The Comparative Effect of Learning Journals and Think Aloud Protocols on EFL Learners' Writing and Reading

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Abstract

This research investigated the comparative effect of learning journals and think aloud protocols on the writing and reading ability of Iranian EFL learners. Through convenient sampling, 60 female intermediate EFL learners were chosen as a homogeneous sample based on their scores on a sample Preliminary English Test (PET). They were then randomly divided into two experimental groups of 30, one group using learning journals and another applying think aloud protocols during an intervention period of 15 sessions. After the intervention, they sat PET writing and reading comprehension posttests. MANOVA was used for data analysis. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in writing performance of learning journals group who outperformed the other one. Also, there was a significant difference in reading performance of think aloud protocols group and they outperformed the other group. The results of the study have implications for learners, teachers, and materials developers.

Keywords: Learning journals, Reading, Think aloud protocols, Writing

1. Introduction

Writing and reading comprehension as key components of communication play an immense role in language use. Competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers as well as for foreign language learners." (Hamp, 2006, p. 2). Also, reading as a dynamic, interactive, productive process requires reader's thought and elaboration.

In order to know whether a learner is becoming a better writer and reader, evaluation takes place. Although assessment in the traditional form of paper-and-pencil can present valid measure of the learners' performance, it is unsuccessful to provide information about what learners can do with language (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Traditional assessment techniques applied to measure learners' writing skill and reading comprehension are teacher-centered, product-oriented, and language focused which foster the learners' extrinsic motivation (Brown, 2002). Moreover, these tests have linguistic, cultural and norming biases given to learners to determine whether they have passed the course, or must re-take the test, or if they can move forward to the next unit of teaching (Pallof & Pratt, 2011). Applying these traditional techniques does not provide a clear and functional idea to what the weaknesses of students may be. This failure has drove scholars to another form of assessment referred to as nontraditional (Penaflorida, 1998), performance (McNamara, 1996), portfolio (Huerta- Macias, 1995), situated or contextualized (Garcia & Pearson, 1994), alternative (Brown, 2002), and authentic and informal (Backman, 1990) assessment. Among alternative assessment methods, portfolios and journals as essential part of instructional planning present an opportunity for the learners to be enthusiastically drawn in the learning process based on their own needs (Schmitt, 2001). Think aloud protocol is also an additional case of alternative assessment technique engaging the learner in this development. As stated by Hanauer (2003), the language learning is "a process of widening and deepening the ways an individual can understand, interpret and understand to themselves and within social settings" (p. 7).

As nontraditional assessments, journals and think aloud protocols help learners and teachers follow the process of learning more easily. Using either one of these approaches learners can provide for themselves and teachers a live picture of their growing and understanding of the subject. Students do not merely learn by listening to lectures from teachers and reading textbooks (Varner & Peck, 2003).

Lack of expression in writing by students will result in miscommunication with their professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else (Walsh, 2010). Many times teachers find their students struggling a lot with a writing assignment even though they should have mastered it in the lower levels. This is why more awareness should be given to the writing skill by both students and teachers who are practicing it. In

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terms of reading as a critical skill in the educational success of individuals, students should be aware that reading skills are not entirely learned by solely memorizing new vocabulary. Moreover, learning to read is a complex process and it is defined by comprehension, not word-calling (Jalongo, 1998). Students believe that if they can read and have good vocabulary, then they can perform well in reading comprehension. This is also the belief of many teachers. However, these are not the facts, as reading comprehension is about steps taken to comprehend the text. Inadequate reading comprehension skills, will lead to students struggling in many subject areas (Baier, 2005).

Mentioning the value of writing skill and reading comprehension and problems with the traditional assessment techniques it is of great importance that teachers try to gain knowledge of what steps students take in their learning process. This is why in this paper, alternative assessment techniques are considered in regards with language skills, leading to the research question as of whether there is a difference between learning journals and think aloud protocols in EFL learners writing and reading comprehension.

2. Method

Participants were 60 Iranian female EFL intermediate learners aged 18-40 at Safir language school who were originally homogenized from100 students through a piloted sample Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET). To increase the manageability of the treatment, the participants were randomly divided into two experimental groups comprising 30 students each and were placed in four classes of 15 learners.

In learning journals group, at the first session the teacher taught the student how to write journals. During reading instruction, they were to read the title of the text and take notes on what they thought of it in addition to the answers of specific questions with the teacher only monitoring their note taking. The journals were later submitted so that the teacher understood how students processed the learning and good give feedback to students explaining what could have changed and what could have been more focused on to help the process. To teach writing, the topic was introduced and the teacher focused students' attention on the language. They were then asked to take notes of the new grammar and phrases and the format of the writing and their brainstorms about what they could use in their own writings. Finally, the students were asked to write their complete draft. The journals were later collected and the teacher provided feedback.

In think aloud protocol group the teacher asked the students to say out loud whatever came to their mind while they were working on a reading section or while they were working on the writing assignment given to them. There was no note taking or brainstorming writing, instead they had a voice recorder to record everything said. Review was allowed, but not erasing. Working on reading, the students were to state their thoughts orally about the topic and specific questions about the text and their general understanding. Then when asked to read the text carefully they recorded anything which seemed important to them. Finally, in doing the assignments, students were only allowed to listen to their recorded voices. The teacher was then handed the recordings and provided feedback. When writing was the focus, the students were again asked to state orally what was on their mind about topic, grammar, language and format and to record their own voices. Then they had to brainstorm with the voice recorders on. Finally, they were asked to write the final draft of the writing using their recordings which was then handed to the teacher for feedback.

Applying a comparison group quasi-experimental design, upon the end of the intervention the participants sat a sample PET reading comprehension and writing posttest.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of PET Reading and Writing Posttest Scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	
					Statistic	Std. Error
Reading LJ	30	26.7000	3.14204	9.872	.090	.427
Reading TP	30	28.3667	3.13471	9.826	-.026	.427
Writing LJ	30	4.2333	.53713	.289	-.355	.427
Writing TP	30	3.7333	.58329	.340	.365	.427

3. Results and Discussion

With all assumptions investigated and met, a MANOVA was applied for data analysis.

Effect		Value	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
GROUP	Pillai's Trace	.231	8.584[b]	.001	.231
	Wilks' Lambda	.769	8.584[b]	.001	.231
	Hotelling's Trace	.301	8.584[b]	.001	.231
	Roy's Largest Root	.301	8.584[b]	.001	.231

Having a value of Wilks' Lambda of (.769, p=.001<.05), the difference between experimental groups proved to be significant.

Table 3. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
GROUP	Wriitngpost	3.750	1	3.750	11.929	.001	.171
	Readingpost	41.667	1	41.667	4.230	.044	.068

Both the writing (p= .001<.05) and reading (p= .044<.05) posttests were significantly different, rejecting the null hypotheses of the study. Accordingly, referring toTable1, learning journals group outperformed think aloud protocol group in their writing with a large effect size of .171, showing 17.1% of variance in writing was explained by this intervention. Clearly, think aloud protocol group had scored higher in reading posttest outperforming learning journal group. In addition, Partial Eta Squared of .068, proved 7% of variance in reading ability was explained by this intervention.

Conducting the present study, it was observed that using specific methods can help students improve their writing and reading skills and make teaching and learning process be exciting as it creates an interactional atmosphere with more engagement. Following the results, the researcher believes that using learning journals had significant effect on writing performance because it contained writing practice and it also left students with a visual form of their thoughts and process with visually reviewable practice. According to Tuan (2010), journal writing nurtures learners' writing motivation and boosts their writing skill as well as establishing rapport. Also, Bataineh (2016) concluded that portfolio-based assessment leads to better performance in writing. Conversely, think aloud protocol did not provide any chance of writing and visual content rather, it was effective on reading because while listening to their own thoughts and looking at the reading passage, students were able to understand more clearly if what they were thinking was putting them on the right track. In conclusion, when teacher and learner both understand the process students go through for learning, it can be of great help for learners writing and reading skills.

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