ausubel, advance organizers direct attention to relevant prior knowledge. Advance organizers "bridges the gap between what the learner already knows and what he needs to know before he can successfully learn the task at hand" (Ausubel, 1977).

The role of schema theory for providing opportunity for understanding is important. A schema is defined as a knowledge framework that represents a class of things, events and situations (Anderson, 1978). It provides a framework for readers to better retrieve information from memory. Readers who have correct schemata about the reading material can easily connect between what they are reading and what they know. Therefore, schema specialists argue that a reader's schema can provide a framework for interpreting the discourse available to them, and that schema theory can explain how familiar situations are easily understood more (Anderson, Wang, & Gaffney, 2006; Freebody & Anderson, 1983). In conclusion, according to Anderson (1994), schemata are essential for discourse comprehension because the processes of activating schemata that gives a good account for events in a text can play a significant role in understanding discourse.

**Review of Literature**

Research on advance organizers has been conducted for the past thirty years. This term, "advance organizer," originated with the work completed by the major learning theorist, David P. Ausubel. In his book, The Psychology of Meaningful learning (1963) his theory of meaningful learning is explained, along with his ideas on the design and function of advance organizers. He assumes that potentially meaningful material is learned when appropriately placed under a relevant concept in cognitive structure.

In their meta-analysis of the use of selected advance organizers from 1960 to 1970, Kozlow and White (1979) found that if the learners do not have relevant subsumers to which the new material can be related, they will be required to memorize isolated facts. Therefore, an essential criterion for meaningful learning is the existence of relevant, and generalizable subsumers in the learner's cognitive structure.

In 1983, Stone conducted yet another meta-analysis on the efficacy of advance organizers. He analyzed 29 reports which yielded 112 studies. Stone used Glass's meta-analysis technique to compare these results with predictions from Ausubel's (1963) model of assimilative learning. Stone found that using advance organizers to introduce new material to be learned does facilitate long-term learning. Moreover, Stone said, "The facilitation of factual learning by generalized advance organizers also is consistent with Ausubel's model".

Townsend and Clarihew (1989) studied the effect of advance organizers on young students' reading comprehension. They support the use of advance organizers with young children who have strong prior knowledge of the prospective content. However, advance organizers did not work with students with weak prior knowledge. This expected result reinforces previous research that comprehension *in* reading tasks *is* functionally related to schema development (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

In another study, Evans (2003) explored the effect of graphic type of advance organizers on expository texts in English for Japanese readers. He found that student generated graphic organizers led to meaningful learning, and enhanced reading comprehension. Empirical research has provided further evidence of the positive effects of various types of advance organizers to facilitate language learning, in general, and reading comprehension, in particular.

**Statement of the Problem**

When students do not have prior information about the passage they are going to read, they encounter difficulty in reading the passage. Ausubel (1960) argues that problems in learning occur when the learner does not possess immediate, topic relevant prior knowledge to assist in the assimilation of new information. This shortcoming could be overcome through the use of advance organizers. It bridges the gap between what is known and what needs to be known for comprehension to occur (Townsend & Clarihew, 1989). Advance organizers remind students of relevant information they already have and are crucial to motivate students to read.

The purpose of this study was to determine if the advance organizer affected the comprehension of a given reading text.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

This study attempts to provide answer to the following question:

1. Is there any significant relationship between advance organizer and reading comprehension?

**Research Hypothesis**

To answer the above research questions, the following hypothesis are addressed:

H0. There is no significant relationship between advance organizer and reading comprehension.

H1. Advance organizer enhances reading comprehension.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants in the study were selected from two intact classes consisting of 20 pre-intermediate students studying English in Dey Novin English Institute in Ahvaz, Iran. They were female students whose age ranged from 12 to 15 years. One class assigned for experimental group and the other for control group.

**Materials**

The materials were textbooks of English Reading Comprehension and a reading comprehension test. The topics of the passages were varied and covers some issues such as science, sports, education, culture, health, technology, entertainment, and environment. The texts presented in the study were short, interesting and relevant to EFL readers at pre-intermediate level. This test consisted of 10 multiple-choice items about the main points of the texts.

**Procedure**

Following quasi-experimental method, two intact classes were chosen for this study. Participants of this research studying English at pre-intermediate level. One class was considered as experimental group and received instruction with advanced organizer and another class considered as control group and received routine instruction. In order to assign their current level of reading comprehension their class scores completion of prior course were taken into account. The scores were analyzed to see whether there is any difference between the two groups or not. Before reading the text, participants of experimental group were instructed to determine the purpose of reading. They learned how the information was organized in the text. They were forced to read a short paragraph related to the main text and talked about given pictures to activate their prior information about the text, before starting to read the main text. They also were asked to make some questions about covered paragraph and pictures. After two weeks of instruction, to investigate the results of instruction, a posttest of 10 multiple choice questions about covered texts.

**Result and Discussion**

The data from the posttest was used to evaluate the effect of treatment. The results showed that the means of Experimental group was (*M* = 18.41) and Control Group was (*M* = 16.80). The results indicate the differences in mean scores of experimental and control groups. A comparison of the means across groups shows that the Experimental Group performed better than the Control Group, although the difference is not statistically significant.

By considering of the above result, the researcher can come to this conclusion that an important aspect of studying reading comprehension is to survey both the comprehension and the processes as they take place. In this study, the products of comprehension indicated that activating prior knowledge can increase the level of the learners’ reading comprehension.

The results of this study showed that the use of advance organizer had a positive effect on English reading comprehension. As Bagui (1998) states, the verbal code can be complementary to the nonverbal code and both codes can act as a corresponding form of presenting information and enhanced the learners’ comprehension. The finding receives support from the findings of the previous research (Erfani et al. 2012; Guerrero 2003; Parsons 2006), who demonstrated that visuals enhanced the reading comprehension of English texts.

It is clear that with the addition of question advance organizers, English reading comprehension improved more effectively. The reason behind the superiority of question advance organizers might be due to the intrinsic nature of the questioning strategies. As Osman and Hannafin (1994) state, questioning strategies can be employed to make learners participate in deeper cognitive information processing and, consequently, expand their learning and deepen understanding.

**Conclusion and Implication**

Cognitive and pedagogical strategies such as advance organizers have been designed to be integrated into various types of instructional materials to improve L2 learners’ fulfilment.

The current study focused on the effect of advance organizer on reading comprehension. The findings revealed no significant effect of advance organizer on the reading comprehension. When the L2 participants were provided with question advance organizers prior to reading materials, they, in general, comprehended reading content more effectively. The L2 teachers include visual elements, such as charts, diagrams, and images, in the L2 instructional materials to facilitate L2 reading comprehension. According to the lot of researches in this field of study, when graphics are added to L2 text-based materials, it will result in more effective L2 reading.

The use of advance organizers can be a good teaching and learning technique in L2 reading programs in the context. The above findings imply that L2 students may benefit from using different types of advance organizers in the classrooms. Curriculum developers in their efforts to improve the effectiveness of teachers to teach reading comprehension materials should encourage the use of advance organizers.

Fourth, the results of this study also have implications for classroom teachers. That is, teachers are highly advised to pay more attention to assist their students make connections what they know and new material by introducing appropriate pre-reading activities. The benefits gained from these activities may well merit the effort as the activities would improve learners' reading comprehension performance and thus enhancing their overall L2 language ability.

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