Raising text structure awareness: A strategy of improving EFL undergraduate students’ reading comprehension ability

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Abstract: Adopted innovative methodologies in teaching reading comprehension have been a topic of interest by reading scholars among which textual awareness raising seems to be effective in the reading classroom. Following this, the present study looked into the effect of reading instruction by raising the students’ awareness of different expository text structures on their reading comprehension ability. The sample of the study was selected from the undergraduate EFL students in Islamic Azad University, Guilan Branch, Roudbar, Iran. In this regard, the students of two intact classes took part in Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) and 60 students (30 in each class) who reached the criterion of upper-intermediate were considered as the participants of the study. Then, the classes were randomly assigned into the experimental and control groups. The reading comprehension pre- and post-tests were utilized before and after the treatment in the data collection procedures. The treatment sessions aimed to raise the learners’ awareness of the variety of structures used in expository texts. Results of the inferential statistics revealed a significant mean difference between the reading comprehension of the

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Teaching reading comprehension has always been a source of concern for language teachers since understanding a text has been a challenging activity for readers because of facing difficult and ambiguous words. This has resulted in introducing a lot of strategies to teach reading in the best way. Considering this issue, the aim of this study was to teach reading by helping learners to have the knowledge of the skeleton of the text they are reading. In other words, if learners know the structure of writing different expository texts, they will probably guess the main ideas of the texts, which is the final goal of reading. The results of the study revealed the learners’ increased comprehension when they received the textual awareness raising strategies. Findings are beneficial for teachers in using the appropriate strategies to raise their students’ awareness of text structure and therefore to improve their reading comprehension ability.
experimental and control groups after the treatment. It was found that raising the students’ awareness of text structure by adopting different expository texts resulted in the improvement of students’ reading comprehension ability in the experimental group. Findings can contribute to the practical application of raising the students’ textual awareness as an effective strategy in assisting them to get mastery over reading comprehension skill.

Subjects: Educational Research; Higher Education; Theories of Learning; Classroom Practice; Curriculum Studies; Applied Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning

Keywords: Expository text; reading comprehension; textual awareness raising; text structure; undergraduate students

1. Introduction
Many students of EFL/ESL have “major difficulties” with English reading comprehension even after years of learning the English language. This often results in them facing difficulties in areas such as finding employment or a better job. They can read a text but for recognizing or understanding the authors’ message/messages often encounter difficulties. According to Ahmadi and Hairul (2012), reading comprehension is an important factor in EFL/ESL learning process and should be emphasized in different levels of education, for instance, an area of concern and indeed one of the top priorities of ESL/EFL students after completing elementary English courses is reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is defined “as the process of extracting and integrating information from a written text in English while applying readers’ background knowledge” (Koda, 2005, p. 28). Despite this, the teaching of reading comprehension strategy seems to have been rather taken for granted in the field of English language teaching. In this respect, metacognitive reading strategy awareness has become one of the effective ways to facilitate students’ reading comprehension in the field of second/foreign language studies (Pressley & Block, 2002). Early studies on metacognitive reading strategy awareness tended to make lists of strategies and other features presumed to be necessary for all language learning students (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In the previous studies, researchers tried to explore what language learners do to facilitate their learning of the processes included in EFL/ESL learning. In this new approach, metacognitive reading strategy awareness is found to be as any choice, behavior, thought, suggestion and technique used by a reader to help their learning process (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2001; Oxford, 1990). Then, researchers attempted to create taxonomies of metacognitive reading strategy among readers to facilitate their comprehension of texts, which attracted more attention and still continue to do so (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Flavell (1981) elaborated on metacognition as cognition about cognition and mentioned the differences between metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experience. Flavell reveals that metacognition refers to both people’s awareness and control, not only of their cognitive processes, but of their desires and motivations as well. Teachers agree that metacognitive reading strategy can be utilized to help student’s reading comprehension and promote the monitoring and regulation of their own cognitive enterprises (Koda, 2005; Yang, 2002). The metacognitive strategy implementation such as self-awareness and self-evaluating is to improve independent readers who can control their own learning and learn, when and how to use those strategies while reading (Flavell, 1981). In order to raise the learners’ metacognition in reading comprehension, it seems that teachers should adhere to some textual manipulations in raising the learners’ textual awareness in improving their comprehension abilities.

Recent views of looking at written texts as an argument that happens between reader and writer need that readers go beyond words and sentences to discourse and be equipped with knowledge of certain textual characteristics and strategies that help their reading (Meyer, 2003). Generally, texts have two kinds of information: content information (content schemata) and structural information (formal schemata). Readers use content information to construct a meaningful mental
representation of a text; and they use structural information to help them organize the content and so facilitate the process of making meaning of a text (Armbruster, 2004). Lack of sensitivity to structural information of texts is stated as one of the factors that leads to comprehension difficulties (Williams, 2007). Text structure awareness, which according to Grabe (2009) consists of recognizing, and attending to a number of discourse-signaling systems, has been shown to be an effective reading strategy for improving reading comprehension and recall of information (Carrell, 1984, 1985, 1992; Koda, 2005; Laureate Martínez, 2008; Meyer & Poon, 2001). According to Tompkins (2007), being aware of the text structure and its organization helps “students learn the difference between the big ideas and the details” (p. 205).

Making students aware of the rhetorical organization of texts also contributes to reading fluency and efficiency (Villanueva de Debat, 2012). Similar terms such as discourse structure, discourse pattern, text type, rhetorical organization, and top-level structure are used interchangeably with text structure and refer to the way information is organized in a text (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). According to Grabe (2002), “discourse, or text, structures can be understood as knowledge structures or basic rhetorical patterns in texts” (p. 10). Most expository texts are structured to facilitate the study process for prospective readers. These texts contain structural elements that help guide students through their reading. Authors of expository texts use these structures to arrange and connect ideas. Five major structures of expository texts outlined by Tompkins (2007) are description, sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution. As Gillam, Fargo, and Robertson (2011) pointed out, expository texts transmit different kinds of information and intend to present facts and information through different cue words. For example, in a descriptive type of expository text, the cue words such as “for example” and “such as”; in a sequential type, cue words like “first” and “previously”; in a comparative kind, cue words such as “however” and “on the other hand” are used, or signal words such as “as a result” and “therefore”; “because” and “so that” are used in cause/effect and problem/solution types of expository texts, respectively (Gillam et al., 2011). Students who understand the idea of text structure and how to analyze it are likely to learn more than students who lack this understanding (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). The research literature in this field reveals that students’ reading comprehension skills improve when they acquire knowledge of texts’ structural development and use them properly.

Carrell (1985) argued that instruction on text structure indeed has a positive effect on the students’ recall protocols. In this case, knowledge of the rhetorical relationship of the ideas—main idea, major ideas, and supporting details—helps readers with their comprehension of the expository texts (Meyer & Rice, 1982; Simonsen, 1996). Reading researchers have argued that knowledge of text organization or structure is an important factor for text comprehension (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Fletcher, 2006; Grabe, 1991, 2004, 2009; Hall, Sobey, & McClellan, 2005; Horiba, 2000; Kendeou & Van Den Broek, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Meyer & Poon, 2001; Snyder, 2010).

Some reading researchers believe that reading comprehension also involves higher-level processing skills of syntax, semantics, and discourse structures along with higher-order knowledge of text representation and the integration of ideas within the readers’ global knowledge (Grabe, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Considering this, familiarizing learners with the organization of expository texts seem to decrease the burden of the reading comprehension tasks since the reader is not boringly involved in figuring out the meaning of words; rather the content and structure of the text are of importance, allowing the reader to consciously go through the text. Therefore, although it seems that it is important for readers to integrate a variety of cognitive, linguistic, and non-linguistic skills and processes for efficient and successful text comprehension, many learners might not be aware of how to use them for better comprehension of the texts. It seems that students have problems in comprehending expository texts, which are more difficult than narrative texts (Williams, 2007) and cannot get the main ideas. It might be because in reading classes more attention is paid to teaching reading traditionally by focusing on some vocabulary and questions to activate background knowledge of students before reading the text and some reading comprehension questions after the text (Kragler, Martin, & Walker, 2005). In this regard, Namjoo and
Marzban (2012) based on a review of the literature indicated that one reason for the failure of students in the academic area is that they are not able to identify the structure of expository texts and so they cannot comprehend their readings. For this reason, they expressed the necessity of raising students’ awareness in this area. Hence, this study investigated the possible effects of text structure awareness raising among Iranian EFL undergraduate university students and its effects on their reading comprehension. It attempted to see whether readers who already have the knowledge of the organizational patterns of the text use it as a strategy to comprehend the text. Therefore, this study answers the following question:

RQ. Does textual awareness raising significantly affect the students’ reading comprehension ability?

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Text structure awareness

One of the most efficient techniques for which there is an influx of research and practice is training students on text structure to facilitate their comprehension of expository texts. Readers of all ages must be aware of text structures if they are to be most successful (Meyer, 2003). The structure or organization of the text is the arrangement of ideas and the relationships among the ideas (Armbruster, 2004). Readers who are unaware of text structures are at a disadvantage because they do not approach reading with any type of reading plan (Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980). However, readers who are familiar with text structures expect the information to unfold in certain ways (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Text structure awareness can be used as a useful strategy to develop readers’ comprehension. Text structure refers to how the information within a written text is organized. It helps learners deduce that a text might show a main idea and details, a cause and then its effects, and/or different views of a topic (Simonsen, 1996). Meyer and Rice (1982) argued that text structure involves the ideas of a text that are interrelated to transfer a message to the reader.

Research on awareness of text structure has been the center of interest for many researchers. There are convincing proofs that knowledge of text structure affects the comprehension of the text (Carrell, 1989). Skilled readers with the knowledge of text structure are capable of constructing mental models of the main ideas, as well as learning and remembering the information presented in the text (Meyer & Rice, 1982). Furthermore, knowledge of text structure let the readers build more detailed mental models of the text being read. Carrell (1989) states that the amount of information that students recall depends largely on the kind of structure of a text. One important level of awareness is identified as “noticing”. Noticing or paying attention to specific features of the target input is considered an important stage in learning, and “those who notice most learn most” (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 237).

Another aspect of awareness was suggested by Little (1997), that is, “the development of psychological relation to one’s learning content and process” (p.93). Once learners are more aware of a process through which something is learned, they are more likely to utilize this process again in their other learning tasks. Therefore, a higher level of awareness may help learners to become independent learners in language learning. Text structure is a significant standard in reading comprehension (McGee, 1982; Taylor, 1992a). Meyer et al. (1980) believe that text structure clarify which concepts of the author are most essential and which are less important. She also stated that authors utilize different types of text structure to transmit their thoughts to the readers comfortably. When reading and writing, in addition to vocabulary and grammar necessary for text comprehension, knowledge of text structure, systems, networks and patterns, are important tools to assist readers in processing a text.

Applying text structure strategy in reading was confirmed to be the area of interest of reading researchers for many decades. In fact, the review of literature in reading has disclosed the fact
that many researchers have thought about awareness of text structure as a key factor in fostering comprehension. Pressley and McCormick (1995), for instance, supported the idea of text structure strategy in empowering reading comprehension of elementary students. They concluded that in text structure strategy, students are learning how to examine the texts, and it is very beneficial in determining the main ideas of the texts. They argued that teaching the students how to analyze the passages is advantageous in empowering their comprehension.

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) argue that knowledge of how texts are structured and how discourse is formed facilitate text comprehension. For Silberstein (1994), reading comprehension is achieved when readers are aware of text structure. There are several types of text structure: definition, description, argumentation, problem-solution, process, classification, cause-effect, problem-solution, comparison-contrast and analysis (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Grabe, 2009). These text structures are found mainly in expository texts. According to Meyer (1985), expository texts are structured on three levels. The highest of these—the superstructure—corresponds to the organization of the textual rhetoric. The function of this superstructure is to establish logical connections between ideas and organize them according to a hierarchy of importance, thereby distinguishing a text from a simple list of words or phrases.

2.2. Teaching text structure

One of the most important aspects of any written text is its structure (Meyer & Poon, 2001). Akhondi, Malayeri, and Samad (2011) believe that text features can assist readers in locating and organizing information in the text. They also suggest that the recognition and use of text organization are essential processes underlying comprehension and retention.

A major issue concerning the influence of text structure is the extent to which such knowledge can be directly taught to students so that it will lead to improved comprehension. There are three major lines of research on the effect of text structure instruction. One line of research includes the impact of direct instruction, which explicitly raises student awareness of specific text structuring (Carrell, 1985; Duke, Pearson, Farstrup, & Samuels, 2002; Miller & George, 1992). This research stresses the uses of transition words, topic sentences, sentence-initial phrases, anaphoric linkages and definite reference to prior text ideas, and the role of various grammatical structures to build coherence in texts.

A second line of research improves students’ awareness of text structure through graphic organizers, semantic maps, outline grids, tree diagrams, and hierarchical summaries (Alvermann, 1986; Berkowitz, 1986; Guri-Rosenblit, 1989; Tang, 1992; Taylor, Ch, 1992b; Taylor & Beach, 1984; Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002; Vacca, 2002; Vacca & Vacca, 1999). It can be inferred that students comprehend texts better when they are shown visually how text information is organized (along with the linguistic clues that signal this organization). Various types of visual representations that reflect how information and ideas in texts are organized and presented are used as a discourse awareness approach with students. When these visual representations (graphic organizers) are used on a regular basis, students continually demonstrate significant improvement in their reading comprehension with academic expository texts.

A third line of instructional training follows from instruction in reading strategies. Because a number of reading strategy training approaches involve attention to structure, main idea identification, and text study skills, this line of instructional research is also a source of studies supporting text structure instruction. Thus, strategy training which includes summarizing, semantic mapping, predicting, forming questions from headings and sub-headings, and using adjunct questions all appear to improve awareness of text structure and text comprehension (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2012; Pressley & Block, 2002, 2002; Vacca, 2002). The above mentioned research studies argue that instruction, which focuses on text structure, enhance comprehension and learning. They also indirectly argue that texts provide guidelines for the construction of the reader’s comprehension; that is, texts provide the coherence-building directions used by readers (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2012).
2.3. Empirical studies

Concerning the empirical studies on text structure awareness, although less research has been done to examine the role of background knowledge of text structure in ESL/EFL reading comprehension, some research studies on ESL/EFL readers have also revealed its facilitative effects on comprehension. Meyer and Freedle (1984) study investigated the effects of four sorts of discourse including comparison, causation, problem/solution, and collection of descriptions on native readers’ remembrance of English and found that the most organized discourse types of comparison, problem/solution, and causation facilitated comprehension and recall.

A number of previous research studies in the EFL/ESL settings have shown that explicit instruction of expository text structures improves middle school as well as college and university students’ reading comprehension (Aghasafari & Azizmalayeri, 2015; Duke et al., 2002; Namjoo & Marzban, 2012; Pressley & Block, 2002; Williams & Pao, 2011). Pearson and Fielding (1991, as cited in Almasi, 2003) noted that nearly any form of instruction that teaches students to recognize text structure enhances comprehension. Several researchers have found that awareness of text structures is highly related to reading comprehension (Collins, Dickson, Simmons, & Kameenui, 2001; Schwartz, Mendoza, & Meyer, 2017). According to Hall et al. (2005), readers who understand how a text is structured “find greater success in identifying important information and relationships between ideas” (p. 215).

Newman (2007) investigated the effect of explicit instruction of expository text structure on reading comprehension. The subjects were third-grade EFL students and they were divided into three groups of experimental and a control group. The experimental groups received training on text structure with the use of graphic organizers. The students in the control classroom received regular instruction with no specific strategies. The trainer used different reading strategies such as modeling, thinking aloud, and graphic organizers during the treatment for the experimental groups. Following the post-test, the participants in the control and experimental groups exhibited a significant difference in their ability to comprehend expository texts.

Piyanukool (2001) investigated the effectiveness of teaching reading through discussion of text structures on students’ reading comprehension. The subjects in the study were 126 EFL students who were divided into the experimental and control groups randomly. Students in the experimental group received training on using and applying text structure knowledge on the stories. In the training procedure, both narrative and expository text structures were used. The control group was asked to answer the questions at the end of stories. After the post-test, a t-test was used. The results did not reveal any differences between two groups’ performance but it was found that the participants favored reading through talking about text structures more than reading by themselves.

A few studies have been conducted in the EFL context of Iran regarding textual awareness raising. For example, Vahidi (2008) inspected the discourse familiarity of paragraph structure and the comprehension of academic/expository text. His findings disclosed that there was a relationship between knowledge of text integration and text comprehension. Similarly, Amoli and Karbalaei (2011) directed a study to explore how strategy of text structure instruction can be implemented most effectively in Iranian universities to improve EFL students’ reading comprehension. The results showed that the underlining strategy that was involved to assist Iranian university learners’ EFL reading comprehension had a significant effect on the reading comprehension. In addition, Zarrati, Nambiar, Nor Rizan, and Mohd Maasum (2014) conducted a study on 170 Iranian EFL learners. They divided them into the experimental and control groups each with 85 learners. In the experimental group, some signal words such as transitional words, frame markers, endophoric markers, code glosses, and even punctuation marks were taught to the learners during one semester. The results revealed the outperformance of the treatment group, who received instruction in text structure strategies, in the reading comprehension test. Aghasafari and Azizmalayeri (2015) conducted a quantitative study to look into the effect of teaching text structure on the university students’ reading comprehension ability. The students were taught how to apply the target strategies before,
while, and after reading the text in order to get mastery over the reading tasks. The university students were armed with systematic instruction of textual awareness raising since the two strategies of identifying main ideas and summarization strongly assisted the students to be more proficient readers by knowing the text configuration while reading the text. Similar study was done by Rabani, Akhondi, and Azizmalayeri (2015) on 60 EFL learners in an English language institute in Hamedan, Iran. Their aim was to find the effect of information processing strategies through text structure on learners’ reading comprehension. The results revealed the positive effect of this strategy on the comprehension of expository texts through the implementation of graphic organizers and summarizing among the other strategies compared to the conventional method of background knowledge activation used in the control group.

In a study on the efficacy of using text structure as a strategy instruction tool, the learners’ ability to read and recall English and Spanish texts was taken into account. In fact, Schwartz et al. (2017) benefited from raising the learners’ awareness of applying text structure instruction as a tool to foster their reading comprehension abilities and recalling the target texts. The researchers found that there were some signal words that should be attended by the learners in order to facilitate the comprehension process and getting to know the gist of the text. It was strongly believed by the researchers that enabling learners to figure out the structure of the text assists them to be professional readers who might encounter serious problems in realizing the meaning of the text.

Calling for optimal instruction in the area of reading comprehension studies, Williams (2018) provided a descriptive review of the efficiency of providing textual awareness raising for L2 or EFL learners in order to assist their reading proficiency more systematically. The researcher argued that teaching text structure is moving forward for the purpose of increasing the quality of reading instruction through learners’ exposure to more various structures of expository texts. Williams cautioned that teachers’ sufficient and professional knowledge of writing instruction is demanding for appropriately raising the learners’ awareness of expository text structures.

In general, it appears that teaching text structure has been well recognized in the literature; however, since reading comprehension demands more cognitive and linguistic understanding by the EFL learners, teaching text structure, particularly for university students, who might not have been mainly familiar with reading comprehension strategies, can be of great help to develop their reading comprehension ability. Although some studies have been conducted in the area of textual awareness raising, the problem of comprehending the expository texts by university students still persists and there is a remaining need for research in this area.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants
The participants of the study were selected from the undergraduate EFL students majoring in English language teaching (ELT) in Islamic Azad University, Guilan Branch, Roudbar, Iran. The participants were female and male students within the age range of 18 to 40. For the purpose of the study, 60 upper-intermediate students from two intact classes of 40 each, after taking Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), were selected as the participants of the study. These classes were randomly assigned into the experimental and control groups each with 30 students. In the experimental group, the structure of different kinds of expository texts were taught; while, in the control group the same texts were read and studied without teaching their structures.

3.2. Instruments
The following instruments were used in the study:

3.2.1. Oxford quick placement test (OQPT)
OQPT was applied to homogenize the participants of the study in terms of their proficiency levels. OQPT was taken by the participants before the treatment sessions to select upper-intermediate
participants. This test includes 60 items in multiple-choice format related to vocabulary and
grammar with a maximum possible score of 60 points. Based on the OQPT scale, the levels,
which can be achieved, include beginner (1–17), elementary (18–29), lower-intermediate (30–39),
upper-intermediate (40–47), advanced (48–54), and very advanced (55–60). In this study, the
upper-intermediate level students were selected.

3.2.2. Reading comprehension pre- and post-test
In order to find out the performance of the participants on reading comprehension, before and
after the treatment, the participants were given the pre-test and the post-test each containing two
reading passages with 10 multiple-choice items taken from TOEFL reading passages for the upper-
intermediate level students.

3.3. Procedure
After homogenizing the participants and assigning them into two groups of the study, the reading
comprehension pre-test was given to them. After that, the treatment period started.

The treatment sessions were conducted during ten weeks. In the experimental group, the
students were exposed to various types of expository texts and were directed to the general
structure of the selected texts in order to give the students the general image of the expository
text. Tompkins (1998) suggestion was used to raise the students’ awareness of text structures.
Tompkins suggested the following three steps to teach expository text structures:

- Introduce an organizational pattern;
- Give students opportunities to work on the text; and
- Invite students to write paragraphs using each text structure pattern

The first session included the statement of the purpose of the study as well as the provision of the basic
information regarding the structure of the texts. The students were given thorough information con-
cerning the structure of the text and the fact that writers benefit from these structures to organize their
intended meaning. In this case, the key expressions that constitute text structure of different expository
texts (i.e., description, sequence, cause/effect, problem/solution, and compare/contrast) were instructed
to the students and the graphic organizer of different patterns was also shown to them. In the following
sessions, each type of expository text was instructed and practiced with respect to the key elements that
play an important role in the structures and paragraphing of the above mentioned expository texts. Every
two sessions, the students practiced each organizational pattern in detail using the selected texts. The
procedure started with the recognition part and proceeded with the practice and production. At first, the
teacher through thinking aloud modeled the students in how they could find the signal words and
phrases in the text then drew the related graphic organizer. At this stage, the teacher gave them
a predetermined text and asked them to highlight the signal words and phrases that identified that
text. Then, they practiced to sketch the graphic organizer of that text first as a whole class activity
followed by small group, pair, and finally individual activities as suggested by Tompkins (1998).
Furthermore, different parts of the text including opening, body, and conclusion were considered by
the students and the teacher provided feedback where necessary. In this regard, different awareness
raising tasks were designed and implemented for the experimental group. For example, the students
were expected to underline the topic sentence, main idea, and supporting sentences in the text. One
more practice was through the use of jigsaw activities. The students were also provided with single
sentences and asked to join them together in order to make a unified text according to the target
structure. In this way, the teacher provided the students with useful opportunities to take into account
different texts with different organizational patterns and analyze the text structures.

In contrast, in the control group, the same texts were practiced during the treatment period. In this
group, the text was read and practiced as in the traditional reading classes through the three stages of
pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. In the pre-reading stage, the teacher activated their
background knowledge by some elicitation questions about the topic of the text; in the reading stage, the students were asked to either read the text individually or read it in groups and then in the post-reading stage they were required to find the answer for some true-false or multiple-choice comprehension questions.

After ten weeks, the experimental and control groups took the reading comprehension post-test in order to determine the effect of text awareness raising on the students’ reading comprehension ability.

3.4. Design
A pre-test-post-test-control group design as one of the quasi-experimental designs was employed in this study. The independent variable was text structure awareness raising and the dependent variable was reading comprehension.

3.5. Data analysis
The pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups were entered into the SPSS 22 to do the necessary analysis. Preliminary assumptions checking were conducted and no violation of the assumptions was observed. In order to compare the groups’ performances before and after the treatment, a set of independent-samples t-test was carried out and the alpha level for testing the significance of the mean difference was set at .05.

4. Results
The purpose of the study was to look into the effect of textual awareness raising on Iranian upper-intermediate students’ improvement of reading comprehension. Hence, quantitative measures were conducted both descriptively and inferentially as follows.

Descriptive statistics (Table 1) were conducted to compare the experimental and control groups’ performance on the pre- and post-test.

Descriptive statistics of the data for the pre-test shows that the students’ mean score in the experimental group (M = 9.71, SD = 1.58) was not too much different in comparison with the students in the control group (M = 10.11, SD = 1.71), revealing that the groups were different, but to a little extent.

As to the post-test, descriptive statistics showed a mean difference of about 3.34 concerning the experimental group’s (M = 13.74, SD = 1.70) reading comprehension ability in comparison with the control group (M = 10.40, SD = 2.09), which denotes the outperformance of the experimental group compared to the control group. After descriptive interpretation of the data, inferential analysis of the students’ pre- and post-tests are provided in the following section.

Test of normal distribution (see Table 2) was initially conducted to see if the scores of the students in both groups were distributed normally.

As Table 2 demonstrates, all p-values for the pre-tests and post-tests of the experimental and control groups are more than the set alpha-level (.05), which indicated the normal distribution of

| Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the pre- and post-test |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Groups | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------|-----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| Pre-test | Experimental | 30 | 9.71 | 1.58 | .27 |
|        | Control     | 30 | 10.11 | 1.71 | .29 |
| Post-test | Experimental | 30 | 13.74 | 1.70 | .29 |
|         | Control     | 30 | 10.40 | 2.09 | .35 |
the data. This legitimized running the parametric test of independent-samples t-test to inferentially compare the groups’ mean scores on the pre-test and post-test (Table 3).

The results in Table 3 indicates a nonsignificant mean difference between the groups’ pre-test scores when equal variances assumed, t (58) = 1.02, p = .31 > .05. This reflects the equality of both groups before the treatment. In contrast, a significant mean difference, t (58) = 7.34, p = .000 < .05, is shown for the post-test scores of the experimental (M = 13.74, SD = 1.70) and control (M = 10.40, SD = 2.09) groups when the equal variances is assumed, implying the outperformance of the experimental group after the treatment period. In this regard, the research question is answered positively and it can be concluded that textual awareness raising could pave the way for the students to improve their reading comprehension.

5. Discussion and conclusion
The present study was an attempt to quantitatively find the impact of textual awareness raising on the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL students’ reading comprehension ability. Based on the pre- and post-test scores of the students in the experimental and control groups, it was revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group after the treatment (i.e., teaching text structures and raising the students’ textual awareness), indicating that the instruction was quite successful in improving the students’ reading comprehension ability. Hence, the study, to a large extent, proved that raising the students’ awareness of text structure can be productive to improve the students’ reading comprehension ability by increasing their familiarity with syntactic and semantic properties of the text (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). It should be noted that, up to the present, there seems to be very few research studies done to highlight the impact of text awareness raising of the students concerning different expository texts to improve the students’ reading comprehension ability, particularly in the foreign language context such as Iran. In this respect, findings of the study are in line with the research done by Grabe and Stoller (2001) and Grabe (2009) who highlighted the role of text structure awareness by providing sufficient instruction for the students to arm them with conscious understanding of the syntactic and linguistics as well as cognitive aspects of the text. Findings can also find empirical support to those of Akhondi et al. (2011) and Pressley and Block (2002) who strongly recommended the artistic application of teaching text structure to increase the students’ gain in reading comprehension by enhancing their awareness of the text. In this regard, different kinds of strategies were proposed by different researchers that can be used in the classroom; For example, discussing about text structure (Piyanukool, 2001), semantic mapping, outline grids, tree diagrams (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2012; Vacca, 2002); focusing on signal words such as transitional words, frame markers, endophoric markers, code glosses (Zarrati et al., 2014), identifying main ideas and summarizing (Aghasafari & Azizmalayeri, 2015), drawing graphic organizers (Jiang & Grabe, 2007; Newman, 2007; Rabani et al., 2015; Tong, 1992), underlining signal words (Schwartz et al., 2017). In the same vein, in the present study, the researchers familiarized the students with different kinds of strategies including highlighting the signal words and phrases, drawing graphic organizers, distinguishing different parts of text, underlining topic sentence, main ideas, and supporting sentences. They helped the students be aware of the structure of different kinds of expository texts and comprehend them better.

| Groups    | Statistic | df | Sig. | Statistic | df | Sig. |
|-----------|-----------|----|------|-----------|----|------|
| Experimental |          |    |      |           |    |      |
| Pre-test  | .130      | 30 | .137 | .952      | 30 | .143 |
| Post-test | .132      | 30 | .131 | .943      | 30 | .214 |
| Control   |           |    |      |           |    |      |
| Pre-test  | .128      | 30 | .133 | .949      | 30 | .086 |
| Post-test | .127      | 30 | .134 | .950      | 30 | .125 |

* Lilliefors Significance Correction.
### Table 3. Results of independent Samples T-test for the pre- and post-tests

|                  | 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 |
| Pre-Test         |      |      |       |    |               |                 |                          |       |       |
| Equal variances assumed | .224 | .64  | -1.02 | 58 | .31           | -40             | .39                       | -1.19 | .39   |
| Equal variances not assumed | .224 | .64  | -1.02 | 58 | .31           | -40             | .39                       | -1.19 | .39   |
| Post-Test        |      |      |       |    |               |                 |                          |       |       |
| Equal variances assumed | 2.04 | .16  | 7.34  | 58 | .000          | 3.34            | .46                       | 2.43  | 4.25  |
| Equal variances not assumed | 2.04 | .16  | 7.34  | 58 | .000          | 3.34            | .46                       | 2.43  | 4.25  |
Findings of the study provided sufficient evidence regarding raising the students’ awareness of text structure and denting that both teachers and students are the beneficiaries of such an instruction in which teachers’ role is of great significance (Amoli & Karbalaei, 2011). In fact, if teachers are thoroughly aware of text structure awareness raising as a strategy to foster students’ reading comprehension ability, students will have the opportunity to consciously try to do the reading tasks, resulting in their success in reading comprehension (Vahidi, 2008). Moreover, since university students are involved in reading comprehension courses during their semesters, as argued by Zarrati et al. (2014) and Aghasafari and Azizmalayeri (2015), they need to be armed with textual awareness raising in order to smoothly parse the reading comprehension texts. In this aspect, Schwartz et al. (2017) and Williams (2018) suggested that teachers can take advantage of teaching text structure and using it as an effective strategy in paving the way for EFL/ESL learners to perform better in a reading class by directing their attention toward signal words within expository texts.

Concerning the theoretical contributions of the study, textual awareness raising can be well justified by the theory of metacognition to enhance the learners’ understanding by activating their background knowledge and involving them in a more interactive reading classroom since comprehension stands at the top of the main objectives of the instruction (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). In fact, when learners’ metacognition is increased by the instruction of text structure awareness raising, they are provided with sufficient opportunities to cooperate with their peers as well as the teacher to appropriately improve their knowledge of reading comprehension (Flavell, 1981).

As the current research highlights the foreign language context in Iran, findings are in agreement with research studies done by Vahidi (2008), Akhondi et al. (2011), Amoli and Karbalaei (2011), Zarrati et al. (2014), and Aghasafari and Azizmalayeri (2015) who verified the effectiveness of arming the learners with textual instruction of expository texts in order to get mastery over the reading tasks. They also highlighted that learners of different contexts such as universities or language institutes can benefit from the instruction although their level of proficiency can, to some extent, be effective in quality instruction. In this case, the explicit teaching of some structural cues such as signal words can help the students comprehend the text so that they first attentively read the text and then when the knowledge of text structure is built in their minds they can follow these strategies while reading other kinds of texts.

This study used different types of expository texts to teach their structures to the EFL upper-intermediate students and raise their awareness in this regard. Similar research can be done on argumentative texts to compare its results with the results of this study. Moreover, there is room to conduct studies on one text type (e.g. argumentative, narrative, expository) when it is linguistically complex and compare it with the text that is linguistically simple or compare the effect of text structure awareness raising when the text is cognitively complex with the text that is cognitively simple.

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