

**British Journal of Education, Society &
Behavioural Science**
4(6): 691-707, 2014

SCIENCEDOMAIN *international*
www.sciencedomain.org



An Investigation of the Effects of Text Variation on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability

Moussa Ahmadian¹ and Ashkan Pashangzadeh^{1*}

¹*Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Arak University,
Arak, Iran.*

Authors' contributions

This study was the result of a close collaboration between both authors. Author MA made substantial contributions to conception and design. Author AP provided important intellectual content, statistical analyses and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

Received 8th November 2013
Accepted 28th January 2014
Published 14th February 2014

ABSTRACT

Early seeds of language variation studies were planted near the beginning of the 1960s under the influence of William Labov who is generally regarded as the founder of the discipline of variationist sociolinguistics which deals with language variations caused by linguistic and non-linguistic factors. With many other branches of linguistics, studies of language variation were also extended to the field of SLA and thereby studies of interlanguage or L2 learners' language variation came into fashion. Almost all studies that have been conducted in this area are in association with variation in speech production and development of sociolinguistic competence and there are few studies which were devoted to the influence of linguistic or non-linguistic factors on variation in first and second language comprehension. This study, therefore, attempts to investigate the influence of text variation (in terms of narrative and non-narrative) on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. Doing so, 45 Persian native-speaking university students majoring in English translation at Arak university, Iran, were selected from among 67 ones and put into two homogeneous intact experimental and control groups (consisting of 21 and 24 participants, respectively). From a large body of existing texts, three narrative and three non-narrative texts (each between 1373 to 1622 words) with Flesch Reading Ease

*Corresponding author: Email: Ashkan.Pashang@yahoo.com;

scores ranged from 66.83 to 73.90 were selected and used as tasks of elicitation. Statistical results, under the influence of existing variation between narratives and non-narratives, indicated significant difference between the experimental and control groups' reading comprehension test scores from pretest to post test. Possible reasons for developed variation in reading comprehension ability and implications of the findings for language teaching are discussed.

Keywords: Language variation; reading comprehension; SLA; narrative; non-narrative; interlanguage.

1. INTRODUCTION

There exist various types of variability within the framework of all natural languages. People use language in different ways and these ways are in association with many factors involving linguistic and nonlinguistic ones. Since the 1960s, a body of ample evidence emerged suggesting that speaker variability in addition to the purely linguistic factors can be affected by non-linguistic ones (outside the language system) as well. In this respect, as a contribution to general explanation of the mechanism of linguistic change, Labov's informative and leading study [1,2], through the direct observation of a sound change in the context of the island of Martha's Vineyard in southeastern Massachusetts, revealed a strong association between linguistic patterns on the one hand and social structures and speakers' attitudes, on the other. Linguistic differentiation seemed to act as an indicator of social differentiation. Pope, Meyerhoff and Ladd [3] maintained that Labov's studies in Martha's Vineyard turned into a corner stone for what has come to be known as sociolinguistics or variationist sociolinguistics.

Furthermore, Labov found that the way people talk changes under the influence of other factors including age, race, gender, topic of discourse, and setting [4]. For instance, words ending in (-ing), such as *doing* and *reading*, have informal pronunciations /'du:in, 'ri:di:n/ as well as formal pronunciations /'du:ɪŋ, 'ri:di:ŋ/. Labov [5] through a comparative study of New Yorkers' speech found that there is a correlation between race and the frequency of [-in] usage. He also found that northern African American speakers use (-in) form less than southern African American speakers. Regarding gender and topic, Fischer [6] found that school boys used (-in) form more than schoolgirls. In this respect, Anshen [7] found that in both varieties of speech including careful and causal styles, compared to women, men used a higher proportion of [-in]. In both above mentioned studies the use of (-in) was more than (-ing) in casual speaking. Previous studies were supported by Labov [8] through which he could show higher frequencies of (-in) usage in men's speaking. So, even fairly small variations in the ways people pronounce words seem to be systematic and appear not to be free variations. One of the main methods used almost in all language variation studies, in order to elicit casual style of speech or vernacular speech, was encouraging people to tell narratives of personal experiences [1,5,9].

Along with many other branches of linguistics, sociolinguistics has exerted considerable influence on variation studies in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Undeniably, one of the intrinsic properties of L2 learner's language (interlanguage) is its variation and language learners, similar to native speakers, do not always use language in the same way. According to Adamson [4], "variation is the hallmark of interlanguage" (p. xi). In this respect, different types of models have been suggested to be used in explanation of variation and

change in language production. Meanwhile, a small numbers of models (sociolinguistic, social-psychological and psycholinguistic models) have been more influential in setting up new developments on language variation studies in the realm of SLA research [10].

The prevailing paradigms in the realm of language variation within the frameworks of all available above mentioned models have shifted all their energies during the last decades towards variation in language production rather than language comprehension. Since there is little, if any, research in this direction, we decided to touch upon the issue through an investigation on the influence of text variation (in this study, existing variation between narrative texts and non-narrative texts) on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension ability. Because of narratives' presence in almost all aspects of individual and social experiences of human beings [11] and due to the important role that narratives have played in first language (L1) and second language (L2) variation studies to date [1,5,9,12,13], the researchers decided to use narrative texts versus non-narrative ones as reading materials and tasks of elicitation in this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mainstream sociolinguistic studies of language variation have been designed to deal with linguistic, stylistic and demographic factors in the realm of native speaker speech communities. Labov [14] through the study of New York City speech suggested that there exist no single-style speakers; that is, people alter their ways of speaking dependent on a number of factors in situational contexts of speaking. Labov cited in [15] proposed that depending on the amount of people's attention to their speech production, style shifting occurs. In this respect, formal (careful) style stands against informal (casual) one as a production of speakers' attention to their own speech. Therefore, in formal style more attention is devoted to speech by speakers and in more informal style less attention is paid to speech, or monitoring of speed production is less possible. In addition, 'attention to speech', seems to be decisively in association with the prestigiousness of speech styles in the Labovian tradition.

With a closer look, we can find that the speakers' social class and speech monitoring, or attention to speech, are not the only sources of variation in speech style. Meanwhile, people's perception of their addressees is of high significance in their selection of speaking style. One of the serious weaknesses of Labov's Sociolinguistic point of view in considering 'attention' as a causative factor in style shifting lies in its ignorance of addressees' effect on interaction [16]. Giles [17] through an interview situation succeeded to observe the interpersonal accommodation phenomenon and consequently developed the theory of accommodation. Giles 'speech accommodation theory' came into stage to demonstrate the significance of social-psychological aspects involving motivations and underlying reasons in selection of language and communication patterns toward others and also establish a deeper understanding of the dynamics of speech. Based on speech accommodation theory, there exist three predominant types of variation within the framework of face to face interaction including convergence, divergence, and speech maintenance [10].

According to Giles, Coupland and Coupland [18], 'Convergence' is described as a strategy through which participants during an interaction adapt to each other's communicative patterns that is ranged from verbal to non-verbal behaviors "including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze, and so on"(p. 7). Having similar beliefs, personality or behavior makes people to be attracted to each other and in this way convergence comes on the scene [19]. Perhaps the most valuable function

of convergence is the establishment of positive relationship in an interactional situation. Speakers through convergence strategy increase positive influence on their speech partners. Divergence occurs whenever speakers try to accentuate verbal and nonverbal dissimilarities existing between themselves and their communicators. So, nobody tries to “reduce social distance or to make communication smoother” [20,p.144]. West and Turner [19] contended that “divergence should not be misconstrued as an effort to disagree or to not respond to another communicator” (p. 475). For members of various cultural communities, namely racial and ethnic groups, divergence acts as a strategy to maintain their social identity [21]. Speech maintenance refers to the absence of speakers’ attempts to make any adjustment in verbal/nonverbal behavior towards or away from addressees. As seen, people use different styles in use of language in different social contexts based on different motivations. Meyerhoff [15] argues that, in sociolinguistic analyses, speakers’ different ways of using language are frequently linked to the following four motivations:

- 1) A desire to show how you fit in with some people and are different from others;
- 2) A desire to do things that have value in the community and associate yourself with that value;
- 3) A desire not to do things that are looked down on in the community and have others look down on you;
- 4) A desire to work out how others are orienting themselves to the concerns in (1–3) (p. 24).

Over the past few decades, SLA researchers and language educationalists have always followed the path of researchers in various branches of linguistics. As an example, Universal Grammar attributed to Noam Chomsky [22] was established to describe and explain the underlying processes of the first language acquisition, but the domain of research expanded to the realm of second language acquisition as well [23]. Exactly the same fate was tied to sociolinguistics, and research studies of speech variation in native languages were followed by studies of interlanguage or L2 learners’ language variation.

For sociolinguistic-oriented SLA researchers, the focal issue, based on age, gender, and social class, is examining whether L2 learners have learnt socially acceptable variants to L2 communities. Adamson [4] maintains that the majority of research studies of language variation are “mainly sociological, not psychological, in nature” (p. 49). On the contrary, he believes that studies of L2 acquisition within the circle of sociolinguistics have psychological nature where the focal issue is the learning of what Corder [24] named it horizontal variation *and* Bachman [25] calls sociolinguistic competence. Sociolinguistic competence, according to Meyerhoff [15], refers to “skills and resources speakers need to deploy in order to be competent members of a speech community using language, not only grammatically but appropriately in different contexts, domains or with different interlocutors” (p.96).

Regan [26] stipulates that the ultimate triumph of an L2 learner usually is to gain an ability to function as a member of L2 speech community so far as possible. Based on Labovian sociolinguistics, “the speech community is built on a shared grammar and shared norms, and a member of a speech community can be seen as the one who recognizes dialectal elements for that specific community where an outsider does not” (p.178). Consequently, an L2 learner whose aim is to achieve successful integration into an L2 community, in addition to linguistic competence or what Corder [24] called vertical variation, needs to improve his sociolinguistic competence (or horizontal variation) compatible with the norms of target speech community. As mentioned before, within the circle of native speech communities people through convergence (making their speech patterns similar to their addressees) try to

develop an effective interaction. An L2 learner who lives in a foreign speech community through the same strategy in confrontation with native speakers, in addition to proper linguistic structure, tries to provide them with appropriate sociolinguistic norms in order to establish an influential communication [26]. Sometimes convergence occurs in opposite direction. For example, in confrontation with foreigners, we usually slow down our speaking speed and make use of simple language, foreigner talk, to provide our addressee with comprehensible input.

A number of sociolinguistic-oriented studies in the field of SLA show some similarity between L2 learners and native speakers' behaviors under the same situations. For example, Dickerson [27] demonstrated the use of more native-like variant when L2 learners monitor their speech production which is in line with Labov [28] who writes "styles can be ranged along a single dimension, measured by the amount of attention paid to speech" (p.29). Similarly, Tarone [29] argued that L2 learners' interlanguage has a vernacular style which is more open to target language forms and is considered as non-target like, but in situations where speech monitoring is possible, it can be adjusted to more target language forms. Tarone's findings related to L2 learners' interlanguage and Ladov's findings [5] in a study of /r/ deletion by New Yorkers (L1 speakers) are by and large in one direction. Labov [5] found that his subjects tend to modify their casual way of speaking, or vernacular style, in situations in which speech monitoring is allowed. Adamson and Regan [30] in a study of variation in alveolarization of /r/ found that English female learners in monitored and unmonitored speaking styles, like the native English-speaking females, show the same patterns in production of (-ing) versus (-in). Regan [26] through a longitudinal study of the progress of Hiberno English learners of French found that through the monitored style of speaking, non-native speakers like native speakers produced a more prestigious form.

Bayley's [31] informative study of vertical and horizontal variations in Chinese speaking ESL learners' speech showed similarities between exciting variation in native speakers' speech and learners' interlanguage. For example, the variable deletion of final /t,d/ in Chinese-speaking ESL learners' interlanguage was similar to the variable deletion of final /t,d/ in native English speakers. Bayley [31] also found that his subjects produced more native-like speech in circumstances that more monitoring (or attention to speech) is encouraged.

Since the English phoneme // does not exist in Spanish, many Spanish-speaking English L2 learners pronounce *ship* as *sheep* and *hit* as *heat* [4]. Thompson and Brown [32] found that monitoring was not a contributing factor to correct speech. Their study showed that their single informant, a native Spanish speaker who spoke English fluently, "was most accurate in her production of // in the more vernacular register, i.e. narration, than in the more formal register, i.e. minimal pair naming" (p.107). Howard [33] across a range of syntactic contexts found that contrary to native speakers, L2 learners' use of liaison which represents the formal variant of this variable shows significant reduction. This finding is drastically in contrast with previous findings [34] in association with sociolinguistic variables where the use of formal variants was found to be dominant in learners' interlanguage.

According to Howard [33], there exists an obvious discrepancy between the level of L2 learners' use of particular variables in natural and classroom contexts of L2 learning, "naturalistic L2 learners of English reporting high social integration are equally seen to make frequent use of the informal variants" (p.8). Howard, Lemée and Regan [35] found that communication with native speakers within the native speech community makes progress in acquiring sociolinguistic variation by the L2 speaker significantly in both informal variant acquisition and underlying native speaker grammatical system.

As seen, although, there is a substantial body of research in L1 and L2 contexts that has demonstrated variation in speech production dependent on a number of factors including age, gender, race, topics, addressee and so on, the effect of text variation in association with comprehension in general and reading comprehension in particular is almost a neglected area of investigation in SLA studies. It was thus that the present study was designed to investigate the effect of text variation on learners' reading comprehension ability in EFL classrooms.

3. THE STUDY

This study intended to investigate whether the use of different texts (variation in terms of narrative vs. non-narrative) in EFL classrooms can develop variation in EFL Learners' reading comprehension. In this respect, the paper attempts to answer the following question:

- Does text variation (here, narratives vs. non-narratives) have any effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?

Based on the research question, to provide an objective answer, the following null hypothesis was formulated to be tested out:

- Text variation (here, narratives vs. non-narratives) does not have any effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

3.1 Participants

In this study 67 undergraduate Persian speaking homogenous EFL learners majoring English translation at Arak University, Iran, aged 19-23, were asked to participate in the study. Their homogeneity in general language proficiency was measured and established through the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Accounting to the OPT results, 63 students were retained—participants whose scores placed in one standard deviation on either side of the mean score. Participants' homogeneity in reading comprehension ability was measured through a test of reading comprehension (as the pre-test). According to reading comprehension test results, 45 students whose scores placed in one standard deviation on either side of the mean score were selected and put into two homogenous intact experimental and control groups: the experimental group consisted of 21 participants including 16 and 5 females and males, respectively. The control group consisted of 24 participants, 14 females and 11 males.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Test of reading comprehension

As mentioned above, through the use of OPT, the homogeneity of the participants' language proficiency was measured. Furthermore, the Reading Section of TOEFL (1996) was used as a test of reading comprehension. This test was administered, as pre- and post-tests, to determine the participants' reading proficiency, in two occasions, before and after the treatment sessions. This test has been validated by Rahimi, Mirzaei and Heidari [36] through a total of 135 junior and senior Iranian university students majoring in English translation and

ELT including 80 females and 55 males whose ages ranged from 18 to 30 (average age was 23). Reported Cronbach's alpha for this test was 0.88, which enjoys high reliability.

3.2.2 Tasks of elicitation

Appropriate tasks of elicitation were needed with certain qualities to make it possible to observe the probable variation in subjects' reading comprehension ability after treatment sessions. Doing so, the researchers had to control some textual variables such as the length of texts, proper Readability score and topics in order to provide the participants in both experimental and control groups with homogenous reading materials, based on mentioned criteria, except the text variation in terms of narrative vs. non-narrative. To do so, three narrative and three non-narrative texts (as elicitation tasks for the experimental and control groups respectively) were selected with Flesh Reading Ease between 65 to 75 Readability score. All the selected texts included 1373 to 1622 words to make them not too long and boring to read on the one hand and not too short to lose their worth in the eyes of the readers on the other. The specifications of the selected texts are tabulated in Table 1. For each of the mentioned narrative and non-narrative text, a researcher-made Reading Comprehension test was designed. Each of these tests consisted of 20 multiple-Choice comprehension items. These tests were pretested and validated by 10 to 12 intermediate and high intermediate EFL learners. Content validity of the tests was approved by 4 experts in English language and literature.

Table 1. Specifications of the Reading Materials

Title	Author	Flesch Reading Ease	Number of words	Type of Text
It happened on the Brooklyn Subway	Paul Deutschman [37]	70.51	1,605	Narrative
The Hungry Man was Fed	Richard Harding Davis [38]	72.45	1,386	Narrative
Personal Narrative-Track Competition	Anonymous [39]	73.90	1,613	Narrative
My Mother Never Worked	Bonnie Smith-Yackel [40]	72.85	1,373	Non-narrative
Mystery Surrounding the Phoenix Lights: Evidence of UFO Sighting?	Anonymous [41]	66.83	1,563	Non-narrative
The Nature of the Mankind	Anonymous [42]	67.23	1,622	Non-narrative

3.3 Procedures

As mentioned before, in addition to general English proficiency, the homogeneity of participants' reading comprehension ability had to be established since homogeneity of general English proficiency does not necessarily lead to homogeneity of reading proficiency. As such, the selected participants based on their OPT results, once again, were screened through the test of reading comprehension (pre-test) and participants whose scores placed in one standard deviation (4.38) on either side of the mean (18.09) were chosen to

participate in the study in two homogeneous intact experimental and control groups. For both groups based on the four communicative reading strategies: a. Reading for meaning, b. not looking up every word, c. predicting meaning, and d. using the context [43], six treatment sessions were conducted in a time frame of six weeks, two sessions were devoted to each text. Therefore, a uniform method of treatment session accompanied by tasks of elicitation with similarities in every respect except the factor of variation in terms of narrative versus non-narrative was employed. The researcher-made reading comprehension tests relating to each text after each two sessions were administered to measure the probable variation effects caused by the tasks of elicitation. As a final point, the participants were given the post-test.

3.4 Data Analysis and Results

3.4.1 Between group comparisons: independent-samples t-test

Through an independent-samples t-test, the pretest scores of the experimental and control groups were compared Tables 2 and 3. The result indicated no statistically significant difference in mean scores between the experimental group (M=18.64, SD=2.53) and the control group, M=18.4, SD = 2.49; $t(43) = .76, p = .44$ (two-tailed). Deviation for each group was 2.53 and 2.49 in that order. So, pre-test results show high homogeneity. The mean difference (mean difference=.57, 95% CI: -.93 to 2.09) was not significant and the Eta squared was calculated (.01), which is small and shows no significant size effect. According to the mentioned results, both groups, at the starting point for this study, were totally homogeneous.

Table 2. Group Statistics (Experimental and Control groups/Pretest)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Experimental Group	21	18.61	2.53	.554
	Control Group	24	18.04	2.49	.508

Table 3. Independent Samples Test (Experimental and Control groups/Pretest)

Pretest	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.045	.83	.76	43	.44	.57	.751	-.93	2.09
Equal variances not assumed			.76	41.99	.44	.57	.752	-.94	2.09

3.4.2 Within group comparisons: paired-samples t-test

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the amount of possible variation in the participants' reading comprehension test scores from pretest to posttest occasions in the experimental group. Based on the information in Tables 4 and 5, there is a statistically significant difference in scores from Pretest (M=18.61, SD=2.53) to Post-test (M=23.29, SD=3.78), $t(20)=-4.95$, $p=.00<.05$ (two-tailed). This result indicates the effects of text variation in reading comprehension scores in the experimental group, under the influence of the treatment period using narrative texts, was statistically significant. Calculation of effect size statistics was done through Eta squared formula and the result turned out to be .55 which is completely large and shows large variation between pretest and post-test scores of the experimental group.

Table 4. Paired Samples Statistics (Experimental Group)

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	18.61	21	2.53	.55
	Posttest	23.00	21	3.78	.82

Table 5. Paired Samples Test (Experimental Group)

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
Pre/Posttest	-4.38	4.05	.88	-6.22 -2.53	-4.95	20	.00

For a second time, a paired-samples t-test was carried out to examine possible variation in the participants' reading comprehension test scores from pretest to posttest occasions in the control group. As Tables 6 and 7 show, there is no statistically significant difference in scores from Pretest (M= 18.04, SD= 2.49) to Posttest (M= 19.50, SD= 3.28), $t(23) = -1.95$, $p= .063>.05$ (two tailed). This result shows that the effect of text variation in reading comprehension scores in the control group, under the influence of treatment period using non-narrative texts, was not statistically significant.

Table 6. Paired Samples Statistics (Control Group)

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	18.04	24	2.49	.508
	Posttest	19.50	24	3.28	.670

3.4.3 One-way repeated measures ANOVA (the experimental group's reading comprehension tests)

Table 8 summarizes some descriptive statistics concerning three researcher-made reading comprehension tests that were administered during the treatment period for the experimental group. Accordingly, the mean scores for each of the three sets of reading comprehension test scores turned out to be 14, 14.61 and 16, respectively (n=21). The minimum and

maximum scores achieved by participants in each test (tests 1 to 3) were 9, 11, 13 and 17, 17, 18 in that order. Also, Table 8 shows that SD in reading test 1 is 2.72, in reading test 2 is 1.62, and in the third reading test is 1.54. These variations indicate that participants moved toward more homogeneity under the influence of using narrative texts as tasks of elicitation in treatment sessions. Table 9 compares each pair of tests and indicates whether the difference between them is significant. Based on the information in Sig. column, Test 1 and Test 3 and also Test 2 and Test 3 are significantly different (all Sig. values are less than .05). So, we may claim that under the influence of the treatment period, through narratives, gradual progress (upward variation) in reading comprehension test scores is observed.

Table 7. Paired Samples Test (Control group)

	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
Pre-, Posttest	-1.45	3.65	.746	-3.00	.086	-1.95	23	.063

Table 8. Experimental Group's Reading Comprehension Test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Reading Test 1	21	14.00	2.72	.59	12.76	15.23	9.00	17.00
Reading Test 2	21	14.61	1.62	.35	13.87	15.36	11.00	17.00
Reading Test 3	21	16.00	1.54	.33	15.29	16.70	13.00	18.00

Table 9. Pair-wise Comparisons (Experimental Group's Reading Comprehension Tests)

(I) Narrative	(J) Narrative	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Test1	Test 2	-.619	.72	1.00	-2.51	1.27
	Test 3	-2.00*	.66	.022	-3.74	-.25
Test 2	Test 1	.619	.72	1.00	-1.27	2.51
	Test 3	-1.38*	.47	.025	-2.61	-.15

3.4.4 One-way repeated measures ANOVA (the control group's reading comprehension tests)

Based on descriptive results tabulated in Table 10, concerning the control group, the mean scores for each of the three reading comprehension test scores turned out to be 12.87, 12.70, and 15.83, respectively. The minimum and maximum scores achieved by participants in each test (tests 1 to 3) were 5, 7, 7 and 19, 20, 19 in that order. Also, Table 10 shows that SD in reading test 1 is 3.49, in reading test 2, 2.91 and in the third reading test 2.85. These variations indicate that participants moved toward more homogeneity under the influence of using non-narrative texts as tasks of elicitation in treatment sessions. Table 11, compares

each pair of tests and indicates whether the difference between them is significant or not. Based on information in Sig. column, Test 1 and Test 3 and also Test 2 and Test 3 are significantly different (all Sig. values are less than .05). So, we may claim that under the influence of the treatment period, through non-narratives, gradual progress (upward variation) in Reading Comprehension Test scores can be observed.

Table 10. Control Group’s Reading Comprehension Tests

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Reading Test 1	24	12.87	3.49	.71	11.40	14.35	5.00	19.00
Reading Test 2	24	12.70	2.91	.59	11.47	13.93	7.00	20.00
Reading Test 3	24	15.83	2.85	.58	14.62	17.03	7	19

Table 11. Pair-wise Comparisons (Control Group’s Reading Comprehension Tests)

					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Test1	Test 2	.167	.789	1.00	-1.870	2.203
	Test 3	-2.958*	.835	.005	-5.115	-.802
Test 2	Test 1	-.167	.789	1.00	-2.203	1.870
	Test 3	-3.125*	.657	.000	-4.823	-1.427

Fig. 1 illustrates the existing variations in mean scores from the first teachers’ made reading comprehension test to the third one in both groups. As observed in this figure, although the reading comprehension means’ scores in both experimental and control groups have an upward journey, all the way through the treatment period (with an exception in the control group at test1 to test2); this variation in the experimental group under the influence of using narratives as tasks of elicitation, compared to the control group where non-narrative texts played role as tasks of elicitation, seems to show more consistency.

3.4.5 Between group comparisons: independent-samples t-test

For a second time, the post-test scores of the experimental and the control groups were compared via an independent-samples t-test. The results according to Tables 12 and 13 revealed a statistically significant difference in the scores of the experimental group (M = 23, SD = 3.78) and the control group, M = 19.50, SD = 3.28; t (43) = 3.32, p= .002 (two-tailed). The difference in the means (mean difference = 3.5, 95% CI: 1.37 to 5.62) was completely significant. Eta squared was calculated (.20) which is an implication of an absolutely large size effect.

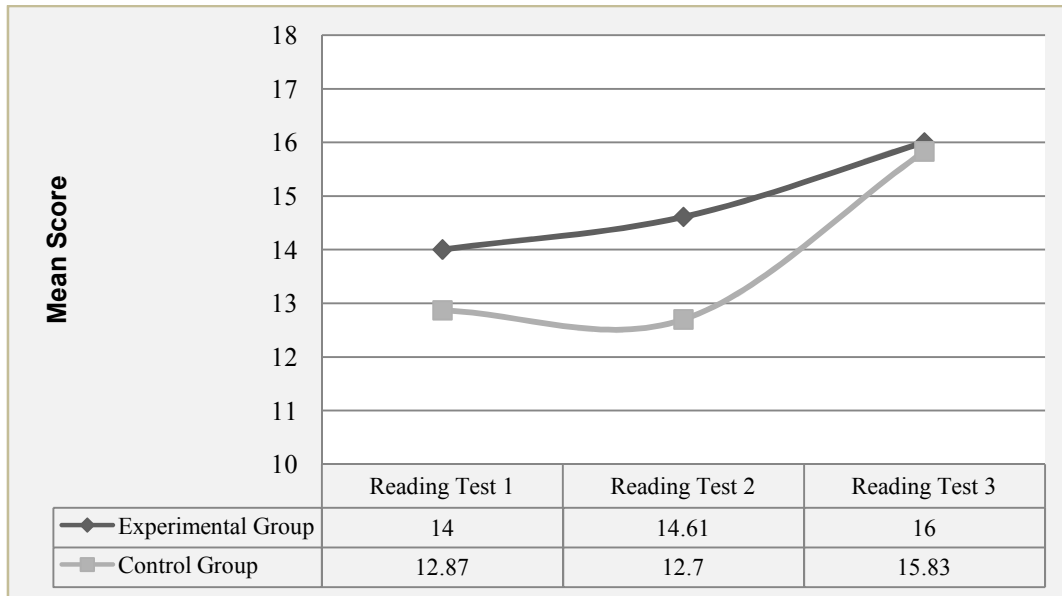


Fig. 1. experimental and control groups' reading comprehension mean scores' variation in researcher-made reading comprehension tests administered between pretest an post test occasions

Table 12. Group Statistics (Experimental and Control Groups/Post-test)

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Experimental Group	21	23.00	3.781	.825
	Control Group	24	19.50	3.283	.670

Table 13. Independent Samples Test (Experimental and Control Groups/Post-test)

Post-test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.01	.163	3.32	43	.002	3.50	1.05	1.37	5.62
Equal variances not assumed			3.29	40	.002	3.50	1.06	1.35	5.64

The above mentioned results show that the existing mean variation in test scores at the post-test occasion, in comparison with the pretest one, has significantly increased. In other words, the variation between the two groups has increased based on reading

comprehension ability under the influence of the existing text variation (narrative versus non-narrative) during treatment sessions (from .57 to 3.50).

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated whether texts variation (here, existing variation between narratives and non-narratives) in EFL classrooms as reading materials cause variation in EFL Learners' reading comprehension ability. The main findings based on data analysis are explained and discussed as follows.

This study showed that the use of narrative texts as reading materials in the experimental group developed a statistically significant variation in EFL Learners' reading comprehension ability. In contrast, making use of non-narrative texts did not lead to a statistically significant variation in EFL Learners' reading comprehension ability involved in the control group. Statistical results also revealed that the amount of developed variation between the experimental and control group's reading comprehension ability in the post-test is entirely significant (Mean Difference: 3.50).

McQuillan [44] argues that there is no role for rewards and incentives to increase either the frequency of reading or the reading comprehension ability. Krashen [45] maintains that "The simpler solution is to provide students with access to plenty of interesting and comprehensible reading material" (p. 24). Ahmadian and Pashangzadeh [11] found that literary texts in general and narrative ones in particular, irrespective of their written language (Persian, English, Russian, etc.) share a great deal of thematic concepts (one of the main existing variations between narratives and non-narratives). They [11] also argue that popular stories in different literature of different countries, by and large, have been written in praise of love, truth, devotion, justice, etc. and denunciation of ambition, betrayal, lies, greed, lust and gluttony. In other word, regardless of language systems, these concepts are quite familiar to people of different nations around the world. One of the most important existing variations between narratives and non-narratives can be the narratives' capacity to express these concepts ideally through a plot in which events are associated together chronologically. When these concepts are expressed in the form of narratives or stories, they can provide their readers in SLA contexts with comprehensible reading materials which may encourage L2 learners to read more and consequently increase their reading comprehension ability.

Krashen [46] explains that "motivational and attitudinal considerations are prior to linguistic considerations" (p. 110). He stipulates that high affective filter hinders the process of acquisition regardless of meaningful and communicative class activities. Krashen has further claims that providing L2 learners with comprehensible input along with peaceful learning contexts may lower the affective filter thereupon the best situation for acquisition happens [cited in 47]. During the treatment sessions in the experimental group there was a tangibly positive change in participants' attitudes in classrooms, when they could come to class, feeling free and relaxed. When students were allowed to interpret and respond to short stories according to their worldview, backgrounds and life experiences, they actually were empowered to share opinions with no fear of generating responses different from the teacher. As a result, in such conditions, they could work collaboratively, communicate empathetically with each other, think critically, negotiate learning outcomes, and cooperate with teachers and their classmates to discover new meanings and ideas. Such a "liberationist" classroom management method, provided by using narratives, effectively created an environment where anxiety was low and defensiveness was absent, or in

Krashen's terms, the "affective filter" was low. Based on our findings and observations, one may be tempted to claim that Narrative texts in general and short Narratives (short stories) in particular are able to provide EFL students with "comprehensible input" with a lower "affective filter".

Based on the findings of this study, the use of narrative texts, in contrast to non-narrative ones, in language learning environments may lead to further variation in EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. These results may be the consequence of psychological effect and role of narrative in the operation of memory and other cognitive processes signifying that a sense of narrative structure facilitates comprehension. One of the most important characteristics of narratives (stories), in contrast to non-narrative texts, is their universality—narratives are present in every age, in every place, in every language and in every society. To put it differently, all students worldwide have experienced stories and thereby they are perfectly able to communicate with short narratives/stories. It is much more interesting given that there is convincing evidence that indicates narrative comprehension is one of the earliest powers of mind which is observable in the young children [48,49]. Narrative comprehension also is the most widely used form of organizing human experience [50]. In other words, we organize our experience and our memory mainly in the form of narratives/stories and what does not get structured narratively suffers from loss and decline in memory. Therefore, the narrative structure of the human mind may possibly be one of the main psychological reasons causing EFL learners to establish a better interaction with this type of text which may lead to further development of their reading comprehension ability. Relatively better performance of the experimental group in this study might be the result of narrative structure of the human mind which leads to a better interaction and comprehension in confrontation with narrative texts.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Based on this study, we may come to the conclusion that the use of narrative texts (short stories) versus non-narrative texts as reading materials in EFL classrooms can develop a significant variation in EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

Ahmadian and Pashangzadeh [11] believe that "narratives, as one of the most popular types of literary texts, display some characteristics which maintain perfect harmony with learner-oriented approaches" (p.161), especially the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Although, through CLT, communicative competence (the ability to use language in a social context) is taught in both foreign and second language settings, sociolinguistic competence [25], that is, the L2 learners' ability to understand and produce informal and nonstandard forms, is seldom taught in second/ foreign language teaching/learning environments. One of the advantages of using narrative texts, as seen in one of the stories used in the treatment period (The Hungry Man Was Fed, Table. 1), is the existence of informal and nonstandard variants, which is directly in association with L2 learners' sociolinguistic competence. In this regard, existing informal atmosphere in some narrative texts, contrary to non-narrative ones, turns them into an excellent opportunity to make their readers (L2 learners), in addition to communicative competence, familiar with some sociolinguistic variants existing in the target language community. This existing variation between narratives and non-narratives enables L2 teachers, through using such narratives, help their learners to develop their sociolinguistic competence along with communicative one and thereby open doors to their learners for better integration in L2 community. However, further research can hopefully provide more evidence for better generalisation.

Considering the fact that one of the most important characteristics of narratives (stories) is their universality and that all students worldwide have experienced stories, so, they are perfectly able to communicate with narrative texts. On the other hand, narratives, regardless of their difference in surface structure, enjoy many human and cultural commonalities in deep structure level. In this regard, narratives may be considered as an excellent starting point to associate already existing cognitive concepts and new events or items. In this respect, students under the influence of both universality and commonality can open doors to new cultural horizons in L2 culture through reading narratives. So, teachers' use of narratives as a source of learning in EFL classes may help their students to benefit a lot from reading narratives as an authentic window to the world of a foreign culture and society to improve their sociolinguistic knowledge. Again, more studies are suggested to enrich the existing literature and to provide more evidence for more effective practices.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Labov W. The social motivation of a sound change. *Word*. 1963;19:273-309.
2. Labov W. The social motivation of a sound change. In: Labov W. *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1972;1-42.
3. Pope J, Meyerhoff M, Ladd DR. Forty years of language change on Martha's Vineyard. *Language*. 2007;83(3):615–627.
4. Adamson HD. *Interlanguage variation in theoretical and pedagogical perspective*. Routledge; 2009.
5. Labov W. *The social stratification of english in New York City*. Washington D.C: Center for Applied Linguistics; 1966.
6. Fischer J. Social influence on the choice of linguistic variant. *Word*. 1958;14:47–56.
7. Anshen F. *Speech variation among Negroes in a small southern community*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. New York University; 1969.
8. Labov W. *Principles of language change: Social factors*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2001;2.
9. Labov W, Waletzky J. Oral versions of personal experience. In: Helm J, editor. *Essays on the verbal and visual arts*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1967;12-44.
10. Ellis R. *The study of second language acquisition*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008.
11. Ahmadian M, Pashangzadeh A. A study of the effect of using narratives on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*. 2013;2(3):153-162.
12. Berman RA, Slobin DI, editors. *Relating events in narrative: A crosslinguistic developmental study*. Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum; 1994.
13. Bardovi-Harlig K. A narrative perspective on the development of the tense/aspect system in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 1995;17:263–291.
14. Labov W. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; 1972.
15. Meyerhoff M. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. London & New York: Routledge; 2006.
16. Bell A. Language style as audience design. *Language in Society*. 1984;13(2):145–204.
17. Giles H. Accent mobility: A model and some data. *Anthropological Linguistics*. 1973;15:87-105.

18. Giles H, Coupland N, Coupland J. Accommodation theory: Communication, context, and consequence. In: Giles H, Coupland J, Coupland N, editors. *Contexts of Accommodation: Developments in Applied Sociolinguistics (Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction)*. Cambridge University Press. 1991;1-68.
19. West R, Turner LH. *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill; 2010.
20. Giles H, Willemyns M, Gallois C, Anderson MC. Accommodating a new frontier: The context of law enforcement. In: Fiedler K, editor. *Social accommodation*. New York: Psychology Press. 2007;129-162.
21. Giles H, Wiemann J. Language, social comparison, and power. In: Chaffee S, Berger CR, editors. *Handbook of communication science*. Newbury Park (CA): Sage. 1987;350-384.
22. Cook VJ. *Chomsky's Universal Grammar*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell; 1988.
23. Eubank L. *Point Counterpoint: Universal grammar in the second language*. John Benjamins; 1991.
24. Corder PS. Formal simplicity and functional simplification. In: Anderson R, editor. *New dimensions in second language acquisition research*. Rowley (MA): Newbury House. 1981;146-152.
25. Bachman L. *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1990.
26. Regan V. Variation In French Interlanguage: A longitudinal study of sociolinguistic competence. In: Bayley R, Preston DR, editors. *Second language acquisition and linguistic variation (Studies in Bilingualism)*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 1996;177-202.
27. Dickerson LB. The learner's interlanguage as a system of variable rules. *TESOL Quarterly*. 1975;9:401-407.
28. Labov W. Field methods of the project on linguistic change and variation. In: Baugh J, Sherzer J, editors. *Language in Use*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall. 1984;28-54.
29. Tarone E. Systematicity and attention in interlanguage. *Language Learning*. 1982;32:9-84.
30. Adamson HD, Regan VM. The acquisition of community speech norms by asian immigrants learning english as a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 1991;13(1):1-22.
31. Bayley R. Competing constraints on variation in the speech of adult Chinese learners of english. In: Preston D, Editor. *Second language acquisition and linguistic variation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 1996;97-120.
32. Thompson GL, Brown AV. Interlanguage variation: The influence of monitoring and contextualization on L2 phonological production. *Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics VIAL*. 2012;9:107-132.
33. Howard M. Sociolinguistic variation and second language acquisition: A preliminary study of advanced learners of French. *SKY Journal of Linguistics*. 2004;17:143-165.
34. Thomas A. La variation phonétique en français langue seconde au niveau. In Dewaele JM, Mougeon R, editors. *Special issue of acquisition et interaction en Langue Etrangere*. 2002;17:101-121.
35. Howard M, Lemée I, Regan V. The L2 acquisition of a phonological variable: The case of // deletion in French. *Journal of French Language Studies*. 2006;16:1-24.
36. Rahimi M, Mirzaei A, Heidari N. How do successful EFL readers bridge between multiple intelligence. *World Applied Sciences Journal*. 2012;17(9):1134-1142.
37. Deutschman P. It happened on a brooklyn subway. In: Diest JV. *Do you believe in miracles? Amazing True Stories of God at Work*. Harvest House Publisher. 2012;13-18.

38. Davis RH. The hungry man was fed. Accessed 10 March 2012. Available: <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/10618/>.
39. Anonymous. Personal Narrative-Track Competition. Accessed 13 May 2012. Available: <http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=18893>.
40. Smith-Yackel B. My mother never worked. In: Conlin ML, editors. Patterns; a short prose reader. 5th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1988;137-140.
41. Anonymous. Mystery surrounding the phoenix lights: Evidence of UFO sighting? Accessed 12 May 2012. Available: <http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=10659>.
42. Anonymous. The Nature of Mankind. Accessed 17 May 2012. Available: <http://www.123helpme.com/view.asp?id=91619>.
43. Krashen SD, Terrell TD. The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom. Pergamon Press; 1983.
44. McQuillan J. The effects of incentives on reading. Reading Research and Instruction. 1997;36(2):111-125.
45. Krashen SD. Explorations in language acquisition and use: The taipei lectures. Portsmouth (NH): Heinemann; 2003.
46. Krashen SD. Second language acquisition and second language learning. Pergman Press Inc; 1981.
47. Brown HD. Principles of Language Learning and Teaching. 5th ed. Pearson ESL; 2006.
48. Lazar G. Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers. CUP; 1993.
49. Foster SH. The communicative competence of young children: a modular approach. Routledge; 1990.
50. Bruner J. The narrative construction of riality. Critical Inquiry. 1991;18(3):1-21.

© 2014 Ahmadian and Pashangzadeh; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:

The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history.php?iid=431&id=21&aid=3676>