Research paper

On Accommodating Questioning Strategies to Enhance Inferencing Ability of Iranian EFL Learners: Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Refreshed

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Abstract

Questioning as one of teaching and learning strategies has long been the focus of attention by researchers and scholars; one major reason is that asking proper questions leads to proper elicitation of knowledge. The present study is aimed at pursuing the implementation of questioning strategies proposed through Bloom's (1956) taxonomy on enhancing the inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. This study was quasi-experimental in Pretest/Posttest design, involving treatment and utilizing standardized tests. Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were employed via the instruments of tests, and interview. From the subject pool of 186 intermediate-level English learners attending a university extra-curriculum program in a private institute in Tehran, Oxford Placement Test was administered and sixty intermediate EFL learners were selected and randomly assigned to treatment and control groups of thirty. The treatment group received questioning strategy-training explicitly in fifteen sessions of the reading comprehension course, while the control group followed common instruction in reading courses. This study was conducted during the first academic semester 2019-2020 and the result of interview and statistical analyses confirmed that questioning strategies enhanced the inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. This study bears the implications of the findings for language learners/instructors, syllabus designers and materials developers.

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Introduction

The third millennium is the world full of thoughtful individuals whose minds are filled with mindful answers, and there is no proper question to be asked from them (Watson 2010) i.e., they are unable to think in real-life situations. This could be the underlying reason which hinders language learners in posing proper questions and making inferences in EFL contexts such as Iran.

Besides the emphasis put on reading comprehension skill, the main goal of a foreign language learner is the ability to read in that language as scholars name it "the most important skill in a foreign language" (McDonough & Shaw, 2003, p.89). What has highlighted reading comprehension skill as the most prominent one is that "Reading" is "a complex combination of processes" (Grabe, 2004, p.14); complex from the point of view that it involves the "activation of prior knowledge, the evaluation of the text, and a monitoring of the reader's own comprehension" (Alderson, 2000, p. 3). Of course such point of view towards reading comprehension is spotlighted once it is dealt with in academic and educational settings. In such settings, learners are involved in critical reading wherein the significant purpose is to identify inferences, assumptions, and implications (Ustunluoglu, 2004).

In the process of obtaining mastery on reading comprehension skill, EFL learners should maintain the context knowledge area of target language texts (Morrow, 2005). EFL learners' reading skill is reinforced when they are equipped with the good command of the ethnics and cultural discrepancies (Ediger, 2001; Hudson, 2007; Kern & Schultz, 2005). Such command on the ethnics and cultural differences could not be mastered in a short time-span. It should be reinforced gradually through exposures to reading comprehension texts in different contexts. EFL learners should begin with reading instances involving references and move towards reading instances involving inferences. Such trend might be viable today due to the great change as the educational reform in teaching realm, a shift from a traditional teacher-centeredness experience towards a more learner-centeredness communication especially in Asian countries. Researches in Asian countries such as those in Pakistan (Islam et al. 2013), China (Liu & Huang, 2011), Japan (Mitchell, 2017), and Iran (Papi, 2010) all of which confirmed that the actual communication, involvement and understanding of EFL learners were enhanced and learners became motivated enough to make proper inferences and socialize.

Concerning the reading comprehension instruction, questioning strategies are the necessary strategies to be taught to EFL learners in order to enhance their reading comprehension skill (Hudson, 2007). Questioning strategies are regarded as the most critical component in lowering the barriers of learning and act as their long term reading motivation (Macalister, 2011). Generally speaking, reading comprehension questions are mostly devoted to the ones concerning what the learners have read (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002; Anthony & Raphael, 2004). Experienced teachers ask quality questions which in turn trigger the learners' prior knowledge, develop new concepts, and crystallize the rationale behind deeds, which all in all would reinforce the high level thinking ability of EFL learners (Good & Brophy, 2000; Gunning, 1992). This way, through deepening the quality of the questions from reference

questions to quality questions by the EFL instructors, the EFL learners are equipped with the skill necessary to make inferences and read between the lines.

Review of Literature

The role of teachers in EFL settings is more than that of the facilitators or models. The teachers challenge the existing and dominant logic of the learners and move towards triggering the reasoning skill of EFL learners by posing the right questions on the proper time. What is meant by questioning technique utilized in classrooms is usually targeted at the questions proposed by the teachers (Graesser & Person, 1994). Hence, that could be regarded as the starting point, for the teachers could guide the students thinking path into deep levels of understanding (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007). Such practice is best institutionalized by the teachers through acting as the model that is capable of asking appropriate questions and provides the necessary room for the learners to mimic in the same line what they have already witnessed. Then little by little they would be empowered to come up with their own challenging questions (Fordham, 2006). The questioning technique is regarded as a good support for students learning a foreign language, questions regarding what they have read which would in turn enhance the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002; Anthony & Raphael, 2004; Fordham, 2006; Good & Brophy, 2000; Gunning, 1992).

Some scholars such as Raphael and Au (2005), Smith (2004), and Raphael (1986) believe that the mastery on reading comprehension of a passage is best manifested when EFL learners are capable of playing question-and-answer game on the passages they have been taught. Once such question-and-answer practice is dominated in a reading course, the reasoning capacity of EFL learners is fine-tuned which would in turn lead to higher level thinking ability of the students (Gunning, 1992), higher level thinking accommodated through Bloom's (1956) taxonomy which accordingly has been classified into various levels for thinking ability, pivoting on the cognitive domain (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Marzano, 2001). The precise boarder line between and among the low level thinking and high level thinking is so vague, because high level questions are rooted in low level questions such as display or literal questions, to the extent that some scholars such as Boyd and Rubin (2006) believe that the necessity of asking display questions are yet of great importance. Elsewhere in Brunei, Ho (2005) has conducted a research on the questions being asked by the teachers in English reading comprehension courses and concluded that there existed no clear boarder-line between open and closed classifications of the questions when the interactions in the classes were to be spotlighted. In US, Lee (2008) has conducted a research on the use of questioning techniques and found that it could be regarded as a useful tool for teaching and learning. All in all, there exists a common belief among scholars (Ho, 2005; Boyd & Rubin, 2006; Marzano, 2001) that higher level questions are rooted in lower level questions and by activating the literal and display questions as the lower level ones, EFL learners are equipped with the basics of questioning strategies to be reinforced by the teachers. This could in turn lead to higher level thinking which is triggered by proposing more inferential questions (Lee, 2008).

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Scholars such as Hall (2005) believe that critical thinking ability of students is enhanced through reading comprehension instances which empower them to establish appropriate links between and among elements of the passages. This way, EFL readers act as critical thinkers and fill in the gaps through inferencing and integrating logical links between the two ends of the understanding matrix as between their prior knowledge and the new information they encountered. Hall (2005) emphasizes that "different schemas will result in different representations (p.99)". It is vivid that as Shomoossi (2004) put in his study on reading comprehension in Iran that the types of questions being ask at the early sessions of the course in order to provide proper understanding of the topics were different from the teachers' questions in the post-reading phases. Such shift of focus from posing reference questions to inference questions is once more highlighted. Tan (2007) also conducted a study in China on the use of questions in reading courses in universities and proposed that teachers' questions help the EFL learners to think independently. In a nutshell, the turning point of departure is to be on the part of the EFL learners, but that of the destination is certainly dependent on the skillfulness of the teachers in how much depth they provide EFL learners with in order for them to be capable enough to judge and digest the passages they read.

It is worth being highlighted that the speed at which the EFL learners cover the information gaps is a function of the teachers teaching policy (Oxford, 1999) in utilizing the strategies in class. Some scholars such as Parker and Hurry (2007) believe that teachers in reading comprehension classes who ask more closed questions would limit the creativity of the students in generating challenging questions. Elsewhere in the UK, Harrop and Swinson (2003) conducted a survey and concluded that the teachers-raised reading comprehension questions are mostly routine, closed questions. Blachowicz and Ogle, (2001) also came up with the same result that such questions rarely activate the higher level thinking ability of the EFL learners in reading courses, just because they get accustomed to mimicking the generation of the same low level questions. Such fashion of practice could be overcome through utilizing the quality questions as proposed by Walsh and Sattes (2005). As they put it, quality questioning, is not a mere tool for extracting stored or memorized information. It should be viewed and practiced as a dynamic process through which the learners are engaged and trapped in it both cognitively and meta-cognitively, the settings which have been pre-set intentionally by the teachers. What counts in comprehending a passage by EFL learners, is to make them actively participate in the texts they encounter. The deeper they get into the passages, the higher level of thinking and inferencing they could achieve in the long run. It is of great importance to consider that the bulk of knowledge could be digested gradually. There exists a process of becoming a higher order thinker and gradually possessing an inferencing capability in case of confronting puzzling situations when demanding to establish a logical relation between and among the elements of the scenes and passages of information (Aghaie & Zhang, 2012).

Research Objectives and Rationale

The present study was an investigation into observing the effects of implementing questioning strategies on inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. This study was inspired by the previous studies performed by various researchers showing that

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strategies could be implemented in elementary, intermediate and advanced levels (Walters, 2006; Tayler, Stevens, & Asher, 2006) indicating that the level of proficiency is an important issue. Other studies signify that the lengths of the intervention program (Lee, 2007) along with the trend of implicitly enacting the intervention (Gu, 2007; Cohen & Weaver, 1998) are of great importance. Some researchers probed that intervention programs could be implemented on different language skills (Cohen, 2011; Harden, 2013) among different levels of schools, universities or institutes (Fan, 2010). As instructional interventions are to be implemented either implicitly or explicitly (Chamot & Rubin, 1994), the researchers the researchers in the present study decided to implement questioning strategy explicitly, inspiring the study conducted by Aghaie and Zhang (2012) embracing the implicit implementation of strategies in Iranian EFL context. In most studies concerning strategy-training (Wenden 1995; Nguyen & Gu, 2013; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Oxford, 1999; Chamot, 2004), the common ground bears the idea that there exists a powerful link between strategy training and elevating the personality traits or self-related characteristics of the practitioners such as self-efficacy and inferencing ability. The findings of the previous studies in this realm had effective impact on the researchers' narrow-down process.

In order to fulfill the idea proposed in the present paper, i.e. to investigate the effects of implementing questioning strategy explicitly on enhancing the inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners through instructional intervention, the researchers came up with the following research question:
Does implementing questioning strategy significantly enhance the inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the present study were 60 EFL learners who were selected from the subject pool of 186 intermediate EFL learners (153 females and 33 males, aged between 18 and 34) studying at a private English institute in Tehran conducting university extra-curriculum programs. Through convenience sampling, the participants took Oxford Placement Test (OPT) in order for the researchers to observe homogeneity regarding their language proficiency. Sixty intermediate female subjects were randomly assigned into two homogeneous groups of 30 as one "control" and one "treatment" groups. This could be regarded as the delimitation of the present study to select 60 female EFL learners because male subjects were rare and did not participate.

Design of the Study

The present study was in quasi-experimental design in which the qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were employed. The qualitative phase comprised of face-to-face semi-structured interview from thirty participants in the treatment group who all volunteered to take part in interview. The qualitative open-ended questions were adopted from the research conducted by Walsh and Sattes (2017). The theme of the questions were all the underlying

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theme of questioning strategies and the qualitative phase was conducted with the volunteers from the treatment group in order to further delve into the participants' belief-layer regarding the notion of questioning strategies.

In the quantitative phase, the researcher employed the descriptive research design to determine the inter-relationship of the dependent and independent variables. The researchers in the present study investigated the effect of implementing questioning strategies as independent variable on the inferential reading comprehension ability as the dependent variable. Meanwhile, questioning strategy was probed through interview, and the inferencing ability was tested through inferential reading comprehension test, and the present study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

Instruments

Three instruments were employed in this study:

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was employed as a standard language proficiency test in order to homogenize the selection of subjects regarding their language proficiency level. In order to check the reliability of the OPT as the pre-test, the OPT was piloted with thirty EFL learners of the same age and proficiency level attending the private language institute. The reliability of the OPT through Cronbach's alpha analysis was performed, the result (r=0.83) indicated that the test was reliable.

Concerning OPT scoring agenda, every correct answer was awarded +1 point and every incorrect answer was given zero point. No negative score was considered for penalty in this test. The total score of the test was 100. According to Oxford Placement Test Score-Band Solutions, 2007, the total score should fall between 70 and 87 out of 100 to be regarded as intermediate.

The Inferential Reading Comprehension Test was a research-based 32-item multiple-choice reading comprehension test battery (see Appendix A in Supplementary) designed by Cromley and Azevedo (2004) to measure participants' capability to draw inferences utilizing the content referred to in the passages. There were eight passages each followed by four multiple choice inferential reading comprehension questions. While it was an accredited standardized test, the researchers were advised to conduct a pilot study by administering it to a group of thirty EFL learners at the same age and proficiency level as the participants of the study. Through the pilot study, the 32-item inferential reading comprehension test had a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability of 0.79 and concurrent validity with the inferential questions on the Gates-MacGinitie reading comprehension subtest as r = 0.72.

Semi-structured interview - An interview embraces greater possibility of eliciting in-depth insights from interviewees (Bell, 2010). Regarding the distinctive differentiation existing between structured and unstructured interviews, the semi-structured interviews provide interviewees with more freedom to freely express their opinions and feelings to the depth controlled and supervised by the interviewer (Cohen et al. 2011). Thus, the researchers in the

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present study found it the most appropriate tool to conduct *face-to-face semi-structured interviews* with thirty participants in the treatment group who attended the reading intervention course.

The qualitative questions were adopted from the research conducted by Walsh and Sattes (2017). It is worth indicating that the interview questions were checked by the scholars and experts to adjust any probable misconceptions. The interview questions were piloted with another ten EFL learner at the same age and English proficiency level as the participants. A few modifications and reordering were deemed necessary, so prior to conducting the main interview session, the minor modifications were made and they were reconfirmed by the scholars in the field.

The interview phase of the study took approximately one-month time span; the interview pattern was a face-to-face one. The learners were informed the interview would be recorded for analysis purposes. The socially co-constructed nature of interviews (Mann, 2011) was considered and confirmed that the participants as the subjects of the study had interactions with the researcher as the interviewer, which in turn shaped the subjects' perception of the idea under investigation. This issue was rectified by informing the subjects of the present study and providing them with necessary information on the trend and the form of the interview they were planned to take part. Their responses and the interview data (after they had been transcribed in full) were categorized through a process of qualitative thematic analysis (Newby, 2010). This process involves reading the data carefully, identifying key issues in them, and then organizing these issues into a set of broader categories. The questions in the interview schedule provided an initial structure within which specific answers could then be further categorized.

Qualitative Questions

The main qualitative question was: "What is EFL learners' perception of questioning strategy?" In this sense, the qualitative interview questions were designed as:

1. Did you receive training on questioning strategy?
2. In a few words briefly explain how was it a different experience in comparison with previous experience you had in other courses not performed in questioning fashion?
3. Did you like this project? Why or why not?
4. How do you think questioning strategy influenced your inferences and performance in the course?
5. Is there anything that your teacher needs to know as he makes revisions to the class? Any comments?

Procedures

The whole process of conducting this research comprised of administering the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) prior to the commencement of the study, and an inferential reading comprehension test administered twice as the pre-test and post-test. The reading intervention course lasted for 15 sessions. The first session was devoted to the administration of OPT and

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the second session to the administration of inferential reading comprehension test as the pre-test. In the treatment phase, the treatment group received a brief instruction (See Appendix B in Supplementary) on questioning strategies and the control group only received the common reading strategies as skimming, scanning, reading for the main idea, etc. The time span of each session of instruction was identical for both groups as ninety minutes. After the 13th session of treatment, both groups took the inferential reading comprehension test as the post-test. The result of the pre-test and post-test were subjected to Independent Samples t-Test statistical analysis in order to compare the results obtained.

Treatment

The treatment group experienced Think-Pair-Share (Lyman, 1981) as one of the questioning strategies. The materials selected were the same as the control group, units from the book "*Active Skills for Reading 3*" by Anderson (2014), hence the presentation and the units' sequences were arranged and presented in small sequence units for the purpose of leading the EFL learners from known ideas to unknown, from simple tasks to more complex tasks. This was mainly done to provide the learners with adequate and necessary freedom to adjust their own pace, and experience their own trend of posing or getting feedback from their own questions. Of course, the teacher provided prompt feedback on the adequacy of their responses in order for them to attain mastery. The EFL learners in the treatment group were paired occasionally to maintain a given goal. The teacher walked around to pinpoint the misunderstandings and guide them back to the roadmap, also to ensure that they traced and followed the proper guidelines. The students were at times encouraged and motivated enough to interact and challenge among themselves.

It is worth mentioning that first the teacher initiated to pose the questions and guided the EFL learners to construct their own questions, meanwhile leading them to enhance the quality of the questions they asked. Controlling the proper wait-time (Yang, 2017) was observed by the teacher in the treatment group (see Appendix C in Supplementary).

After the completion of the course for thirteen consecutive sessions, the fifteenth session was assigned to the administration of the inferential reading comprehension test as the post-test for both groups.

Results

To answer the research question contending the effect of implementing questioning strategies on inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners, an Independent Samples t-Test was run. The data collected in both pre-test and post-test phases of the research undergone the statistical analysis using the SPSS17 software and the descriptive statistics as follows:

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Table 1.

*Descriptive Statistics Regarding both Groups' Performances on the **Pre-Test***

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig.	t	Std. Error Mean
Treatment	30	29.5000	3.80443	0.159	0.725	.85070
Control	30	30.3000	4.14726			.70375

As Table 1 indicates, the data obtained in pretest indicates that the mean scores of both treatment and control groups were 29.50 and 30.30 respectively. This shows that both groups were considered almost the same as the mean scores are almost the same in range. It should be highlighted that the t-observed in the pretest phase was 0.725 which was lower than the t-critical (which is 2). This means that both groups were similar regarding their inferential reading comprehension ability at the beginning of the study prior to any treatment.

After the thirteen-session treatment, both groups took inferential reading comprehension test as the post-test. The descriptive statistics in the post-test phase is illustrated in Table 2, which depicts the effect of the treatment on the treatment group compared to the control one:

Table 2.

*Descriptive Statistics Regarding both Groups' Performances on the **Post-Test***

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig.	t	Std. Error Mean
Treatment	30	36.9300	2.77014	0.005	4.856	.61942
Control	30	31.8500	3.94789			.55855

As shown in Table 2 the descriptive statistics shows that the mean scores of the treatment and control groups were 36.93 and 31.85 respectively in post-test phase. This means that the treatment group outperformed the control group. The t-observed in the post-test was 4.856 and the t-critical is 2. So the t-observed was above the t-critical, this means that the difference in the mean scores of both groups is meaningful. It was concluded that there existed a significant difference between the performances of the two groups in post-test phase.

Regarding the data analysis in Table 1 and Table 2 depicting the pretest and posttest descriptive statistics of the treatment and control groups, it was concluded that the significant difference in the performance of the treatment group compared to that of the control one was regarded as the effect of implementing questioning strategies. So in line with the results of other studies in Asian countries such as in Pakistan (Islam et al. 2013), China (Liu & Huang, 2011), Japan (Mitchell, 2017), this study confirmed that implementing questioning strategies enhanced the inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners.

Discussion

One of the key features in the whole process of conducting this research which made participants activate their questioning appetite was to determine their own points of view in proposing the appropriate questions. In teaching questioning strategies, the participants were trained to take the role of the authors of the passages or the characters in the texts. That is the strategy named "author and me questions" in Raphael's taxonomy (1986). Such stances of view

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empowered them to pose more direct and delving questions, i.e., once they put on the role of the author of the passages, they were somehow put in the situation to defend their passages and make proper inferences of the messages in the texts.

The notions of *what to ask* and *how to ask* (Walsh & Sattes, 2017) are the underlying facets of the art of questioning which truly could not take place in a few sessions of practice. What the authors of the present paper witnessed in the process of implementing the treatment was that of acuity of the questions. Once delving into the underpinning causes of the ill-structured questions made by the participants, the researchers found that EFL learners had problems making proper questions just because they had not had enough concentration on the passages at hand. Learners began to pose rhetorical questions at first, but gradually were empowered and guided to pose delving questions which demanded proper inferences of the messages in the texts. It is true to say that only the prepared minds catch up with the tone of voices and fill the missing parts of the symphony by proposing proper questions. What counts is that the notion of prepared mind exists whenever the participants keep track of the stream of thoughts or sequence of actions and occurrences within the passages. Through implementing questioning strategies, the EFL learners were equipped with the power of asking questions from two perspectives of *how-ness* and *what-ness*. These two perspectives had in turn enhanced the quality of their questions, along with the gentle shift of focus from surface-version questions towards deep-version questions or in better words, from referential-version towards inferential-version questions.

Qualitative-phase discussion

The qualitative phase was designed to delve thoroughly into deep layers of the participants' beliefs and opinions in the subject matter. The main qualitative questions were those listed above. The researchers believed that the theme obtained from the semi-structured interview shed more light to the notions under investigation, and in turn enriched the outcomes of the study.

Subject Resemblance: Through the semi-structured interviews held along the process of treatment, the researchers noticed that those who had general background knowledge regarding the ideas discussed within the passages maneuvered skillfully on the questions they proposed. Some interviewees indicated that:

> ……... the passage in the book was talking about the experience we had
> in a foreign country. I was not outside Iran all my life. I just talked about
> my trip to RaamSar last summer. It was a real outside Iran.
> ………. the title of our book chapter was Wine Festival. I really thank
> our teacher that changed the title to Rose-Water Festival in Kashan. We
> all went to Golab-festival by the tour of university on Spring last year.

Fake similarities even worked. In other words, even the fake similar experiences about the ideas covered in the passages provided sort of fake brevity for the participants to propose their questions. Once the participants were asked on how they came up with such appropriate questions, they replied that the idea discussed in the passage resembled such and such pieces of information for example in the technical field of a totally different realm. In line with the

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findings of other researchers such as Cohen (2011), such resemblance and similarities within subject matters existing among irrelevant realms superficially enhanced the confidence of the participants in posing or adjusting and accommodating proper questions which suited or modifying-ly suited the passages.

No-Penalty Spirit: What was really astonishing in the interviews was that almost all the participants held the idea that they had no serious problem in constructing good or proper questions, but the point of pondering was that most of them were afraid of losing points if they had come up with wrong, ill-structured questions:

> ……... the permission our teacher gave us to talk freely and ask whatever questions coming to our mind was very nice. I myself was very brave to ask different questions with no fear.

> …….. we all thank our teacher that let us feel at home and corrected us at different times that we made big mistakes or irrelevant questions. The freedom of asking questions regarding what we feel about the text and the message of the text was an interesting idea. I never had this experience before this course.

The researchers of the present study ascertained the participants in treatment group in the first session of the treatment that there existed not lose-and-win game in play during the course sessions. In line with the findings of the research by Tan (2007), the participants admitted that the point highlighted had changed their behaviors significantly and provided them with the freedom to participate and propose questions, some of them far and large, having no fear of losing points or being penalized.

Gradual Enrichment: The final point of discussion which was mentioned implicitly above, through the implementation of the questioning strategy, the participants caught up with the state of minds through which they reached deep layers of understanding and inferencing the passages. The point witnessed here was the reconfirmation of the result of the study by Blachowicz and Ogle, (2001). Compared to those of the experimental group, unlike the control group participants' inference ability which was so limited to the surface meanings in black-and-white logic fashion, the participants in the treatment group showed noticeable progress concerning the notion of inferences:

> ……... the questions we asked in the first sessions were very simple. We learnt to ask questions which challenge the other classmates in our class. Even the type of questions we ask in our everyday life became more high level. Other people say so.

> …….. when we reached the last sessions, it was like our mind produced questions very fast and very correct. I had many problems at the beginning, the teacher said this part is wrong, that part is not OK. But in the last sessions the teacher said my questions are very correct and needs thinking for answering to them. I am very glad to hear that.

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The participants in control group were not deprived of inference ability totally; on the contrary, they had experienced limited logic of inference out of which they could not yield. In better words, the participants in the control group who did not receive any instruction in this regards had limited performances on inference capabilities of their minds. Hence, the participants in treatment group were equipped with the flexible side of their inferential reading comprehension ability, to delve into hidden layers of meanings and intentions embedded in the passages.

Conclusions

In Iranian EFL context, where exposure to authentic real-life settings of English language usages and contexts are so rare, the command on English literacy and linguistic competency is best judged through the proper understanding of the texts and passages. It is mastery on reading between the lines, and thoughtfulness. It is having the necessary command on thinking the way natives do in real-life contexts. Having a thoughtful perspective towards the chunks of information is not an incidental phenomenon. It is performed and achieved through proper practice. Implementing questioning strategies help them out, while paying attention to the underlying theme of the passages. Although today the prevalence of applications through smart phones has established a proper ground for in-and-outside classroom learning and the obtaining of prompt answer to the questions raised in the minds of learners (Hashemifardnia et.al., 2020), learning to ask the proper question from the absent author or a challenging one from themselves was a proper remedy for that. Here in this paper, the researchers concluded that through implementing questioning strategies, Iranian EFL learners were equipped enough to delve into the passages before them, in such a way that they were empowered to get the rationale and the messages laid in between the lines and in the long run, their ability to make inferences from passages enhanced. The finding of the present study was in line with that of Aghaie and Zhang (2012) who conducted a similar research in Iran but implicitly. Also the finding of the present study reconfirmed what Shomoossi, (2004) found that questioning strategies would enhance the proper engagement of the EFL learners. The materials developers and course designers could also benefit from the findings of the present study to accommodate proper quality questions in the curriculums in such a way that provokes the EFL learners' inferential reading comprehension ability. Researchers and scholars may also utilize the findings in conducting further researches on other proficiency level rather than intermediate level investigated in the present study.

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Appendix A

Sample inferential reading comprehension test

Inference and Strategy Use measure

Please read the passage and choose the one best answer for each question and fill in the corresponding circle on the answer sheet. PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ON THE TEST

So far as I know, picking a four-leaf clover was her only superstition, or anyway, the only one she ever acted on. And it was always used for the same purpose, which was to get my father's patients to pay their bills.

Very few of the patients paid promptly, and a good many never paid at all. Some sent in small checks, once every few months. A few remarkable and probably well-off patients paid immediately, the whole bill at once, and when this happened my father came upstairs after office hours greatly cheered.

1. In the second sentence, what does "it" refer to?
    A. the clover
    B. his father's bill
    C. picking a four-leaf clover
    D. his father's patient

2. In the last sentence, why was his father "greatly cheered"?
    E. because someone paid their bill on time
    F. because his mother found a four-leaf clover
    G. because someone paid in cash
    H. because someone finished paying on layaway

3. Which of the following is most likely to follow this passage?
    I. An explanation of why the author's mother picked a four-leaf clover
    J. How much the average doctor bill was at the time
    K. What the family spent the money on when patients paid on time
    L. Why the author's father was happy

4. Which of the following would be most useful to know in order to understand the passage?
    M. The author is writing about the Great Depression
    N. "Her" refers to the author's mother
    O. Rich people pay their bills on time
    P. Doctors are happy when patients pay their bills

Appendix B

Procedure for treatment group receiving questioning strategies

The procedure exercised in the treatment group was one of the questioning strategies as Think-Pair-Share, designed for instructional purposes by Lyman (1981). As the literature confirmed that learner autonomy could be fostered through questioning strategies, the instructional roadmap designed for implementing Think-Pair-Share involved the following sections:

1. Introduction phase: Identification of topics, elaboration of concepts, subtopics and instructional aims and objectives (Introducing the questioning instructional strategy along presenting brief remarks on them.).

2. Presentation phase: elaborating of theoretical base of reading such as skimming, scanning, etc. also the requirements of presenting reports.

3. Implementation phase: enacting the strategy and performing specific treatment (questioning instruction).

4. Evaluation phase: general assessment of knowledge gain and its consolidation.

Think-Pair-Share as one of the questioning strategies ensures that all learners simultaneously engage with the topic and text, which in turn enhances synthesis and the social construction of knowledge. The instructional guidelines and principles provided for the treatment group were as follows:

1. Students were given a short specific timeframe (1 to 2 minutes) to independently and briefly process their understanding/opinion of a text selection, quality and discussion questions, or questions regarding the topic (this is the "thinking" phase of Think-Pair-Share).

2. Students then pair up and share their thinking or writing with a peer for another short and specific timeframe (e.g., 1 minute each) then asking the related questions.

3. Finally, the teacher leads a whole-class sharing of thoughts, often trimming the diverse thinking and patterns in student ideas. Quality questions then emerges in this phase. This helps both students and the teacher assess understanding and clarify ideas.

Appendix C

Precautions regarding the treatment phase of the study

The following precautions were taken into account during the treatment and control group sessions of the study:

1. The same set of materials and research packages were used throughout the present study in order to eradicate any mismatches having occurred due to instrumentation.
2. Attendance of the learners in both groups was observed throughout the teaching sessions.
3. The treatment and control group subjects were provided with equal time of treatment and observations.
4. To prevent the learners from remembering the questions of the pre-test and post-test of the inferential reading comprehension test battery (8 passages and total of 32 items), the passages and the test items in the pre-test were scrambled and reordered in the post-test.

Strategies to be used by the teacher in treatment group

It is crystal clear that the students in treatment group may or may not answer the questions, regardless of the question types as open, closed, or quality questions. In this respect, the teacher may utilize two distinctive strategies:

When students respond to question proposed, the teacher use *Reinforcing, Probing, and Adjusting* strategy. Reinforcing is used to encourage future participation and it is done either by making positive statements or positive nonverbal communication, Probing is used to check if the initial response of the students were superficial or out-of-the-blue, also it is used to get students more involved in critical analysis of their own or other students' ideas, and Adjusting (Refocusing) is used when the students provide answers which are out of the context, the teacher can refocus to involve the students to tie their answers t the content being discussed.

When students resist and do not answer, the teacher uses Redirect, Rephrase, and Wait-time strategy. Once a student do not answer or provide wrong answer, the teacher can ask another student to answer, or allow a student to correct another student's incorrect statement. Rephrasing is used when the teacher believes that the student resisting responding or providing incorrect response could not understand the question posed. Through rewording the question, the teacher tries to make it clearer or break the question down into more manageable parts. Wait time has powerful effects on students' participation because the general wait time for information processing is at least three seconds to comprehend a question, process the answer and then provide proper response. Of course controlled wait time (Yang, 2017) which is managed by the teacher and is flexible according to the nature of the passages is more effective.