

# The effectiveness of Hymes' ethnography of communication model in teaching English learners reading comprehension

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The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of a discursal approach on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. A Quick Placement Test (QPT) was used to select 60 intermediate EFL learners as the participants of this study. Then, they were divided into experimental and control groups. Each group consisted of 30 learners. Prior to the treatment, the participants of both groups were given a pre-test to determine their reading comprehension levels. The experimental group was exposed to the Hymes' model. In the control group the researcher used a traditional approach for teaching the reading skill. Then a post-test was administered to both groups. An independent samples t-test between post-tests of the study and a paired-samples t-test between the pre-test and post-test of the groups of the study were run. The results of the study indicated that applying Hymes' model improved the learners' reading comprehension while the traditional approach did not.

كان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو التحقيق في تأثير النهج التدريبي على قدرة الطلاب الإيرانيين على تعلم القراءة والكتابة في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم استخدام اختبار تحديد المستوى السريع (QPT) للتأكد من تجانس متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الذين كانوا في فصلين دراسيين. ثم، تم تقسيمهم بشكل عشوائي إلى مجموعتين تجريبية ومراقبة. كل مجموعة تتألف من 30 متعلما. قبل العلاج، تم إعطاء المشاركين من كلا المجموعتين قبل الاختبار لتحديد مستويات الفهم القراءة لديهم. تعرضت المجموعة التجريبية لنموذج التراتيل. في المجموعة الضابطة، استخدم الباحث المنهج التقليدي لتدريس مهارة القراءة. ثم تدار بعد الاختبار لكلا الفريقيين. تم إجراء اختبار مستقل لعينات t بين الاختبارين اللاحقين للدراسة واختبار t المقترن بالعينات بين الاختبار المسبق والاختبار اللاحق لمجموعات الدراسة. أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن تطبيق نموذج هايمز قد حسن من فهم القراءة للمتعلمين في حين أن النهج التقليدي لم يفعل ذلك.

## Introduction

Reading is considered as an effective learning activity for creating meaning and attaining new knowledge (Pretorius, 2002). Many scholars have emphasized the power of reading. According to Ashton (2012), reading comprehension proficiency is very significant for academic success. Through reading, people can have a richer view of the world and acquire wisdom. Reading is considered as an essential tool and a basic skill upon which all formal education depends (Su, 2006). Since most of what is needed to be known is communicated via the written mode, the reading skill plays a significant role in second/foreign language learning. Because of the crucial role of reading, teachers should find the best techniques and resources to improve their teaching of reading skill. Nowadays, views of reading theories have changed noticeably in that reading is no longer seen as simply a reinforcement for oral language instruction. Psycholinguistic research has primarily investigated language comprehension at the level of words and sentences (Traxler & Gernsbacher, 2006). Understanding discourse, however, requires much more than processing a series of individual sentences. Researches on discourse comprehension have emphasized the critical role of discourse context in building meaning from extended linguistic input, and have tried to characterize the various psychological processes involved in discourse experiences (Gerrig, 1993; Graesser, Gernsbacher & Goldman, 2003). This study aims to investigate the impact of a discursal approach on Iranian intermediate EFL students' reading comprehension.

## Literature review

Historically, research in discourse processing has examined the factors that influence comprehension and memory for text. Text content has a considerable impact on readers' comprehension.

According to Long (1996) and Lyster (2007), classroom discourse plays a critical role in second language learning. The instructional exchanges between teacher and students provide opportunities for the learners to practice unfamiliar language, test out hypotheses about how it works, and obtain useful feedback. Learners' conscious attention to meanings and forms (of words, phrases, sentence structures) – i.e. *noticing* – is necessary for language learning, especially in the situations in which the teacher and learners negotiate the meanings of the target words or when the learners notice the gap between what they want to say and what they can produce during classroom interaction (Renkema, 1993).

The teacher's input is equally important for learners to learn unfamiliar words. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) further suggest that learners learn by searching for and locating information on the meanings or forms of new language. Instructional scaffolding that leads learners to make associations of the target words with other lexical items, grammatical forms, syntactical structures, and contextual meanings improve learners' depth of processing of the target words (ibid). As Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) aptly suggested, it is the *frequency* and *quality* of processing of the meanings of new words that help learners to remember them. Concerning this issue, in recent decades, studies on reading comprehension have attracted the attention of scholars in language learning and teaching research in the EFL context (Nation, 2006, 2013, 2015; Mehrpour, Razmjoo & Kian, 2011); but none of them mentioned the role of the discorsal approach in reading comprehension. By the discorsal approach, we mean an approach which focuses on discourse, i.e. extended language in context rather than isolated words or sentences. Regarding the importance of discourse, Hymes (1964) believed that if readers know about the writer who produces the utterance, it will help the readers to imagine what that particular person is likely to say. After Chomsky's (1965) introduction of the concept of linguistic competence (a person's unconscious awareness of what sentences are possible in a particular language), Hymes (1972) proposed the concept of *communicative competence*: the underlying knowledge of the rules of speaking which allow someone to communicate *appropriately* in a particular context (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005).

Hymes proposed the term 'ethnography of speaking', later amended to 'ethnography of communication', to describe a new approach to understanding language in use (Hymes, 1972). In doing this, Hymes aimed to move away from considering language as an abstract system of rules and toward investigating the diversity of speech as it is encountered in ethnographic fieldwork. Thus Hymes offers a theoretical basis for language study that accounts for both linguistic variations from individual to individual and relative linguistic coherence across the social realm. For Hymes, discourse cannot be considered separate from the sociological and cultural factors that help shape linguistic form and create meaning.

According to Hymes's SPEAKING model, the following elements constitute the core of the ethnography of communicative events:

**Setting and scene:** the time, place and environment of the situation.

**Participants:** those involved in the communication, including the speaker and the audience.

**Ends:** the purpose and goals of the communication as well as any outcomes.

**Act sequence:** The order of events that took place during the communication event.

**Key:** The overall tone or manner of the communication.

Instrumentalities: the medium and style used in the communication.

Norms: define what is socially acceptable in the event.

Genre: the type of communicative event.

The importance of this study stems from its attempts to improve students' reading comprehension through Hymes' theory emphasizing the ethnography of communication. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following research question was proposed:

RQ: *Does applying a discursal approach have any statistically significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?*

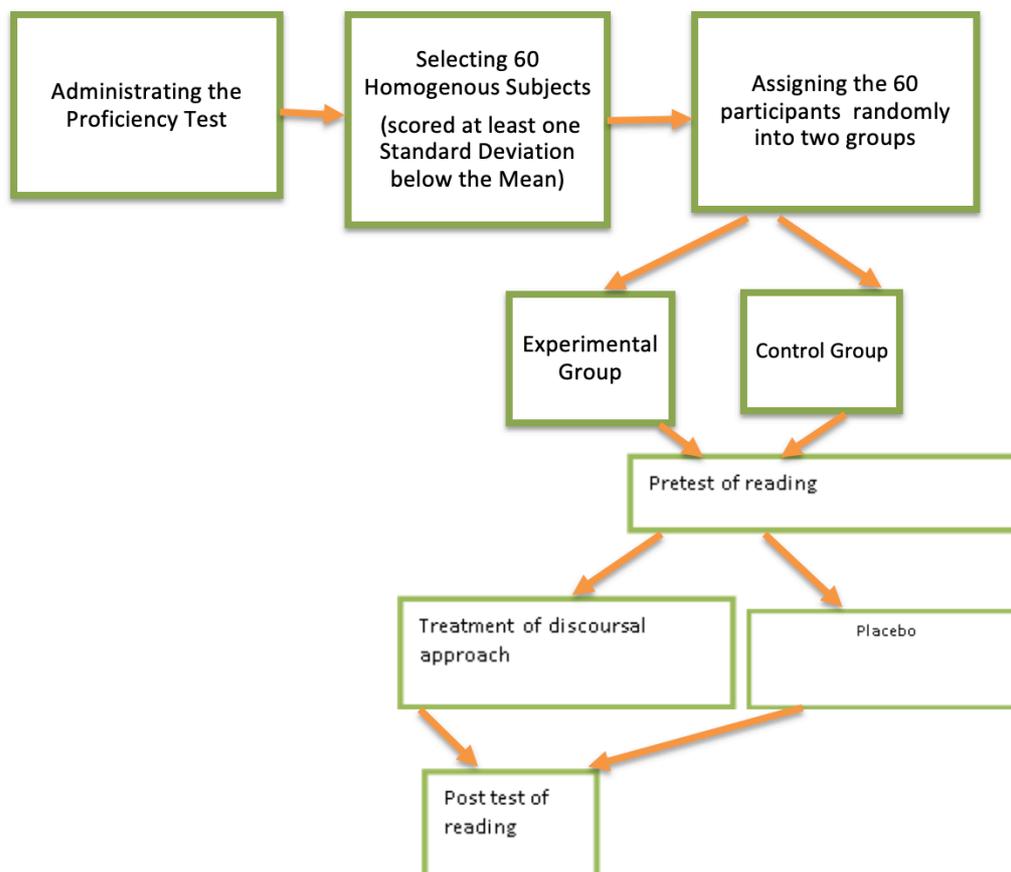
Based on this research question, the following null hypothesis has been considered:

H<sub>0</sub>: *Applying the discursal approach will not have any statistically significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.*

## Methods

### *Design of the study*

The current study followed a quasi-experimental design in which subjects of the study were selected for homogeneity, and then their intact classes were randomly assigned into one control and one experimental group in order to investigate the research question of the study. The following diagram illustrates the steps taken in this study:



**Figure 1: Design of the study.**

## Participants

The study was conducted with 60 Iranian high school students in Langroud, Iran. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling from two intact classes. Thirty participants in the first class were considered as the experimental group and the other 30 in the second class were considered as the control group. Their age varied from 15 to 16; all of the students in the two classes gave informed consent to participate in the study. In order to make sure of homogeneity, the participants were selected out of 80 intermediate students based on their results in a placement test. This enabled the researchers to have a good understanding of what level the students were at. Having calculated the mean and the standard deviation (SD), students scoring within one SD above or below the mean were selected to participate in the study. The experimental group received eight treatment sessions using a discursal approach (see below), while the control group received more traditional instruction focusing on linguistic competence (vocabulary and grammar).

## Research instruments

In order to be sure that the participants were initially fairly homogenous in their reading (Armstrong, 2000), a Quick Placement Test (QPT) was administered. The test is developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL and consists of a reading text including on average 150 words with 20 graded questions assessing student's level of reading comprehension.

Once the participants were selected, a further test was used to test their reading comprehension. This test was taken from the *Handbook for the TOEFL Standard Test* (Educational Testing Service, 2014). The tests were real TOEFL test questions for practice. In other words, authentic TOEFL test questions formed the test. The reliability of the test was 0.737. The test was utilized to measure the reading comprehension knowledge of the learners in both groups before the treatment. No changes or modifications were made to the test.

A similar reading test with the same reliability was used as a post-test after eight sessions of instruction at the end of the treatment. This test which was administered after the treatment sessions was equal in all respects to the pre-test. In fact, another version of the reading comprehension test from the *Handbook for the TOEFL Standard Test* was used to post-test the participants' reading comprehension.

## Pilot study

The reliability of the reading comprehension test and QPT were estimated through running Cronbach's Alpha to the results of the tests in a pilot study on (15) students. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Reliability statistics for the Reading Comprehension Test and QPT**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Reading Comprehension Test	.737 15 students
QPT .773	15 students

The values of reliability were explained according to the reliability standards suggested by Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott (1994). The values of Cronbach's Alpha for the reading comprehension test and QPT were (.737), and (.773), respectively which were both acceptable indicating that the instruments could be considered as reliable tools for the main study (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Suggested standards for the Reliability Index (Barker, Pistrang & Elliott, 1994)**

Interpretation	Reliability index
Good	.80
Acceptable	.70
Marginal	.60
Poor	.50

### ***Data collection procedures***

This study was conducted in March and April 2018. After selecting a homogenous sample with the QPT (see above), 60 intermediate subjects were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups. A pre-test of reading comprehension was administered to both groups. The students in the two groups worked with the same reading materials and were taught by the same teacher.

During the two months of the study, the students read eight passages on different subjects. The experimental group received a discursal approach: the teacher used Hymes' model to analyze and explain the texts. For Hymes, communication cannot be considered separate from the sociological and cultural factors that help shape linguistic form and create meaning, and so the frame he offers in place of grammar gives equal place to both aspects of speech: speech and the entailments that give meaning to speech cannot be considered in isolation. Based on Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model, the teacher clarified each item for the students in the experimental group before they read the text. Here is an example of a text analysis based on Hymes' model:

Setting and Scene: The setting is school. Two boys are talking together on the basketball field.

Participants: Two boys.

End: The reading is a conversation between two classmates; one of them is trying to convince another that he is a good basketball player.

Act Sequence: The speech acts are in conversational form, e.g. "I mean you played well last week".

Key: The overall tone is informal.

Instrumentalities: The members talk face to face.

Norms: There is a competitive norm, e.g. " Exactly! Bill's right, we should win".

Genre: conversation.

For the control group, the teacher-researcher gave the same reading texts and explained the topic of the reading text before asking students to read it. Then the students read the text, focused on the meaning and pronunciation of unfamiliar vocabulary and then answered the reading comprehension questions.

After the treatment, a post-test of reading comprehension, similar to the pre-test (see above), was administered to both groups.

## **Findings**

### ***Descriptive findings of the study***

This section focuses on the descriptive analysis of the obtained data in this study. Such analysis was done by using SPSS. Tables 3 and 4 show the descriptive analysis for the pre-test and post-test scores of the reading comprehension in the experimental and control groups of the study:

**Table 3: Descriptive statistic results of the pre-test of both groups on the reading comprehension test.**

Variable	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Control	30	16.20	2.772	.506
Experimental	30	16.82	2.195	.415

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistic results of the pre-test of the groups of the study. The number of students in the control group was 30 and the mean of this group, the standard deviation, and the standard error mean were 16.20, 2.772 and .506 respectively. Also the number of students in the experimental group, the mean of this group, the standard deviation, and the standard Error mean were 30, 16.82, 2.195, and .415 respectively.

**Table 4: Descriptive statistic results of the post-test of both groups on the reading comprehension test.**

Variable	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Control	30	16.47	2.193	.400
Experimental	30	18.46	1.551	.293

The question of the study targeted the effect of the discorsal approach on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. In this regard, the mean scores of students' performance on each of the two exams as well as the standard deviations were calculated in order to observe the probable change in students' performance before and after instruction. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistic results of the post-test of the groups of the study. The number of the students in the control group was 30 and the mean of this group, the standard deviation, and standard error mean were 16.47, 2.193 and .400 respectively. However, the number of students in the experimental group, the mean of this group, the standard deviation, and standard error mean were 30, 18.46, 1.551, and .293 respectively.

### ***Inferential findings of the study***

The current study was conducted to explore a hypothesis about teaching and learning, and in this regard took several theoretical, practical and statistical steps. In order to probe whether the treatment given to the experimental group had made any significant change within this group and to see if the students in this group had performed significantly differently on the post-test compared with the pre-test, the reading comprehension pre-test and post-test scores were compared within each group (experimental group and control group) by using a paired t-test. The results obtained from this statistical test are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5: Paired sample t-test for pre- and post-test in experimental and control groups.**

Groups		Paired Differences		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD			
Experimental	pretest - posttest	-1.643	1.062	-8.189	27	.000
Control	pretest - posttest	-.267	1.437	.262	29	.318

Now, in order to answer the research question, data were analyzed in both control and experimental groups according to tables. As it is evident from Table 5, there is no significant difference between pre- and post-tests in the control group ( $t=1.017$ ;  $p=.318$ ) while with regard to the effect of the discorsal approach on improving EFL learners' reading comprehension, the results of the data analysis (t-test) in Table 5 indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between students' performance in reading comprehension in the pre-test and post-test ( $t= 8.189$ ;  $P=.000$ ). On the other hand, by looking at the table (7) subjects scored higher on the post-test ( $M=18.46$ ,  $SD= 1.55$ ), when they were taught using the discorsal approach, than the pre-test ( $M=16.82$ ,  $SD= 2.195$ ).

By taking the results of the data analysis into account, the null hypothesis, i.e., "Applying a discorsal approach does not have any statistically significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability" is rejected. In other words, the discorsal approach could play a significant role in enhancing EFL learners' reading comprehension.

## Conclusions

The results suggest that applying Hymes' model pedagogically had significant effects on the reading ability of Iranian EFL intermediate learners. According to the results of this study, it seems that the discorsal approach was effective.

The findings of the present study are in line with those of Wu (2017), who found that readers should adopt an interactive approach, that is to say, they should analyze a text in a macro way as well as focusing on details, and only in this way can our students understand a text more quickly and thoroughly, then their language skills will be improved. Things that our teachers should pay attention to are: first, master abundant language knowledge, such as grammar, lexicology, syntax, linguistics, pragmatics and so on; second, focus on varied background knowledge, such as cultures both at home and abroad, literatures, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and things alike. All this knowledge is not only beneficial for readers to develop their discourse analysis skills but also helpful to make the teaching of reading efficient.

The findings of this study are also in line with Sparks (2004), who investigated language/discourse comprehension and understanding. Discourse comprehension involves building meaning from extended segments of language, such as novels, news articles, conversations, textbooks, and other everyday materials. Successfully comprehending larger units of text and discourse requires making inferences to connect ideas both within and across local and global discourse contexts. Establishing such connections relies on the integration of information from prior discourse contents, as well as from prior knowledge, in order to build a coherent memory representation for the events and concepts the text describes. Following successful comprehension, the resultant discourse representation can be retrieved, updated, manipulated, and applied in order to answer questions and solve problems.

In the present study, an advancement was seen from the pre-test to the post-test in two groups, i.e. the experimental and the control. In any case, the members in the experimental group who used Hymes' model as a treatment could comprehend the text contrasted with the control group who got no treatment. Consequently, the consequences of the present study have uncovered that using the discorsal approach improves the EFL learners' reading comprehension. In any case, the study has demonstrated that the experimental group who used Hymes' model exceeded the control group in their reading comprehension. According to the results of this study, Hymes' model could influence students' reading comprehension ability sufficiently and made statistically significant improvement in the students' reading ability. Generally, the results of the current study demonstrated that comprehension ability can be improved by employing appropriate strategies such as Hymes' model.

This study explored the effects of the discorsal approach on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. The findings obtained in this study lead to some pedagogical implications which are beneficial for teachers and learners in an EFL context. Different stakeholders in the field of language learning and teaching such as curriculum and material developers, course and syllabus designers, learners, teachers and teacher trainers can gain positive advantages from the obtained results. Hymes' model as a helpful technique can be employed in English language classrooms. Using the findings of this study can improve the condition and status of language teaching in the context of Iran. The findings may encourage teachers, who still believe in their own

traditional techniques in teaching reading to shift their attitudes and follow more practical techniques.

With regards to the results of the study, Hymes' model was applied in order to improve the learners' reading ability because it *is the best known model for analyzing texts*; in order to comprehend a text correctly, one needs not only to learn its vocabularies and grammar, but also the context in which words are used. As a result, the learning of the SPEAKING model can be helpful for students.

This approach can help to understand relationships and power dynamics within a given speech community and provide insight on cultural values. Since it is obvious that language is used in many different ways among different groups of people and each group has its own norms of linguistic behavior. Therefore, once all of SPEAKING's components have been discovered in a text, learners will be more likely to be able to communicate appropriately in a cross-cultural situation because they indicate differences with regard to beliefs, values, reference groups, norms, and the like.

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