UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERGENT INFLUENCES OF READING ACTIVITIES ON THE COMPREHENSION OF SHORT STORIES

İsmail Hakkı ERTEN
iherten@gmail.com

Müge KARAKAŞ
mgekarakas@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims at understanding how the use of different reading activities affects readers' comprehension of short stories. Forty-seven students with an advanced level of English proficiency participated in the study where a quasi-experimental research design was pursued. The experimental and control groups of students completed different sets of activities on the same short story. The experimental group was given a set of activities comprising previewing, predicting, keywords, scanning, skimming, clarifying, summarising, question and answer, and drawing conclusions; while the control group did activities including brainstorming, predicting, surveying, reciprocal teaching, evaluating, inferring, re-reading, thinking aloud, discussion, and summarising activities. A post-test measured both literal comprehension and evaluation of the textual information. Statistical analysis revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on literal comprehension while the control group did better on evaluation questions, implying a differential influence of the activities on different types of comprehension. The study suggests that reading teachers need to be sensitive to the requirements of comprehension tasks in their selection of reading activities.

Introduction and Background

Reading is often referred to as the most important of the four language skills for EFL learners (Gu, 2003) as it enables students to gain exposure to the target language and receive valuable linguistic input to build up language proficiency. Moreover, many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals in their language learning experience and various pedagogical purposes served by written texts help reading receive this special focus (Richards and Renandya, 2002: 273). Mere exposure to reading material, however, is not always sufficient for effective reading. Readers as language learners need to go through an

active process that requires an interaction between the reader and the text rather than simply decoding the graphic representations (Anderson, 1999). Many good readers have been reported to automatically become engaged in this interactive process (Grabe, 1991; Ur, 1996) while some readers do not seem to be able to do so. To assist those students who cannot automatically initiate the reader-text interaction, teachers are often advised to make use of certain activities in their reading classes (Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Pardo, 2004) as well as making use of different types of questions to promote different aspects of comprehension (Day and Park, 2005).

The impetus for this study was that, although a long list of activities has been proposed by various authors for use with student readers at different stages of the reading process (Stevens, 1982; Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993; Chen and Graves, 1995; Sola, 1996; Sequero, 1998; and Abita, 2001), little seems to be documented as to how different activities in fact influence comprehension. This study, therefore, aims to shed light on the possibly varying effects of activities in the process of reading comprehension with a specific reference to comprehending short stories.

The Reading Process and Types of Comprehension

Literature on reading processes has seen a prominent shift from a perception of reading as a rather passive process towards that of an interactive process (Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Koda, 2005). Early work on Second Language Reading assumed a rather passive, bottom-up view (Carrell, Devine, and Eskey, 1988), which asserts that readers need to analyse and synthesise different types of information such as; the symbol system (sounds in oral languages and graphic shapes in written languages), the language structure (the grammar of the language) and the semantic system (language meanings, organised as conceptual structures), to get the author's meaning (Goodman, 1971; 1988). Difficulties in second language reading and reading comprehension were viewed as being essentially decoding problems, deriving from the print (Rivers, 1968; Plaister 1968).

A top-down model of reading which emphasises what readers bring to the text (Carrell, 1983; 1984) has been proposed as an alternative view to early conceptions of the reading process. In such a model, the reader is characterised as having a set of expectations about the text information and samples enough information from the text to confirm or reject these expectations (Alderson, 2000). The top-down model of reading processes is especially valid for explaining the reading experiences of skilful readers in directing the reading process (Eskey, 1988) who are autonomous while reading in that they can build expectations and predict meaning by making use of contextual clues and combine these clues with their background knowledge, which less skilled readers seem to lack (Grabe and Stoller, 2002).

Recently, it has been acknowledged that the reading process is one that may involve both top-down and bottom up processes, giving rise to an interactive model of reading (Eskey and Grabe, 1988; Murtagh, 1989; Adams, 1990; Stanovich, 1992; Anderson, 1999; Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Koda, 2005), where reading is viewed as a kind of interaction that occurs between the reader and the text (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). The role of the reader is described as extracting meaning from the text as the meaning does not reside in the text alone but lies in the interaction between the reader and the text (Grabe, 1991). The reader uses a variety of clues to understand what the writer is implying or suggesting. In that way the reader is able to see beyond the literal meaning of the words (Harmer, 2001). Since successful interpretation depends to a

large extent on shared schemata, schemata (background knowledge) has a vital role in comprehending what is being read (Alderson, 2000).

Three different types of schemata have been proposed as crucial in building successful interaction with the text. These are *Content Schemata, Formal Schemata* (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983), and *Abstract Schemata* (Oller, 1995). *Content Schemata* is background knowledge of the content area of a text (Carrell, 1984). If a reader possesses the content schemata presupposed by a text, it is likely that comprehension of the text will be easier (Pardo, 2004). Content schemata is developed through our experiences and perception of the reality surrounding us (Oller, 1995).

Formal schemata refers to a second aspect of background knowledge which involves knowledge of the organizational pattern of different types of texts (for example: story, fable or expository text). Knowledge of these rhetorical conventions enables the reader to better read through and comprehend the text (Meyer, 1975; 1977; Meyer and Rice 1982; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Carrel, 1984).

A third type of schemata, termed *Abstract Schemata*, has been recently proposed by Oller (1995). Such schemata are useful in making inferences from "representations that are independent of any particular case or any finite number of actual cases in the material world" (1995: 30). Abstract schema involves possessing knowledge that is not necessarily presented in the text. Oller gives a useful example. When one reads that "hotels are businesses that aim to make a profit," it can be inferred that "they must generally charge more for their services than those services cost the owners." This is a rule of thumb for making a profit. This information does not need to be provided to draw any inferences.

As is clear from the above description, different types of background knowledge contribute to comprehension of the texts. With a host of different types of background knowledge and interaction with texts, the concept of comprehension cannot be taken as a monolithic mental process. It involves different levels of mental processing and interaction with the text (Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Nassaji, 2002; Pardo, 2004; Koda, 2005) resulting in different levels of comprehension, as has been proposed by several authors (Barrett, 1968, 1972; 1976; Herber; 1978; Pearson and Johnson, 1972; Day and Park, 2005).

One of the earliest descriptions of comprehension was provided by Barrett, who offered four categories of comprehension: literal recognition or recall, inferences, evaluation, and appreciation. Similarly, Herber (1978) suggested three levels of reading comprehension: literal comprehension, interpretive comprehension, and applied comprehension. More recently, Day and Park (2005), reflecting on the works of Pearson and Johnson (1972) and Nuttall (1996) proposed a taxonomy of reading comprehension. They suggest that there are six levels of comprehension: literal, reorganisation, inference, prediction, evaluation, and personal response.

In Day and Park's description of reading comprehension, *literal comprehension* involves understanding and obtaining explicit information presented in the text, such as facts, vocabulary, dates, and times. The next type of comprehension is *reorganization,* which is based on literal comprehension; students need to make use of their comprehension from different parts of the text and combine it for additional understanding. An *inference* requires students to identify meaning that is in the text but not explicitly stated. This involves combining what is provided with personal experience and intuitions. The fourth comprehension type discussed by Day and Park is *prediction,* which involves being able to determine what might happen next in the flow of the text. To do this, readers are supposed to use both their understanding of the text and their personal background knowledge. An *evaluation* involves being able to make a judgement about

the entirety or some aspect of the text. Finally, *personal response* necessitates a level of comprehension that enables readers to express a personal opinion about the text and subject.

Interactive models of reading hold that everything in the reader's background knowledge has an important role in reading comprehension (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Nuttall 1996; Karakaş, 2002) and this background knowledge needs to be activated through different mental processes and activities (Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Nassaji, 2002; Pardo, 2004; Day and Park, 2005; Koda, 2005) to achieve fuller comprehension of the texts. Readers, in this respect, seem to vary in the processes they employ. Involvement of the reader and features of effective behaviours are reviewed below.

Good Reading Behaviours

Good readers have been identified as using a number of strategic behaviours to activate their background knowledge and engage in purposeful reading processes (see Brantmeier, 2002 for a review). For example, Cook (1989) summarises the cognitive behaviours of good and poor readers as follows.

Figure 1: Features of Good and Bad Readers (Based on Cook, 1989)

	GOOD OR MATURE READERS	**POOR OR IMMATURE READERS**
BEFORE READING	Activate prior knowledge	Start reading without preparation
	Understand task and set purpose	Read without knowing why
	Choose appropriate strategies	Read without considering how to approach the material
DURING READING	Focus attention	Are easily distracted
	Anticipate and predict	Read to get done
	Use fix-up strategies when lack of understanding occurs	Do not know what to do when lack of understanding occurs
	Use contextual analysis to understand new terms	Do not recognize important vocabulary
	Use text structure to assist comprehension	Add on, rather than integrate new information
	Self-monitor comprehension by... *Knowing comprehension is occurring *Knowing what is being understood	Do not realize they do not understand
AFTER READING	Reflect on what was read	Stop reading and thinking
	Feel success is a result of effort	Feel success is a result of luck
	Summarise major ideas	
	Seek additional information from outside sources	

An examination of the difference between good readers and poor readers demonstrates how good readers are engaged in an interactive metacognitive process whereby they plan their reading and activate their background knowledge and become engaged in purposeful reading,

whereas poor readers seem to start reading without any explicit planning and activation (Cook, 1989).

Grabe and Stoller's (2002: 16) description of the behaviours of skilled readers is congruent to what has been suggested by Pardo (2004) as effective classroom strategies for a reading teacher, that skilled readers *specify a purpose for reading; plan what to do/what steps to take; preview the text; predict the contents/section of the text; check predictions; pose questions about the text; find answers to posed questions; connect text to background knowledge; summarise information; make inferences; connect one part of the text to another; pay attention to text structure; re-read; guess the meaning of a new word from context; use the discourse markers to see relationships; check comprehension; identify difficulties; take steps to repair faulty comprehension; critic the author/text; judge how well objectives were met; and reflect on what has been comprehended from the text.*

Effective readers are then considered to be those who can automatically engage in an interactive reading process (Widdowson, 1990; Ur, 1996; Brantmeier, 2002; Sarıçoban, 2002). However, there are always those who fail to spontaneously interact with the text (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). To help those who cannot implement the characteristics of successful reading, it is the reading teacher's responsibility to devise classroom activities that will lead them into active involvement in the reading process (Lazar, 1993; Chen and Graves, 1995; Ur, 1996; Demiriz, 1998; Pardo, 2004).

The Merits of Reading Activities

The aim of reading activities is to prevent failure and support readers' interpretation of the text through interaction between the reader and the text (Wallace, 1992), in that reading activities can promote strategic reading behaviours and thus can play a vital role in schema activation in order to comprehend and interpret the text better (Chen and Graves, 1995; Demiriz, 1998; Grabe and Stoller, 2002).

Types of activities and their functions

It is necessary to point out here that although different types of activities can be suggested to be made use of with different types of texts, this study underlined only a small number of activities suggested particularly for short stories. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this article to review all possible activities.

Contemporary reading tasks involve a three-stage procedure: pre-, while-, and post-reading (Ur, 1996; Alyousef, 2006). Reading activities are thus subcategorised into pre-reading activities, while-reading activities, and post-reading activities.

The use of pre-reading activities has been emphasized to provide anticipation and activate the reader's schema (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Grabe, 1991; Zhang, 1993; Grabe and Stoller, 2002), which will motivate readers to become engaged in more purposeful reading in order to complete the activity better and with less effort, since they have gained confidence (Chastain, 1988; Ur, 1996). At the pre-reading stage, through the discussion of titles, subheadings, photographs, identifying text structure, previewing, and so on, both formal and content schemata can be activated (Abraham, 2002).

Some common pre-reading activities suggested for use while reading short stories, in order to activate the necessary background knowledge which readers may lack or cannot easily access, include *previewing, providing background knowledge, pre-questioning, and brainstorming* (Lazar, 1993).

After introduction to the text and activation of schema, readers move on to work on the reading material. To promote an interaction between the reader and writer, while-reading activities aim to encourage learners to be flexible, active, and reflective readers (Wallace, 1992). To achieve this purpose, particularly with short stories, Lazar (1993) states that while-reading activities may enable readers to understand the plot and characters and help them with difficult vocabulary and the style and language of the text. The activities can therefore help readers tackle texts by assisting them in linguistic and schematic knowledge (Alyousef, 2006) through an active engagement with the text.

Some common while-reading activities used to provide interaction in reading include skimming, scanning, predicting, key sentence, jumbled sentences or sections, group cloze, information gap tasks, multiple choice activity, reciprocal teaching, graphic organizers, and content and process questions (Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993; Abita, 2001).

The last stage is the post-reading stage. According to Barnett (1988), post-reading activities first check readers' comprehension and then lead them to a deeper analysis of the text. Lazar (1993) comments that post-reading activities help readers to make interpretations of the text, understand the narrative point of view, and also prepare them for writing activities and discussion.

Some common post-reading activities that help readers interpret the text are: thinking aloud, drawing conclusions, follow-up writing, role-playing, note-taking, question/answer relationships (QARs), recycled stories, and meta-cognitive journals.

Although there is a host of different activities with methodological and pedagogical validity for activating students' background knowledge, little has been subjected to any experimentation. The varying nature of activities suggested for particular stages of reading can in fact influence readers' mental processes in different ways and thus their comprehension of the text in depth and scope (Day and Park, 2005).

What is known about the value of these activities answers the question of whether these activities should be used,rather than how alternative activities might influence comprehension. The arguments and evidence are generally in favour of using these activities before getting students actually to read the text (Stevens, 1982; Chen and Graves, 1995; Sola, 1996; Sequero, 1998), while reading the text (Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993; Abita, 2001), and after reading the ext (Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993). Day and Park (2005), for example, present a useful review of how different types of questions asked by the reading teacher can promote different types of text comprehension. Little is known, however, about the possibly varying effects of different activities suggested for the various stages of reading.

The presence of alternative activities that can be done at the same stage of reading warrants systematic investigation into their effects. Identifying the effect of different activities can assist teachers in selecting the most appropriate reading activity. Such knowledge can be of practical value for teachers as it is not possible to make use of too many reading activities within a limited class period. For example, it would be useful to know how differently a *previewing* activity might influence the comprehension of a text rather than a *brainstorming* activity. Methodological suggestions, therefore, need to be subjected to experimental examination.

The Study

    Aim of the study

        The study aimed to understand possible divergent influences that reading activities can exert on the comprehension of short stories.

Methodology

    Setting

        This study was carried out at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Turkey within the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of the Faculty of Education. The ELT Department served as an appropriate research setting as the teacher-training programme pursued in the department included a Short Stories Course, which conveniently, for research purposes, allowed the use of different reading activities. This helped the researchers avoid any artificiality bias in the classroom environment and thus on the data collected as the activities were naturally integrated into classroom procedures. Further, the authors were employed in the same department and had constant access to the participants and classes.

    Participants

        Forty-seven third year students took part in the study. Eight of the students were male while thirty-nine were female, reflecting the natural demographic gender distribution in ELT departments in Turkey. The participants had, on average, an advanced level of English language proficiency. At the time of data collection, the participants had been studying English for over 6 years and had passed a very competitive university placement test for foreign language departments, warranting a minimum upper-intermediate level of English proficiency at the onset of a four-year teacher training programme. The participants were all training to be teachers of English as a foreign language and following the same teacher training curriculum.

    Materials

    The story

    <u>A Rose for Emily</u> by William Faulkner (from Demirtürk, 1987) was chosen for research purposes as it met several criteria set by the researchers.

Firstly, the language of the story was of great importance. If the story contained too many unknown words and had complex sentence structures above the participants' level of language proficiency, the participants might be discouraged and not willingly participate in classroom activities, which could bias the data. *A Rose for Emily* met our criteria as it had the appropriate level of linguistic complexity.

Secondly, the length of the story was important for the application of the reading activities. The story allowed use of the activities ascribed for the study. In addition, the researcher would also have to spend time on the post-test, which also required class time. The length of the story was deemed appropriate as it allowed the researchers to finish the story, including all activities chosen and the post-test, in three class hours.

        Finally, the story had to attract the readers' interest. To avoid a sense of burden and boredom, the story was chosen carefully to arouse interest in the readers. The short story was by a well-known author, William Faulkner, selected in the hope of attracting the participants' attention and to give them a taste of literature. The theme of the story was relevant to students' lives in that the participants were able to make comments and express their own experiences, which could activate their prior knowledge.

Comprehension test

A post-test was prepared to measure comprehension of the story. The post-test aimed to measure two types of comprehension: *literal comprehension* and *evaluation*, as described by Day and Park (2005). Literal comprehension involves understanding the straightforward meaning such as finding facts, vocabulary, dates, times, and locations; while evaluation refers to being able to provide a judgment about the whole or an aspect of the text. According to Day and Park, to be able to do the latter, the former type of comprehension is necessary.

The eight questions in the post-test were organised in a manner to measure both types of comprehension. Four of the questions (1, 2, 6, 7) involved literal comprehension (finding factual information) while the second set of four questions required some evaluation (3, 4, 5, 8). Figure 2 illustrates the questions asked in the post-test.

Figure 2: Comprehension questions asked in the post-test

QUESTIONS SEEKING LITERAL COMPREHENSION
1- Who is Colonel Sartoris and when did he die?
2- How did Emily's behaviour change after her father died and her lover deserted her?
6- What does Emily look like after she starts appearing less in town and what changes occur in the house?
7- What do townspeople find in her room after they unlock the door?
QUESTIONS SEEKING EVALUATION
3- What kind of a mental portrait do the townspeople draw of Ms. Emily and her father?
4- Why do the townspeople pity Ms. Emily after her father's death?
5- Why do some of the ladies call Ms. Emily's dating Homer Barron "a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people"?
8- Why does Emily destroy her only chance for happiness?

Activities used

The study made use of several types of reading activities described by different authors in the field (McCormick, 1989; Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993). The activities used can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Procedures for data collection

Treatment I (Control)	Treatment II (Experiment)
Pre-test (Not given)	Pre-test (Not given)
Pre-reading Activities	Pre-reading Activities
Brainstorming	Previewing
Surveying	Key-words
Predicting	
While-reading	While-reading
Reciprocal teaching	Scanning
Evaluating	Skimming
Inferring	Clarifying

Re-reading	
Post-reading	Post-reading
Thinking aloud	Question and Answer
Discussion	Drawing Conclusions
Summarising	
Post-test	Post-test

The activities have been grouped according to what they might involve. Activities given to the experimental group students mostly involve procedures directed towards literal comprehension while those given to the control group students tend to involve more than literal comprehension and require some reflection on the textual information, thus promoting evaluation of the textual information.

Procedures for Data Collection

A quasi-experimental research design was pursued. Two intact groups of students were assumed homogenous due to their similar educational background. The two groups of students were labelled randomly as Treatment I group ('control group' hereafter) and Treatment II ('experimental group' hereafter). Each group of students read the same short story but completed different reading activities. Figure 3 summarises the basic steps taken and the activities used with different groups of students.

Neither group was given a pre-test before reading the short story. This was mainly because the story was new to them and they were not informed which short story they would be reading. It was assumed that the students had not read the short story beforehand. Informal observations of the researchers confirmed this assumption; the participants were not familiar with the short story used.

At the pre-reading stage, both groups were given two activities. The control group received *brainstorming* and *surveying* while the experimental group received *previewing* and *key words*. Both groups of students were asked to do a *predicting* activity as a transition activity into the story.

The control group did a *brainstorming* activity, whereby the title of the story was written on the board and the students were asked to utter anything related to the title. Using the items written on the board in the brainstorming activity the participants did a *surveying* activity that helped learners think about and develop a general idea about the social background, status of women, women's rights and the relationship between a man and woman in the period of the story in order to anticipate the story structure. Following the surveying activity the students were asked to compare the fates of characters in stories read previously, reflecting on the social surroundings that the female characters lived in and students were expected to *predict* some problems the character of the current story, Emily, might face.

The experimental group, on the other hand, was given a *previewing* activity that gave an explanation about the setting and time of the story. Then a *predicting* activity was carried out and the students were asked to state some probable problems Emily would face. Finally, a *key-words activity* was done, whereby, reflecting on the participants' suggestions, key-words were written on the board. Keywords tended to depict Emily's personality, family life, social class, relations with townspeople, and the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a noble family. At the

while-reading stage, the control group were offered activities that would promote interpretation of the text while the experimental group were given activities aiming at finding factual information. The first group of students were asked to do *reciprocal teaching*, *evaluating*, *inferring*, and *re-reading* while the latter group did *scanning*, *skimming*, and *clarifying*. In the *reciprocal teaching* activity the control group participants were asked to read the first section and answer 6 teacher-prepared questions. For the second section, the students were asked to skim the section and find references about the true or false sentences (evaluating activity). After reading the third section, an *inferring* activity was pursued in which the students were asked to describe Emily's portrait after her father's death.

The experimental group in return was given a *scanning* activity in which they were assigned to scan the text, give titles to each section and find adjectives that describe Emily, her father, and Homer. Following the first activity, the group was given a *skimming* activity. Six questions that yielded factual information were given to the group. Since the story has flashbacks, the group was given a *clarifying* activity and the readers were asked to put the events in Emily's life in an order from the beginning of the story until her death.

At the post-reading stage, the control group students did *thinking aloud* and *discussion activities* whereas the experiment group students did *question and answer* and *drawing conclusions* activities. Both groups of students also did a *summarising* activity. Summarising is a natural element of any language lesson.

In the *think aloud* activity, the control group were asked three questions to give their ideas on Emily's dramatic attempt to destroy her only chance for happiness and to highlight the cause and effect relationship of the action. After stating their opinions on the questions in the *discussion* activity, the students were invited to talk about the significance and importance of the doors mentioned several times in the story to strengthen the cause and affect relationship as in the previous activity. Finally, to wrap-up the story the students were put into groups, assigned different sections of the story, and asked to summarise it. Through the *summarising* activity, the students would relate the events in chronological order.

The group was given 7 questions for the *question and answer* activity. The activity aimed to help students comment on Emily's behaviour and the unexpected, shocking end of the story. The group was then asked to *draw conclusions* from the story. A *summarising* activity was then carried out to restate the events from the beginning of the story to the end. Finally, both groups of students were administered a comprehension test as the post-test of the study.

Procedures for data analysis

Marking the papers: grammar mistakes were ignored while marking the papers as the study aimed to test only the effectiveness of different reading activities on ELT learners' reading comprehension skills via the content of the comprehension questions. Only the content of the written answers was considered.

Inter-rater reliability: A second independent reading teacher marked a subset (25%) of randomly-chosen student post-test papers with the help of a previously prepared answer key. A high correlation coefficient was observed between the two raters' marks (r= .990 p<.000), which implied high consistency between the two raters.

Findings

Data collected from the marking of the papers were statistically analysed by using an independent samples t-test procedure to explore group differences on different aspects of post-

test scores. The statistical analysis yielded some significant differences between the two groups of students. Table 1 shows the results of the independent samples t-test.

Table 1: Group differences in post-test

Type of Comprehension	Group	Mean	Mean difference	t	df	Significance
Total	Experiment	52,05	-2,91	-,820	45	,416
	Control	54,96				
Literal Comprehension	Experiment	31,78	5,39	2,513	45	,016
	Control	26,39				
Evaluative Comprehension	Experiment	20,36	-8,20	-3,282	45	,002
	Control	28,57				

An examination of Table 1 reveals that there was no significant difference between the total scores ($p<.416$), with a minimal mean difference of -2.91 between the two groups of students. This was mainly because the two groups performed quite differently on different sets of comprehension questions, the total score thus averaging out differences on these questions. The control group, for example, outscored the experimental group students ($p<.002$) in questions requiring evaluation of the textual information (questions 3, 4, 5 and 8) with a mean difference of 8,20; while the experiment group students performed better than the control group ($p<.016$) in questions seeking literal comprehension (questions 1,2, 6, and 7). Figure 4 illustrates group differences on different question types.

Figure 4: Group differences on different types of questions
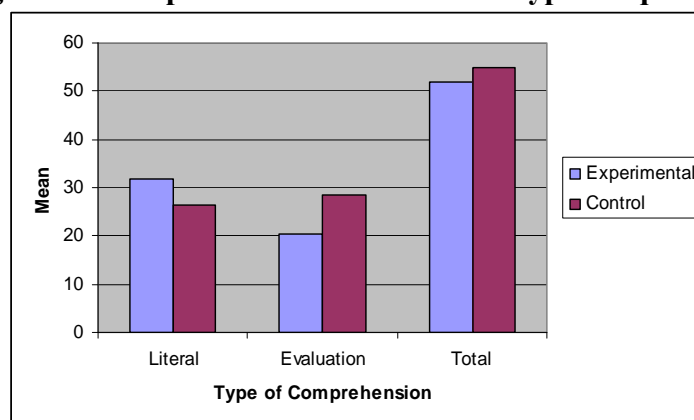
A close examination of the results on individual questions gives a better picture of the difference between the performances of the two groups. Table 2 presents group differences on questions seeking factual information.

Table 2: Group differences on questions seeking literal comprehension

Questions		Mean	Mean difference	t	df	Significance
1	Experiment	7,94	1,59	1,566	45	,124
	Control	6,35				
2	Experiment	7,21	0,43	,412	45	,682
	Control	6,78				
6	Experiment	8,21	2,07	2,072	45	,041
	Control	6,14				
7	Experiment	8,42	1,32	1,634	45	,109
	Control	7,10				
Literal Comprehension	Experiment	31,78	5,39	2,513	45	,016
	Control	26,39				

An examination of the table above shows that the two groups of students performed quite differently on factual questions. It may be observed that the experimental group students earned higher marks on all factual questions. The difference on question 6 was statistically significant (p<.041). Although there was a significant difference only on one question, differences on individual questions added up to show a highly significant variation in the total score in favour of the experimental group (p<.016).

An examination of group variations on questions measuring evaluation, on the other hand, yielded a completely different picture. The control group students outperformed the experimental group students on all interpretative questions. Table 3 shows the results of the independent samples t-test analysis on these questions.

Table 3: Group differences on evaluative questions

Questions	Groups	Mean	Mean difference	t	df	Significance
3	Experiment	4,00	-1,1071	-,863	45	,393
	Control	5,10				
4	Experiment	6,47	-1,0977	-1,031	45	,308
	Control	7,57				
5	Experiment	6,05	-2,4831	-2,212	45	,032
	Control	8,53				
8	Experiment	3,84	-3,5150	-3,380	45	,002
	Control	7,35				
Evaluation	Experiment	20,36	-8,2030	-3,282	45	,002
	Control	28,57				

The control group outscored the experimental group on all questions. The differences between the two groups of students were statistically significant on test items 5 and 8 (p<.032 and p<.002 respectively). As reported earlier, group differences in overall performance on evaluative questions were statistically significant in favour of the control group students (p<.002). Group differences on different types of individual questions are illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Group differences on individual questions**
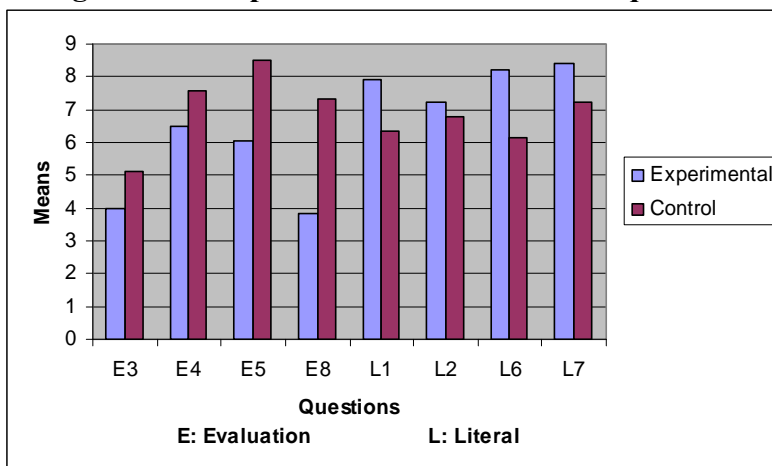
In addition to between-group differences on different sets of questions, some within-group differences were sought through a paired samples t-test procedure. Table 4 illustrates within-group differences observed on the fact finding and evaluative questions.

Table 4: Within-group differences on different sets of questions

Group	Pair	Means	SD	Mean difference	T	df	Significance
Experimental Group	Literal	31,78	6,95	11,42	6,529	18	,000
	Evaluation	20,36	8,11				
Control Group	Literal	26,39	7,40	-2,17	-,997	27	,328
	Evaluation	28,57	8,59				

The analysis revealed that the experimental group's performance was considerably higher on literal comprehension than evaluation (p<.000). However, despite a reverse tendency, there was no significant difference between the performance of control group students on different parts of the post-test (p<.328). It is important to note here that the disparity between the scores of the experimental group on the fact-finding and evaluative components of the post-test was much greater than that of the control group students. These are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Within-group differences on different components of the post test
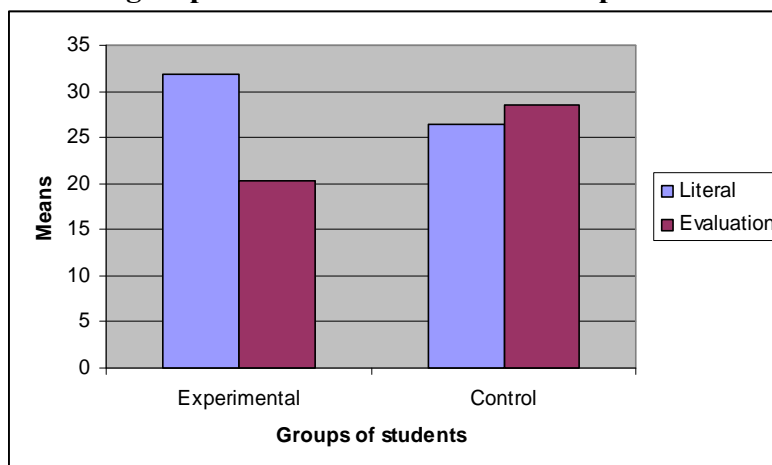
Discussion

The differences between the groups of students can be explained by the nature of the activities used and thus refer to the differing mechanisms and mental processing involved in the reading activities.

Day and Park (2005) assert that students perform better at what they practise during the reading process. The participants in the experimental and control groups performed differently because the activities they completed in the course of reading the story were probably congruent to the types of questions they could answer better.

The nature of the composite of activities done by the experimental group students; mainly involved finding facts as these activities generally focused on locating discrete pieces of information (Wallace, 1992; Lazar, 1993). For example, at the prereading stage; *predicting*, *prewieving* and *keywords* activities provided the experimental group with opportunities for anticipating the content of the story, activating reader's schemata as well as some necessary linguistics background information. At the while reading stage; *scanning, skimming* and *clarifying* activities promoted getting the gist of the text and locating and clarifying discrete pieces of information. Lastly, at the post reading stage, the group employed *question and answer*, *drawing conclusions* activities. Both groups were given a *summarising* activity to highlight the major ideas and the themes of the story, by the help of explicit information presented in the text thus eventually promoting better literal comprehension than evaluation of textual information, and most likely resulting in the superior performance of the experimental group on comprehension questions that measured literal comprehension.

The set of activities completed with the control group students tended to involve more reflection on the content because these activities required not only locating discrete pieces of information in the text but involved personal interaction on the part of the reader (Lazar, 1993). At the prereading stage *brainstorming* and *surveying* activities helped to activate the reader's schemata. *Reciprocal teaching*, *evaluating*, *inferring*, and *rereading* activities at the while reading stage seemed to help the readers to become reflective readers to be able to make judgement about the whole or some aspect of the text. Finally, at the post reading stage, through *thinking aloud* and, *discussion* activities, the group exchanged their opinions about the text and the main characters. The control group students were advantaged in this area as they invested

more time on such aspects of the text to make judgement about the text, which the experimental group was not required to do.

It is interesting to observe that although there was a significant within-group difference between literal comprehension and evaluation of the textual information among experimental group students, there was not such a difference among the control group students (p<.000 and p<.328 respectively). This was probably because the natural reading processes may involve mechanisms that are involved in the activities done by the experimental group (Brantmeier, 2002; Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Pardo, 2004). In other words, certain reading processes may be a prime cause of success in reading comprehension (Day and Park, 2005). ELT students with high levels of English proficiency may already have developed reading strategies resembling effective classroom activities (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Control group students; therefore, who did not particularly go through reading activities for finding factual information, may have been able to make up for the lack of such activities on factual questions, which in turn narrowed the gap between the performances of these students on both types of comprehension questions. The significant difference observed on literal comprehension questions between the groups of students, on the other hand, can be explained by the extra efforts invested by the experimental group students on factual aspects of the text. The reason why a significant difference occurred between literal comprehension and evaluation by the experimental group students can therefore be explained by the fact that these students lacked the opportunity to reflect on the text and performed poorly on evaluation questions.

Conclusions and Implications

Before drawing any conclusions, it is important to point out that this study did not intend to measure the effectiveness of individual reading activities. Nor did it intend to discredit some activities and promote others. Rather, the study aimed to explore possible divergent effects of activities, focusing on only two aspects of comprehension. Further, the study did not monitor possible intervening variables that might have biased the data and thus the procedures followed might have elevated group differences. The conclusions that can be drawn from the results of the study should therefore be considered as tentative and limited in scope.

Despite these limitations, the results are helpful in highlighting the fact that the nature of reading activities can have divergent effects and promote different aspects of comprehension. The study therefore calls for the careful and purposeful selection of activities set by the reading teacher.

To this effect, it can be concluded that although the contribution of individual activities towards comprehension of the short story cannot easily be segregated from others, activities such as *previewing*, *providing keywords*, *scanning*, *skimming*, *clarifying*, *question and answer*, and *drawing conclusions* seem to contribute more to literal comprehension. On the other hand, *brainstorming, surveying, reciprocal teaching*, *evaluation, inferring, re-reading, thinking aloud*, and *discussion* tend to promote evaluation of the textual information. This is illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Activities and their by-products

Previewing Providing keywords Scanning Skimming Clarifying Question and answer Drawing conclusions	Brainstorming Surveying Reciprocal teaching Evaluation Inferring Re-reading Thinking aloud Discussion
⇓	⇓
Literal Comprehension	Evaluation
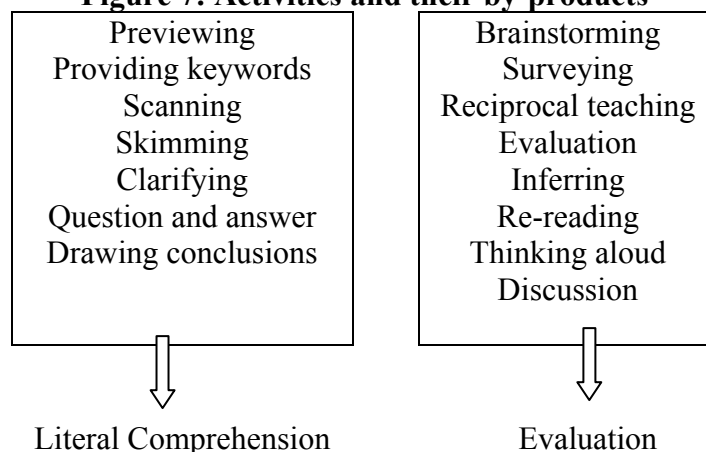
The results of the study reiterate the necessity of using a variety of activities to promote the reader's comprehension. Using a host of different activities that cater to different types of comprehension can contribute to a fuller appreciation of texts and move our students beyond literal comprehension of the text. As illustrated above, moving beyond literal comprehension requires getting engaged in reading activities that promote interaction between the reader and the text and help the reader make better sense of what is being read.

Although there is not an ideal set and correct order of reading activities that can be done in reading classes, different stages of reading short stories seem to call for the use of different activities. Reflecting on the tentative conclusion proposed in this study it can be suggested that a reading teacher make use of activities that will facilitate both literal comprehension and evaluation of the text and this can be done employing activities that resemble behaviours performed by skilled readers as summarised by Brantmeier (2002) and Pardo (2004). For example, at the pre-reading stage a skilled reader should be able to activate prior knowledge; specify a purpose for reading; plan what to do/what step to take; preview the text, preview the contents/sections of the text. Further, while-reading the text, they should be able to focus their attention on the content; use fix-up strategies; check predictions; pose questions about the text; find answers to the posed questions; connect text to background knowledge; summarise information; make inferences; connect one part of the text to another; and use the discourse markers to see relationships. At the post-reading stage a good reader reflects on what has been comprehended from the text; critique the author/text; judge how well objectives were met; and summarise the major ideas.

Less skilled readers are often inclined to ignore or skip processes that are employed by the skilled readers (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Therefore, the reading teachers are strongly advised to make use of varying activities to assist different tpes of comprehension activities. For example, to accelerate literal comprehension, the reading teacher, as indicated in this study, can confidently implement activities such as; *previewing*; *providing keywords*; at the while-reading stage, *scanning*; *skimming*; and *clarifying*, and finally at the post reading stage *question and answer* and *drawing conclusions* can be made use of. On the other hand, to promote evaluation of the text, brainstorming; and surveying can be employed at the pre-reading stage, reciprocal teaching; evaluation; inferring; and re-reading at the while reading stage, and thinking aloud and discussion activities at the post-reading stage. Hence, it may be safe to propose that making use

of a composite of activities at different stages of reading can easily improve our students' literal comprehension and evaluation of the short stories.

This study focused only on a limited range of activities and only two types of reading comprehension proposed by Day and Park (2005) in relation to tasks that can be done in short story classes. It may therefore be useful to examine effects of other activities on different types of comprehension under controlled experimental conditions. Only such controlled examinations may yield a much better understanding of the contribution of different and alternative activities to different types of comprehension involved in reading short stories. The reading teachers are, therefore, advised to develop a critical approach in selecting activities for their reading classes.

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İsmail Hakkı ERTEN works as an Assistant Professor at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Education. His research interests include vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary learning strategies, reading comprehension, and individual differences such as gender, motivation, learning styles and strategies as well as pre-service teacher training. He can be contacted at iherten@gmail.com or herten@comu.edu.tr.

Müge KARAKAŞ works as a lecturer at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University and is interested in the processes involved in reading comprehension and factors influencing comprehension. She teaches "Introduction to English Literature" and "Teaching and Examining Short Stories" within the ELT Department. She can be contacted at mgekarakas@yahoo.com .