



## Texts with Various Levels of Hardness, Reading Comprehension and Reading Motivation

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### Abstract

Considering the vital role of comprehensible input, this study attempted to compare the effects of input with various difficulty levels on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension and reading motivation. To fulfil this objective, 54 Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners were selected from two intact classes ( $n = 27$  each). The selected participants were randomly assigned to two equal groups, namely "i+1" ( $n=27$ ) and "i-1" group ( $n=27$ ). Then, the groups were pretested by a researcher-made reading comprehension test. After carrying out the pre-test, the treatment (i.e., extensive reading at different levels of difficulty) was practiced on the both groups. The participants in "i+1" group received reading passages beyond the current level, on the other hand, the "i-1" group received those reading passages which were below their current level. After the instruction ended, a modified version of pre-test was conducted as posttest to determine the impacts of the treatment on the students' reading comprehension. The obtained results indicated that there was a significant difference between the post-tests of "i+1" and "i-1" groups. The findings showed that the "i+1" group significantly outperformed the "i-1" group ( $p < .05$ ) on the post-test. Moreover, the findings indicated that "i+1" group's motivation increased after the treatment. The implications of the study suggest that interactive type of input is beneficial to develop students' language skills.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus of agreement among the researchers that input is vital for language learning to come about but they may not have analogous opinions about the way it is utilized by learners (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Input may be operationally described as “oral and/or written corpus of target language to which second language (L2) learners are subjected via different sources, and is perceived by them as language input” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 26). According to Ellis (2012), input-based instruction “includes the utilization of the input that learners are presented to or are needed to process” (p. 285). In this procedure, through presentation to language input, if students discover the way language works or the way language is rehearsed in workplace, or handicraft target condition, learning will be occurred (Basturkmen, 2006). Thus, it can be deduced that input is of fundamental significance for language learning abilities particularly reading.

Reading is seen as “an essential expertise for EFL learners to enhance their language ability” (Chiang, 2015, p. 11). Reading is characterized as “a fluent process of readers joining information from a text and their own background knowledge to fabricate meaning” (Nunan, 2003, p. 68). It gives chances to foreign language learners to be presented to English in circumstances that language input is entirely restricted (Lao & Krashen, 2000; Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, & Ahmadi, 2019; Wu, 2012).

In recent years, extensive reading (ER) has gained particular consideration as an impressive and undertaking way of expanding foreign language skills (Yamashita, 2013). ER aims “to progress good reading habits to form knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and to encourage a liking for reading” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 194). The major purpose in ER is to reach at a general understanding of what is read (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). ER is for general comprehending in which “the minimum 95% comprehension figure” (Meng, 2009, p. 134) is admissible and the reading velocity is below 100 to 150 words per minute (Mikeladze, 2014). Truly, some studies (e.g., Bell, 2001; Chiang, 2015; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Iwahori, 2008; Leung, 2002; Namaziandost & Ahmadi, 2019; Tanaka, 2007) have presented that ER significantly enhanced foreign language reading comprehension and general proficiency.

One of the best bountiful sources for providing language input for EFL learners is through extensive reading (ER) (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1982; Nasri, Biria, & Karimi, 2018). As indicated by Krashen (1982), the input to which learners are presented ought to be a little above their current level of competence, ‘i + 1,’ in which ‘i’ alludes to the present language capacity of learner, though ‘1’ alludes to the input that is somewhat above the learners’ present language ability. On the other hand, Day and Bamford (1998) suggested a diverse model on the hardness level of the input. Based on this hypothesis, “ER is efficacious if it furnishes students with input which is marginally beneath their current level of competence (i.e., ‘i-1’)” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 36). This way language learners can swiftly develop their reading certainty, reading fluency and construct sight words and high-frequency words.

However, a glance to the prior literature divulges that there are rare studies on the impacts of these two viewpoints (i.e., ‘i + 1’ and ‘i - 1’) on EFL learners’ reading comprehension and reading motivation. To cover the extant gap, the current study tried to focus on this theme by inspecting how Krashen’s input hypothesis through ‘i + 1’ and ‘i - 1’ materials may impress EFL students’ reading comprehension and reading motivation.

Reading comprehension has been defined by researchers as “a critical part of the multifarious interplay of mechanisms involved in L2 reading” (Brantmeier, 2005, p. 52). For many students, reading is presumed as the beneficial dexterity that they can utilize inside and outside the classroom. It is additionally the skill that can preserve the lengthy time. According to Allen and Valette (1999), “reading is not only allotting foreign language sounds to the written words, but also the comprehension of what is written” (p.

249). Miller (2008) characterized "Reading comprehension as the ability to comprehend or to get meaning from any kind of written materials" (p. 8).

Furthermore, Papalia (2004) believed that reading comprehension in prevalent utilization and more particularly in referral to training and psychology has approximately identical meaning as comprehending the message of the text. Grellet (1981) guaranteed that "reading comprehension is getting written text means extricating the needed information from it as effectively as feasible" (p. 3). Grellet additionally believed that "reading comprehension is not sufficient to comprehend the epitome of the text but further voluminous information is indispensable too" (p. 13).

Wood (2005) confirmed reading included understanding meaning from the written words. Janzen (1996) declared that "reading comprehension as the capacity to learn lexical data (i.e., semantic data at the word level and infer sentences and discourse elucidations but reading on graphic regarding development touching through the eye" (p. 8). Webster's Collegiate Dictionary considered reading comprehension as "the valence of mind to see and comprehend the meaning imparted by the content."

Regarding the mentioned points, reading widely is an individual movement which depends on the students' fondness (Nasri & Biria, 2017; Nation, 1997). Extensive reading (ER) boosts reader's reading aptitudes and it is shortsighted to urge EFL students to peruse better through ER which is enchanting to them (Azadi, Biria, & Nasri, 2018; Nuttal, 2000). The principle objective of an Extensive reading plan is to give a circumstance to students to appreciate reading a foreign language and new real messages quietly at their own velocity and with satisfactory comprehension (Day & Bamford, 1998). "ER is bolstered by Krashen's (1982, 1994) input hypothesis, affective filter hypothesis, and delight hypothesis" (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017, p. 6).

Reading extensively is an individual activity which is based on the learners' interest (Nation, 1997). ER enhances reader's reading skills and it is easy to teach EFL learners to read better through ER which is enjoyable to them (Hosseini, Nasri, & Afghari, 2017; Namaziandost, Nasri, & Rahimi Esfahani, 2019; Nuttal, 2000). The fundamental objective of an ER program is to provide a situation for learners to enjoy reading a foreign language and unfamiliar authentic texts silently at their own pace and with sufficient understanding (Day & Bamford, 1998). ER is supported by Krashen's (1982, 1994) input hypothesis, affective filter hypothesis, and pleasure hypothesis.

According to Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, adequate exposure to comprehensible input is essential for language learners to learn the language. According to this hypothesis, the input to which learners are exposed should be a little beyond their current level of language competence, i.e., 'i+ 1.' Based on this hypothesis, when learners frequently and repeatedly meet and concentrate on a large number of messages (input) which is a little beyond their level of competence, they gradually acquire the forms. Furthermore, based on Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1982), language acquisition occurs in low-anxiety situations. Foreign language learners with a low affective filter (e.g., anxiety) will attain the language acquisition or comprehension more easily (Huang, 2001; Namaziandost, Abedi, & Nasri, 2019). In the same vein, Krashen (1994) proposed the pleasure hypothesis, arguing that the pleasurable activities are effective and facilitating for language and literacy development. Based on this hypothesis, ER provides a low-anxiety situation for learners to learn a foreign language. Krashen's hypotheses have encouraged different universities and institutions to do research in ER and utilize ER programs in foreign language teaching (Chiang, 2015).

The Input Hypothesis directs the question of how we get language. This speculation expresses that we obtain (not learn) language by comprehending input that is a little past our current level of procured capability (Krashen & Terrell 1983; Namaziandost, Rahimi Esfahani, Nasri, & Mirshekaran, 2018). This has been lately declared perspicuously by Krashen (2003a): "we procure language in just one way: when

we comprehend messages; that is, when we acquire “comprehensible input” (p. 4). This potent allegation is rehashed in different spots where Krashen expresses that ‘comprehending inputs is the main way language is obtained’ and that ‘there is no individual variety in the key procedure of language procurement’ (Krashen 2003a, p. 4). Consequently, Krashen frequently utilizes the term ‘comprehension hypothesis’ (2003a) to allude to the Input Hypothesis, contending that ‘perception’ is a superior depiction as only input is not sufficient; it must be comprehended.

Thus, based on Krashen’s (1982) input hypothesis, adequate presentation to understandable input is essential for language students to learn language. In light of this speculation, the input to which students are uncovered ought to be a little past their current level of language ability, i.e., ‘i + 1’. Considering Krashen’s perspective, when learners constantly and repeatedly confront and concentrate on an expansive quantity of input which is a little higher than their level of capability, they inchmeal obtain the structures. Krashen’s input hypotheses have motivated different universities and institutions to accomplish researches and studies in ER and utilize ER programs in teaching TEFL (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Chiang, 2015; Hashemifardnia, Namaziandost, & Sepehri, 2018).

Day and Bamford (1998), in particular, suggested a modern scheme which is diverse from Krashen’s (1982) input hypothesis. Based on this scheme, “ER is advantageous if it furnishes the students with input which is somewhat beneath their current level of competence (i.e., ‘i-1’)” (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, “‘i-1’ creates a condition for automaticity educating and extending a huge sight vocabulary rather than learning new target structures” (Mikeladze, 2014, p. 5). Truth to be told, ‘i-1’ is considered as the learners’ tranquility zone where they can rapidly construct their reading certainty and reading fluency (Chiang, 2015; Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019).

All of researchers and teachers accepted that motivation is a basic factor to enhance reading comprehension. As indicated by Dornyei (2001), the meaning of motivation is very intricate and obscurant because it is made out of various models and hypotheses. As discussed by Protacio (2012), “reading problems occur partly due to the fact that people are not motivated to read in the first place” (p. 11). Moley Bandré, and George (2011) explain that, motivation happens when “students develop an interest in and form a bond with a topic that lasts beyond the short term” (p. 251). Furthermore, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000, p.405) propound that “reading motivation is the individual’s personal objectives, values, and beliefs regarding the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading”. Considering this delineation, one would come to two principle consequences: The first is that reading motivation refers to putting together of various dimensions of motivation in an intricate route. The second is the type of agency people have over it since they can manipulate, unify and divert their motivation to read in terms of their credence, worthiness and objectives (Wigfield & Tonks, 2004). “Not only does reading motivation relate to reading comprehension, but it also relates to both the amount of reading and students’ reading achievement” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2005, p. 76). Guthrie et al. (2006, p.232) elucidate that “reading motivation correlates with students’ amount of reading”. For this purpose, Guthrie and Wigfield (2005) emphasize the perspective that “reading motivation is domain-specific as it belongs to a status that necessitates an emotional reaction particular to a reading material, and that would metamorphose based on the diversity of activities inaugurating it” (p.89).

Pachtman and Wilson (2006) expressed that it is crucial to propel students to read by giving them chances to choose their interest materials. In other words, readers need to read more when they are allowed to choose their reading materials since they should find out that reading is a pleasurable action. As indicated by Hairul, Ahmadi, and Pourhosein (2012), reading motivation is the substantial measure of motivation that learners need to focus their positive or negative feelings about reading. For example, students who read for joy and utilizing ways to help their understanding are amazingly roused readers.

Students of this sort regularly view reading as a vital factor in their daily exercises, acknowledge difficulties in the reading procedure and are probably going to be effective readers.

Hairul, Ahmadi, and Pourhosein (2012) believed that reading motivation greatly affects reading appreciation. The researchers proceeded with that reading motivation impacts all parts of motivation and reading appreciation procedures in various conditions. They additionally accentuated that learners' inspiration totally influences their understanding; it implies that learners with more stronger reading inspiration can be relied upon to read more in more extensive territory. As indicated by Hairul, Ahmadi, and Pourhosein (2012), a standout amongst the most essential components which help students read more is reading inspiration and it importantly affects reading perception. In this manner, numerous researchers have been very much aware of the noteworthiness of inspiration in the objective language learning and how inspiration expands appreciation among language students.

Prior researches have checked the impacts of ER on EFL reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Bell (2001) carried out a two-semester study on young adult students at the elementary level in Yemen to compare the impacts of ER and intensive reading on reading speed and reading comprehension. This study was run over two semesters. The researcher divided students into two groups: an experimental group (n = 14) and a control group (n = 12). The experimental group received an ER program and read graded readers; these students had access to 2000 graded readers in the British Council library. On the other hand, the control group received the intensive reading program, read short passages and filled the tasks. The researcher measured students' reading speed by utilizing two reading tests, and for measuring their reading comprehension he utilized three various texts with three types of questions (cloze, multiple-choice, and true-false). The two groups enhanced both in speed and reading comprehension, but the ER program based on graded readers was much more effective to the enhancement of reading speed than the intensive reading program. The outcomes of the reading comprehension test also indicated that the learners in the extensive group got higher scores than students in the intensive group.

Chiang (2015) researched the impacts of different text difficulty on L2 reading perceptions and reading comprehension. To give the ideal test to L2 reading, comprehensible input hypothesis hypothesizes that selecting text somewhat more difficult than the student's present level will improve reading perception. Fifty-four freshman from one college in central Taiwan were arbitrarily separated into two groups. Level 3 and level 4 Oxford Graded Readers were given to the learners in the 'i -1' group while students in the 'i + 1' group were equipped with level 5 and level 6. Quantitative data were collected through the English Placement Test and the Reading Attitudes Survey. Findings from the pretest and posttest of the Reading Attitudes Survey propose that the i-1 group has achieved significantly in reading attitudes, while no difference in reading attitude was recognized with the i + 1 group. The outcomes additionally indicated that diverse hardness levels of reading text did not significantly influence participants' reading comprehension.

Bayat and Pomplun (2016) aimed to indicate how several eye-tracking features within reading are influenced by different primary agents, as individual discrepancies, the hardness level of the text, and the topic of the text. To this end, they directed an eye-following experiment with 21 participants who read six sections with various points. For each topic, metamorphosis in three factors were assessed: the mediocre obsession term, the student estimate, and the normal rapidity of reading. The Flesch reading ease score was utilized as a measurement for the hardness level of the content. Examination of difference is utilized as a part of request to break down determinant factors related with content attributes, containing the difficulty level and the point of the content. The findings showed that during the reading of entries with comparable difficulty levels, the point of the content has no noteworthy impact on mediocre obsession

span and mediocre understudy estimate, though a critical effect overall speed of reading is watched. Additionally, individual properties have a primary effect on eye-movement demeanor.

Ahmadi (2017) attempted to consider the effect of reading motivation on reading comprehension. In his paper, he explained the terms reading motivation, different types of motivation, reading comprehension, and different models of reading comprehension. The review of this study showed that reading motivation had a considerably positive effect on reading comprehension activities.

Recently, Bahmani and Farvardin (2017) examined the impacts of various text difficulty levels on foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) and reading comprehension of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. To fulfil this objective, 50 elementary EFL learners were chosen from two intact classes ( $n = 25$  each). One class was considered as ' $i + 1$ ' and another as ' $i - 1$ '. The participants in each class practiced extensive reading at diverse levels of difficulty for two semesters. A reading comprehension test and the FLRA Scale were administered before and after the treatment. The outcomes indicated that both text difficulty levels significantly enhanced the participants' reading comprehension. Moreover, the results revealed that, the ' $i + 1$ ' group's FLRA augmented, while that of the ' $i - 1$ ' group diminished.

However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, rare studies, if any, have been carried out on the impacts of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (i.e., ' $i + 1$ ' and ' $i - 1$ ') on EFL learners' reading comprehension and reading motivation. To reach the purposes of the study, this study attempted to response the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Are there any significant differences between and within the ' $i + 1$ ' and the ' $i - 1$ ' groups' reading comprehension after implementing the treatment? If so, which group has higher reading comprehension in English?

**RQ2:** Are there any significant differences between and within the ' $i + 1$ ' and the ' $i - 1$ ' groups' reading motivation after implementing the treatment? If so, which group has higher motivation towards reading in English?

## METHODS

### Design

a quasi-experimental approach was utilized in this study gather data from 54 EFL learners to check the potentially various impacts of using ' $i + 1$ ' versus ' $i - 1$ ' readers on reading motivation and reading comprehension. To this end, the reading motivation and reading comprehension of the participants were quantitatively measured prior to and after the intervention of ER through the Foreign Language Reading Motivation and the FCE (First Certificate in English).

### Participants

Fifty-four EFL learners (25 males and 29 females) from a private language institute in Ahvaz, Iran, took part in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 21. American Headway 1 (Soars & Soars, 2010) was the textbook taught to the participants. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) classification, American Headway 2 is appropriate for the B1 level. To ensure the participants' proficiency level, CEFR Headway placement test (2012) was performed to all participants, and their score ranged between 66 and 74, which is equal to B1 level. The participants were chosen from two intact classes. Each class was assigned to a group (i.e., ' $i + 1$ ' or ' $i - 1$ '). The ' $i + 1$ ' group ( $n = 27$ ) read graded readers stories which were beyond their level of proficiency, whereas the ' $i - 1$ ' group ( $n = 27$ ) read graded readers stories which were below their level of proficiency. The participants read graded readers

along with their classroom materials. Per week, 35 minutes of class time was devoted to the participants' narration of the novels they had already read.

### Instruments

#### *CEFR Headway Placement Test*

CEFR Headway placement test is designed to provide a useful tool to estimate the participants' level at which they should begin or continue their English language studies (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017). This test was selected because the participants were studying American Headway. Moreover, the American Headway book, CEFR Headway placement test (2012) and Oxford Bookworm Series (the graded readers in this study) were classified based on CEFR. It could be a big help to determine the probable 'i' of participants (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017). CEFR Headway placement test (2012) comprised of 100 multiple-choice items with three sections, including 50 vocabulary, 25 grammar and 25 reading comprehension items. The findings were compared with the band score of CEFR Headway placement test (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Band score of CEFR Headway placement test

Test result	CEFR level
0-40	A1- low
41-48	A1- high
49-56	A2- low
57-65	A2- high
66-74	B1- low
75-83	B1-low-medium
84-92	B1- medium-high
93-100	B1- high

#### *Graded Readers*

The reading materials in this study were the Oxford Bookworms Series published by Oxford University Press. The Oxford Bookworms Series classifies books into seven levels. Table 2 indicates the word counts and CEFR levels in the Oxford Bookworms series.

**Table 2** Word counts and CEFR levels in the Oxford Bookworms Series

Book levels	Word counts	CEFR levels
Starter	250	A1
Level 1	400	A1/A2
Level 2	700	A2/B1
Level 3	1,000	B1
Level 4	1,400	B1/B2
Level 5	1,800	B2
Level 6	2,500	B2/C1

To make sure what level is appropriate, nine EFL learners at the pre-intermediate level and four EFL teachers were asked to read the Oxford Bookworms Series at various levels. After studying the books, all teachers agreed that for the pre-intermediate level learners, Starter, Level, and Level 2 were really easy,

and Levels 4, 5 and 6 were both grammatically and lexically difficult. According to the teachers, Level 3 was considered suitable for the pre-intermediate level. The learners also reported that Level 3 was comprehensible for them. Level 3 equals to levels B1 in CEFR. Therefore, Level 3 was determined as the appropriate level for the participants. Accordingly, the 'i - 1' group was proposed to read Levels 1 and 2 and the 'i + 1' group was suggested to read Levels 4 and 5. The participants were required to read two books at each level throughout the study.

#### *Reading comprehension test*

The reading comprehension part of the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE, 2008) was used to measure the participants' reading comprehension ability. This part comprised of three reading passages which include both macro and micro questions, such as the expression of opinion, attitude, purpose, main idea, detail, tone and gist. The reading section of the FCE includes 30 items that should be replied in 30 minutes. This study utilized two equivalent versions of the FCE, one as a pretest and the other as a posttest. A Pearson correlation coefficient between the two equivalent forms of the FCE was calculated as 0.936 which indicated a high reliability between the two versions of the test.

#### *The Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ)*

Another instrument utilized in the present study was a modified sample of *Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ)*. MRQ was expanded by Dr. Allan Wigfield and Dr. John Guthrie from University of Maryland in 1997. Wigfield and Guthrie utilized the MRQ on a group of students at one mid-Atlantic state school during implementation of Concept-Oriented Reading teaching. Factor analyses carried out by Wigfield and Guthrie affirmed the essence of construct validity which backups eleven factors for the total 53 -item in this MRQ. There was an affirmative relevance of maximum segments of reading motivation with low - to high levels. They additionally asserted that their questionnaire has a reliability range from .43 to .81. In this research, the researchers had selected 30 items of the entire 53 items in the questionnaire because solely eight aspects of total eleven aspects of reading motivation were identified to measure. They are: reading efficacy, reading challenge, reading curiosity, reading involvement, importance of reading, reading word avoidance, social reasons for reading, and reading for grades. MRQ was a five-point Likert scale questionnaire made up of five options: 1 for 'I strongly agree', 2 for 'I agree', 3 for 'I don't know', 4 for 'I disagree', and 5 for 'I strongly disagree'. The MRQ was given to participants twice, one before the treatment and once after the treatment.

#### **Data Collection Procedure**

Fifty-four pre-intermediate EFL learners were participated in this study. In the first week, the CEFR Headway placement test was performed to specify the participants' proficiency levels. This test additionally helped the researchers determine the probable participants' 'i.' In the second week, the MRQ and the reading comprehension test were carried out in 80 minutes. Based on the outcomes of the CEFR Headway placement test (2012), the 'i + 1' group were assigned to read graded readers at Levels 4 and 5, and the 'i - 1' group were assigned to read Level 1 and Level 2 graded stories. There was a small library and bookstore in the language institute to provide the participants with the graded readers. It was also proposed that if they would not find the book of their interest, they could find them from other libraries and bookstores outside.

The number of pages the participants required to read was specified at the outset of each week. At the end of each week, 20 minutes of the class was allocated for their reports. The participants were given



time to talk about various parts and the characters of the novels, their ideas about the end of the novels, and even provided some comments regarding the novels. In the first semester, the 'i + 1' group read two graded readers at Level 4 which were one level beyond their 'i', and in the second semester, they read two graded readers at Level 5. On the other hand, in the first semester, the 'i - 1' group read two graded readers at the Level 1 which was two levels below their 'i' and in the second semester, they read two graded readers at Level 2 which was one level below their 'i.' Finally, after a three-month involvement in this study, the findings of these two various ways were compared with each other. In the last week of, the participants received an immediate posttest. They responded the MRQ and an equivalent version of the reading comprehension test in one session. The procedure was like the pretest.

### Data Analysis

Collected data through the aforesaid procedures were analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software version 25. Firstly, Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was run to check the normality of the data. Then, two independent samples t-tests were done to figure out if there was any significant difference between the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups in terms of reading comprehension and MRQ. At the end, two 2 x 2 mixed analysis of variance (ANOVAs) were run to discover significant interaction impacts between time and group from the reading comprehension test and the MRQ. Furthermore, independent samples t-tests were run to test the simple main impacts of group on the pretests and the posttests. Paired samples t-tests were also done to further follow up on the simple main impacts of time on MRQ and reading comprehension for both groups. To indicate the practical significance, for all of the t-tests, effect sizes (Cohen's ds) were computed.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The previous section included a delineation of the methodology which was utilized to respond the research questions of this study, which are rewritten here for reasons of convenience: (a) Are there any significant differences between and within the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups' reading comprehension after implementing the treatment? If so, which group has higher reading comprehension in English? and (b) Are there any significant differences between and within the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups' reading motivation after implementing the treatment? If so, which group has higher motivation towards reading in English?

### Results of Normality Tests

Before conducting any analyses on the pretest and posttest, it was indispensable to peruse the normality of the distributions. Thus, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was run on the data acquired from the above-mentioned tests. The consequences are presented in Table 1:

Table 3. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (Groups' Pretests, Post-tests, and MRQ)

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
i+1 pretest	.165	27	.058
i+1 posttest	.192	27	.298
i-1 pretest	.215	27	.098
i-1 posttest	.223	27	.092
i+1 MRQ (Before Treatment)	.186	27	.187
i+1 MRQ (After Treatment)	.220	27	.086

i-1 MRQ (Before Treatment)	.218	27	.772
i-1 MRQ (After Treatment)	.173	27	.183

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The *p* values under the *Sig.* column in Table 3 determine whether the distributions were normal or not. A *p* value greater than .05 shows a normal distribution, while a *p* value lower than .05 demonstrates that the distribution has not been normal. Since all the *p* values in Table 1 were larger than .05, it could be concluded that the distributions of scores for the pretest, posttest, and MRQ obtained from both groups had been normal. It is thus safe to proceed with parametric test (i.e. Independent and Paired samples *t*-tests and mixed-ANOVA in this case) and make further comparisons between the participating groups. Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations of the participants' scores on the reading comprehension tests and the MR questionnaire before and after the study.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the 'i - 1' and 'i + 1' groups' responses to reading comprehension test and MRQ

Groups	N	Pretest				Posttest			
		Reading Comprehension		MRQ		Reading Comprehension		MRQ	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>i+1</b>	27	9.37	1.66	52.96	4.72	13.07	2.05	58.11	5.83
<b>i-1</b>	27	9.22	1.05	51.07	6.89	11.48	.096	50.37	3.66

To answer the first research question, one mixed 2 x 2 ANOVA with two main factors, time (i.e., reading comprehension pretest and posttest) and group (i.e., 'i + 1' and 'i - 1') was run to examine whether there were significant interaction effects between difficulty levels. Furthermore, independent samples *t*-tests were run to check the simple main impact of group on the reading comprehension pretest and the posttest, respectively. Finally, paired samples *t*-tests were done to investigate the simple main impact of time for each group. Tables 5 and 6 shows the results of the mixed ANOVA on the reading comprehension tests.

Table 5. Results of mixed-ANOVA on reading comprehension pretest and posttest with time and group factors

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
time	240.009	1	240.009	107.445	.000	.674
time * Groups	14.083	1	14.083	6.305	.015	.108
Error(time)	116.157	52	2.234			
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared

Intercept	12566.898	1	12566.898	5496.122	.000	.991
Groups	20.454	1	20.454	8.945	.004	.147
Error	118.898	52	2.287			

The results indicated that the main impact of the text difficulty level was not significant [ $F(1, 52) = 8.945$ ,  $p = .004$ , partial eta squared = .147], proposing a significant difference in the reading comprehension scores of the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups. Moreover, there was a significant interaction between difficulty level and time [ $F(1, 52) = 6.305$ ,  $p = .015$ , partial eta squared = .108], suggesting that over the course of two semesters, the changes in scores from the reading comprehension differed significantly between the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups. There was also significant main impact of time [ $F(1, 52) = 6.305$ ,  $p = .000$ , partial eta squared = .674], suggesting a substantial difference in the reading comprehension scores across two periods. Next to a mixed ANOVA, two independent samples t-tests were run as follow-up tests to check the simple major impact of group on the pretest and the posttest, respectively (Table 6).

Table 6. Independent samples t-tests on reading comprehension pretest and posttest scores

	Mean difference	Std. error difference	T	Df	P	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Pretest	.14815	.37924	.391	52	.698	0.106358
posttest	1.59259	.43705	3.644	52	.001	0.991757

As Table 6 illustrates, the findings indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups on the pretest ( $t = .391$ ,  $p = .698$ ,  $d = 0.106358$ ), showing that both the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups were at a similar baseline prior to the experiment. Moreover, the outcomes show a significant difference between the two groups in their posttests ( $t = 3.644$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.991757$ ) after the intervention. Furthermore, paired-samples t-tests were run as follow-up tests to check the simple main impact of time for each group (Table 7).

Table 7. Paired samples t-tests of both groups (reading comprehension pretest and posttest)

	Mean differences	SD	SEM	t	df	p	Cohen's <i>d</i>
<b>i+1</b>	3.70370	2.64306	.50866	7.281	26	.000	1.978905
<b>i-1</b>	2.25926	1.39622	.26870	8.408	26	.000	2.239838

As illustrated in Table 7, the findings propose that both groups' reading comprehension was significantly progressed at the end of this study ( $t = 7.281$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d = 1.978905$  for the 'i + 1' group's reading comprehension;  $t = 8.408$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d = 2.239838$  for the 'i - 1' group's reading comprehension). That is, the reading comprehension of the 'i - 1' and the 'i + 1' groups significantly enhanced after the intervention of ER. Cohen (1988) expressed that the impact size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.2 is small; 0.5 is moderate; and 0.8 is high. Cohen's effect size values of the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups' paired samples t-tests are  $d = 1.978905$  and  $d = 2.239838$  for reading comprehension, respectively, proposing high practical significance. To response the second research question, first, a mixed ANOVA was run to assess the impact of two discriminatory text difficulty levels ('i + 1' vs. 'i - 1') on participants' scores from the MRQ before and after the treatment (Table 8).

Table 8 Results of mixed-ANOVA on MRQ before and after treatment with time and group factors

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
time	133.333	1	133.333	3.355	.073	.061
time * Groups	231.148	1	231.148	5.816	.019	.101
Error(time)	2066.519	52	39.741			
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	304857.815	1	304857.815	16089.782	.000	.997
Groups	625.926	1	625.926	33.035	.000	.388
Error	985.259	52	18.947			

As Table 8 indicated, there was significant interaction between difficulty level and time [ $F(1, 52) = 5.816, p = .019$ , partial eta squared = .101], suggesting that over the course of the treatment period, the changes in scores from the MRQ differed significantly between the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups. There was no significant main effect of time [ $F(1, 52) = 3.355, p = .073$ , partial eta squared = .061], proposing no substantial difference in the MRQ scores across the two periods. Moreover, the major impact of the text difficulty level was significant [ $F(1, 52) = 33.035, p = .000$ , partial eta squared = .388], suggesting a difference in the MRQ scores of the two text difficulty levels. After the mixed ANOVA, two independent samples t-tests were run to check the simple main impact of group on the pretest and the posttest, respectively (Table 9).

Table 9. Independent samples t-tests on MRQ before and after treatment

	Mean difference	Std. error difference	T	Df	P	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Pretest	1.88889	1.60963	1.173	52	.246	0.319386
posttest	7.74074	1.32528	5.841	52	.000	1.589669

As Table 9 shows, the findings indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups before the treatment ( $t = 1.173, p = .246, d = 0.319386$ ), suggesting that both the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups were at a similar baseline of MR prior to the experiment. The outcomes also show a significant difference between the two groups in their posttests ( $t = 5.841, p = .000, d = 1.589669$ ) after the treatment. In other words, the 'i + 1' group was found to have greater increases in their MRQ scores. Furthermore, Cohen's effect size value of the groups' independent t-tests on the posttest is  $d = 1.589669$  showing high practical significance. Paired-samples t-tests were also conducted as follow-up tests to check the simple main impact of time for each group (Table 10).

Table 10. Paired samples t-tests of both groups (MRQ before and after treatment)

	Mean differences	SD	SEM	t	df	p	Cohen's <i>d</i>
i+1	-5.14815	8.86525	1.70612	-3.017	26	.006	0.969698
i-1	.70370	8.96495	1.72531	.408	26	.687	0.127414

As illustrated in Table 10, the findings propose that the 'i + 1' groups' reading motivation was significantly progressed at the end of this study ( $t = -3.017$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = 0.969698$ ), whereas the 'i - 1' groups' FLRA was significantly decreased after the intervention ( $t = .408$ ,  $p = .687$ ,  $d = 0.127414$ ). Cohen's effect size values of the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' groups' paired samples t-tests are  $d = 0.969698$  and  $d = 0.127414$  for reading motivation, respectively) proposing high practical significance for the 'i + 1' group and moderate practical significance for the 'i - 1' group. In summary, the text difficulty significantly affected the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' participants' FLRA. The findings imply that the 'i + 1' group had greater increases in their MRQ scores.

In brief, the present study aimed to see whether using the *i+1* and *i-1* could improve the reading comprehension of EFL learners, and whether there was a difference between the learners' motivation in this regard or not. The outcomes of the study indicated that this *i+1* significantly improved reading comprehension of the learners in the experimental group; moreover, the motivation of the experimental group (*i+1*) was increased after the treatment. Consistent exposure to the input (i.e., graded readers) over the treatment period seemed to have had an important effect on improving participants' reading comprehension. It could be possible that consistent exposure to written input facilitated the participants' incidental vocabulary learning (Mikeladze, 2014; Waring & Takaki, 2003).

The obtained results may be due the significant role of inputs which the students had received before they produced the language. The comprehensible inputs which the students were subjected to before producing the language greatly helped the students to be able to read English more efficiently. It can be deduced that comprehension precedes the production.

Students of the experimental group had improvement on the post-test thanks to the treatment they had received. The researcher found that the classes were more challenging and the students were more involved in learning to understand the reading texts. The improvement of the students can be attributed to the 'i + 1' reading texts as Krashen (1982) states input which is somewhat above the present level of competence of the language learner can be conducive to learning. If *i* is the language learner's current level of competence in the foreign language, then *i+1* is the following prompt advance along the improvement continuum. Accordingly, if the objective is to help the language student advance in their task, it is basic to furnish the learner with comprehensible input [*i + 1*].

The researcher observed that the students were more motivated to read and understand the texts that were more difficult for them, they seemed curious to know the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases, consequently, they asked the researcher to provide the meaning of unknown words, phrases, and sentences, and this attempt led to their success in reading comprehension.

More significantly, based on the comparison made between two groups of varying text difficulty, the *i+1* group performed better in reading comprehension and gained better results at the end of the study. This finding is in line with Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis. According to Krashen (1982), it was expected to observe the development of reading comprehension only in the 'i + 1' group. For that reason, the similar development in the 'i - 1' group's reading comprehension seems skeptical. The results of statistical analysis accepted such an idea and showed that reading the 'i - 1' materials did not improve

participants' reading comprehension. This finding is in contrast with Chiang's (2015) research in which the 'i - 1' group's reading comprehension was developed. The results can be due to using 'i + 1' materials which provided a situation for participants to expand their reading comfort zone in which they had the opportunity to build up their reading confidence and develop a large sight vocabulary rather than learning new linguistic elements (Day & Bamford, 1998).

This study is supported by Bahmani and Farvardin (2017) who discovered the effectiveness of different text difficulty levels on FLRA and reading comprehension of EFL learners. The final findings uncovered that both text difficulty levels significantly enhanced the participants' reading comprehension. The outcomes additionally revealed that, the 'i+ 1' group's FLRA enhanced, while that of the 'i - 1' group lessened.

The results of this study also revealed that there was significant effect of time suggesting substantial difference in the reading comprehension scores across two periods. However, regarding the other previous studies, time might be less crucial in affecting participants' reading comprehension. Whether the time of intervention was two months (Mason & Krashen, 1997), five months (Tanaka, 2007) or even one year (Chiang, 2015), reading comprehension increased. It might be possible to identify more obvious differences in reading comprehension between the two groups if the duration of participation in ER could be extended.

To sum up, the positive effect of i+1 viewed in this study can be ascribed to the vital role of comprehensible language input providing learners with linguistic data that they are able to understand. In the field of SLA, there is a mimic metaphor about language input proposed by VanPatten (2003) "input is to language acquisition what gas is to a car". There is language input that is better than other input, just like there is high octane gas that is better than low-octane gas. The "better input" here is comprehensible and meaning bearing. The more comprehensible and meaning-bearing the input is, the more likely it will be turned into intake that learners are able to internalize into their cognitive systems.

In contrast to the common belief that easy materials may increase the motivation of EFL learners, this study proved that the more difficult materials could increase Iranian EFL learners' motivation towards reading English. It can be claimed that difficult materials have discovery nature, meaning that, students want to discover and understand new things. In addition, students may do not have much more motivation to learn easy and ordinary materials without rich content. These results are congruent with former study (Chiang, 2015; Tanaka, 2007). Constant offering to the input (i.e., i+1) over times appears to have had a significant impact on developing learners' reading comprehension.

## CONCLUSION

This study compared the effects of i+1 and i-1 materials on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension and reading motivation. The findings revealed that i+1 group outperformed the i-1 group. i+1 material increased reading comprehension and reading motivation of the participants. In addition, it can be concluded that the materials of EFL English textbooks should be one level higher than the current level of the students to motivate and challenge them. This study comes to the conclusion that the input hypothesis of Krashen (1982) "learners progress in their knowledge of the language when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level" is valid.

The other conclusion which can be drawn from this study is the importance of the EFL learners' motivation. The motivation of the students should be increased to learn English language more easily since motivation directs behavior toward particular goals, it will augment students' time on task and is additionally a momentous factor having effect on their learning and development.

Motivation boosts cognitive processing. Motivation specifies whether a student will pursue a task (even a difficult one) with enthusiasm or a lackluster attitude. So, it is important to recognize aspects that foster internal motivation in English language learning.

This study provides some implications for teachers who are interested in using ER in their classes. Teachers can take benefit of the 'i + 1' or the 'i - 1' in ER as a supplementary activity in English courses. This study suggests that ER is effective in improving EFL learners' reading comprehension, and helpful in enhancing vocabulary, grammar and reading speed regardless of the level of materials learners choose. This study indicates whether the learners choose easier or harder ER materials, they gain more or less similar results in reading comprehension. According to this study, choosing novels based on the participants' own interests can encourage them to eagerly participate in ER program. Ideally, teachers should consider the value of self-selected materials as a key to a successful implementation of ER.

There are, however, some limitations in the study. First, there were 54 participants in the current study. In order to gain more evidence about the influence of text difficulty on participants' FLRM and reading comprehension, more participants are recommended. Second, lack of random sampling was one of the limitations of the study. Random sampling will provide more concrete evidence for the effects of text difficulty on FLRM and reading comprehension. It is recommended to invite larger samples of learners in order to provide an opportunity for selecting them randomly. Third, future research can be replicated in ESL contexts. Fourth, in the current study, participants read four novels. Future research needs to provide a big stock of books and also ask participants to read more to maximize the effects of ER. Fifth, future research can focus on the effects of the 'i + 1' and the 'i - 1' hypotheses on other areas of language learning like grammar. Finally, time commitment is important for ER to be reasonably successful; this study lasted for three months which may not be enough for full benefits of ER. Future studies can gain better results if learners participate in ER program for a longer time.

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