The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners’ Gender and Reading Comprehension of Three Different Types of Text

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Abstract
The present study investigated the relationship between the reading comprehension of three types of text and the gender of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, several reading passages with the same length and readability were selected based on which a reading comprehension test was constructed on three different text types namely essay, history, and short story. After determining the validity and reliability of the reading comprehension test, it was administered to 62 male and female students who were at the same level of language proficiency based on their scores on the TOEFL Test. A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data, the results of which indicated that male and female EFL learners differ in their reading comprehension ability with females being better comprehenders of English passages. The results of a two-way ANOVA also showed that both males and females are better at comprehending essays followed by history and short story, i.e. different types of text are understood differently regardless of the gender of the subjects. The findings are interpreted to have direct implications for EFL teachers and instructors as well as syllabus designers and test developers.

Key Words: Gender, Reading comprehension, Text types, Iranian EFL learners

Introduction
English has now become the predominant language of international academic publications. This has been attested by the importance attached to publications in English language media and the need for language learners to read these published texts in different forms, such as research articles, abstracts, stories, recipes and the like (Huttner, 2008).

Both as a source of getting information and pleasure and also as a means of extending one’s knowledge of the target language, reading is one of the most important skills in any language programme. For the majority of students of English as a second or foreign language, reading is not only the primary means by which they become acquainted with the
The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners’ Gender…

cntent of the subject area they are studying but also the most important way they could develop their knowledge of the language itself. In spite of this crucial role of reading, many university students still have problems concerning reading and understanding of different types of texts. This seems true even if the learners possess a considerable amount of linguistic knowledge. Therefore, it can be suggested that there are some non-linguistic factors in the process of reading comprehension.

Two important factors that affect the process of reading and consequently the process of comprehension are the reader variable and the text variable. Considering the first variable, different studies have been conducted to investigate the way readers affect the processes of reading and comprehension. The strategies used by readers, their background knowledge, motivation, attitude, age, personality and sex all have been investigated (See, for example, Bugel & Buunk, 1996; Chavez, 2001; Brantmeier, 2003, 2004, 2007).

One of the important reader variables is gender. Gender marks a sociocultural distinction between men and women on the basis of traits and behaviour that are conventionally regarded as characteristics of and appropriate to the two groups of people. Feminist theorists and others have classically argued that gender is a social construction that is linked by society to each sex in a wholly arbitrary way and learned quite independently of the underlying biological information. In most psychological research, it is appropriate to talk of gender differences rather than sex differences, because the participants are categorized on the basis of their outward appearance and behavior, not on the basis of biological characteristics (Thorne, Kamarae, & Henley, 1983).

The origin of contemporary research on differences between women and men lie in traditional concerns either to support or to refute assumptions and expectations about the appropriate social roles for men and women (Mosedale, 1978). Men and women have probably been
alleged to differ from each other in every area of psychological functioning at some time or another.

It is now commonly accepted that there are clear variations in men and women’s approaches to and use of language, though the reasons for these differences remain contested. A large amount of psychological, sociological and linguistic literature on this issue now exists (Lackoff, 1975; Coates, 1986; Wardhaugh, 1993; Holmes, 1994; Ehrlich, 1997; Romaine, 1999, to mention but a few) and this literature has often been viewed as representing two distinct models of gender and language. The first position (Lackoff, 1975) can be viewed as concentrating on the use of language in the domination of women. The second position (Tannen, 1984) can be characterized as viewing the variation as the product of gender differences.

As Daughty and Long (2005) assert, few studies have focused on gender differences as a source of explanation for second language acquisition variability. However, many researchers have noted that from the very outset of schooling through to university level male students talk more than females, and receive more class time than females (see, for example, Nilsen et al. 1977; Thorne et al. 1983; Tannen, 1990, 1996). With regard to reading, however, girls seem to be in a better position. As Wardhaugh (1993) notes, there is more reading failure in schools among boys than girls, but it does not follow from the fact that boys are inherently less well-equipped to learn to read, for their poor performance in comparison to girls may be socio-cultural in origin than genetic.

In a study by Brantmeier (2004a), it was found that females compared to males recalled more idea units and scored higher on the multiple-choice questions on one of the two given authentic violence-oriented texts. The overall findings of this study indicated that females may have an advantage over males in the free written recall procedure. The combined results of Brantmeier’s (2002; 2003; 2004a, b) studies
emphasize the importance of readers’ gender and passage content at the intermediate level of language instruction. The interesting finding of these studies was that females outperform their male counterparts on the written recall task while performance by gender on multiple-choice items across studies was inconsistent.

With respect to the text variable, different studies have been conducted in which the effect of the cultural origin of the text, the passage content or familiarity with the topic of the text on comprehension of the subjects have been investigated (See Mandler, 1978; Johnson, 1981; Hammadou, 1991; Chavez, 2001).

Knowing how texts are organized, what sort of information to expect in what place, as well as knowing how information is signaled, and how changes of content might be marked have long been thought to be of importance in facilitating reading. For example, knowing where to look for the main idea in a paragraph, and being able to identify how subsidiary ideas are marked, ought in principle to help a reader’s process or product (Alderson, 2000).

Empirical studies on the relationship between different types of text and the reader processing are rare, but it has been shown by Salager-Meyer (1991) that there is an interaction between text structure and familiarity with the topic of the passage. In the present study, an attempt is made to investigate the relationship between text types and reading comprehension process. Gender is also included as another variable to see whether it modifies the relationship between text type and the comprehension process.

Lin (2006) defines text types as text prototypes defined according to their primary social purposes, and he refers to six text types as narratives, recounts, information reports, instruction, explanation and expository texts. In contrast, genres refer to more specific classes of texts, e.g. newspaper reports, research discussions, etc. Texts of each genre may
be of only one text type or a blend, e.g. recipes are just of instruction text type, but sermons can be found as a blend of recount, explanation or narratives.

**The Purpose of the Present Study**

Salager-Meyer (1991) demonstrated that text familiarity exerts a strong influence on the reading outcome of two test groups of Spanish-speaking medical students learning English as a second language. Further studies have also shown that familiarity with the text type has a strong influence on testees’ performance (see Bugel and Buunk, 1996; Brantmeier, 2001, 2005; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2003).

Other studies have investigated the relationship between learners’ gender and their comprehension of different text types. Brantmeier (2004b) examined the topic familiarity levels and comprehension of university level male and female second language readers with two different authentic violence-oriented texts. He gave a 700 word reading passage, a written recall task, a multiple-choice test, and a questionnaire to the participants during two different testing periods. The results revealed that females recalled more idea units and scored higher on the multiple-choice test than the males did for the texts that involved male to female violence. The overall findings showed that females may have an advantage over males in the free written recall procedure.

In a study conducted by Yazdanpanah (2007), three reading comprehension passages were given to 187 participants who were studying English at the intermediate level in North Cyprus. Two of the texts had a male topic and one had a neutral topic. The results revealed that males and females performed differently on different items. Males outperformed females in reading for specific information, identifying referential information and matching titles with paragraphs. Females scored higher on identifying main ideas, guessing meaning from context and text coherence questions.
AL-Shumaimeri (2005) investigated the difference between Saudi tertiary level male and female students of English in the comprehension of gender-neutral texts, one familiar in content and the other unfamiliar. He gave the subjects (N =132) two gender-neutral texts to assess their comprehension on multiple-choice questions on those texts. The findings of this study revealed that content familiarity was an important factor affecting subjects’ performance. Male students outperformed their female counterparts in both tests.

These studies have invaluably enhanced our understanding of the importance attached to the content of the text and its impact on subjects’ comprehension of the texts. But it seems that with regard to the interaction between text type and gender of the subjects different studies yield contradictory results. To shed more light on this issue, the present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ gender and their comprehension of three types of text. This research seeks to find out whether differences in text types affect male and female subjects’ comprehension of those texts. Thus, the following null hypotheses are posed:

- There is no difference in Iranian male EFL learners’ comprehension of the three selected text types.
- There is no difference in Iranian female EFL learners’ comprehension of the three selected text types.
- There is no difference in Iranian male and female EFL learners’ comprehension of the three selected text types.

Method
Participants
182 senior and junior English major students studying at Razi University in Kermanshah, Iran participated in this study. 80 of them took part in a pilot study whose purpose was to validate the tests made on three different types of text. The rest took a TOEFL test that was used as a measure for selecting subjects who were at the same level of language
proficiency. 62 of these students were selected, based on their scores on the TOEFL test, to take part in the last phase of the experiment, i.e. the administration of the final version of the reading comprehension test made on three different types of text. Out of the 62 subjects, 28 were male and 34 were females.

**Instrumentation and Procedure**

The instruments used in this study consisted of a standard language proficiency test, i.e., Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and a reading comprehension test made on three types of text. The standard language proficiency test included 90 multiple-choice items: 15 on structure, 25 on written expressions, and 50 on reading comprehension. This test was used as a measure for selecting subjects with the same level of language proficiency.

The second instrument was a reading comprehension test made on three types of text. This was administered to 62 selected subjects who were at the same level of language proficiency based on their scores on the TOEFL test. This was done after validating the test in the first phase of the study.

The three types of text selected for the purposes of the present study were history, essay, and short story. Several passages were selected on each text type from university reading comprehension books. The readability of the selected passages was determined based on Fog’s readability formula. Finally, three passages which had the same readability indices (10) and were of the same length were chosen to be used for developing the reading comprehension test. 40 multiple-choice questions were made of the selected passages. Then, the newly made test was administered to 80 subjects. Based on the psychometric characteristics of the items, i.e. item facility, item discrimination and choice distribution, the test was modified and certain items were
The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners’ Gender…

discarded. The final version had 24 multiple-choice items on history, essay and short story. The test proved to be reliable (0.76) based on Cronbach’s alpha formula. The face validity of the test was established through the expert opinion of three university instructors, one from TTU in Tehran and the other two from Razi University of Kermanshah.

Design
The design of this study was ex post facto since no treatment was given to the subjects. Reading comprehension was the dependent variable, text type was the independent variable and gender was the moderator.

Results
The means of males’ and females’ scores on each type of text are shown in Table 1. As illustrated, both males and females have the highest mean or scores on essay followed by history and short story. As Table 1 shows, females do better on each type of text type and in general are better comprehenders of English reading passages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Type (Factor A)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Std</th>
<th>Effect of text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>X=5.64</td>
<td>X=6.24</td>
<td>1.3853</td>
<td>X=5.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>X=6.64</td>
<td>X=7.48</td>
<td>1.5245</td>
<td>X=7.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short story</td>
<td>X=5.21</td>
<td>X=6.27</td>
<td>1.4678</td>
<td>X=5.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (Factor B)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Std</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X=5.83</td>
<td>X=6.67</td>
<td>X=6.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P< .05

In order to compare the reading comprehension of the male subjects on the three different text types, a one-way ANOVA was conducted, the results of which are displayed in Table 2.
As illustrated in Table 2, the F ratio for males’ comprehension of the three selected text types at .05 level of significance and 2 & 81 degrees of freedom was 7.1. Thus, the F ratio was much greater than the critical value of F. Therefore, the first null hypothesis stating that there is no difference in males’ comprehension of the three types of text can safely be rejected. That is, the results show that males are better comprehenders of essay passages, then comes history and at last short story.

To compare the performance of female subjects on the three selected text types, a one way ANOVA was also employed, as illustrated in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variance</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.06</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>171.57</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 2, the F ratio for males’ comprehension of the three selected text types at .05 level of significance and 2 & 81 degrees of freedom was 7.1. Thus, the F ratio was much greater than the critical value of F. Therefore, the first null hypothesis stating that there is no difference in males’ comprehension of the three types of text can safely be rejected. That is, the results show that males are better comprehenders of essay passages, then comes history and at last short story.

To compare the performance of female subjects on the three selected text types, a one way ANOVA was also employed, as illustrated in Table 3.
As Table 3 depicts, the F ratio at .05 level of significance and 2 and 99 degrees of freedom is much greater than the critical value of F, i.e. 3.09. Therefore, the second null hypothesis is also rejected. This means that there is a difference in females’ comprehension of the three selected text types. More specifically, essay resulted in the highest scores, followed by history, and short story resulted in the lowest score.

To test the third null hypothesis and find out whether there is a difference in the comprehension of male and female students on the comprehension of the three selected text types, a two-way ANOVA was conducted in which the effects of factor A (text types), factor B (gender), and the interaction between factors A and B were considered, as shown in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variance</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Type (A)</td>
<td>62.27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31.14</td>
<td>17.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (B)</td>
<td>31.24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31.24</td>
<td>17.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A x B</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>419.9</td>
<td>185</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4 illustrates, the F ratio for factor A (text types), i.e. 17.21 at .05 level of significance, is greater than the critical value of F (3.06). This means that the difference in text types is important and it affects subjects’ comprehension. The F ratio for factor B (gender) is also greater than the critical value of F (17.26). This shows that males and females have different levels of comprehension and based on the differences in means, females do better on reading comprehension tests. The F ratio for
the interaction between factor A and B (.45) is less than the critical value of F indicating that the interaction between factors A and B is not significant. Thus, it can be concluded that both males and females make greater gains on essay regardless of their gender.

Discussion
The findings of this study indicate that there is a difference between males’ and females’ comprehension of the reading passages. It is clear from males’ and females’ mean scores that females are better comprehenders of English passages. This supports Maccoby and Jacklin’s (1974) view that females are outstandingly superior in reading skills, and it is known that remedial reading classes contain significantly higher proportions of males. This finding is also in line with Bratmeier’s (2002, 2004b, 2007) studies in which females outperformed males in their comprehension of given passages in a written recall task.

Another finding is that both males and females are better comprehenders of essay followed by history and short story regardless of their gender. This supports the results of a study conducted by Mohdfaiz (1998) indicating that there are significant differences between subjects’ comprehension of different types of text. The reason for different levels of comprehension of these three text types in the present study could be due to the fact that students have more exposure to essay and history text types in their reading books and short story forms only a small proportion of their textbooks. This finding is in line with the results of a study conducted by Brantmerier (2003) in which he examined the effects of readers’ gender and passage content on second language reading comprehension of participants from intermediate level of Spanish language instruction. The results of her study provided evidence that subject matter familiarity or familiarity with the text type has a facilitating effect on second language reading comprehension at the intermediate level.
In terms of text type, Brantmeier (2004a) investigated the topic familiarity levels and comprehension of male and female second language learners. To do this, he used two authentic violence–oriented texts (male to female and female to male violence). The results of his study revealed that females recalled more idea units and scored higher on the multiple-choice test than the males did for the texts that involved male to female violence. The results of the present study also support the findings of Brantmeier’s research considering different levels of comprehension of texts by male and female subjects.

**Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

Regarding the findings of the study, some pedagogical recommendations, mostly for language teachers can be suggested. First and foremost, selecting texts for different levels of instruction should not simply be a matter of examining text difficulty aspects that are based on features such as readability or interest; rather, other factors such as the type of the text should also be considered.

Moreover, as the results of this study indicate, females are superior in reading comprehension compared to male subjects. This suggests that teachers should take into consideration the fact that more practice needs to be done when working with male students.

Furthermore, since the students had different levels of comprehension in different text types, i.e. essay resulted in the highest scores followed by history and short story, language teachers should include different types of texts in reading courses and should avoid using a single text type. In other words, language teachers are responsible for the integration of different types of texts when teaching and testing reading comprehension. Besides, they should focus on those texts that have proven to result in the lowest scores.

Another implication of the study can be drawn from the finding that both male and female students had greater gains on essay regardless of
their gender. This may imply that teachers can focus on teaching different types of texts in their classes regardless of their students’ gender. This may enable learners to pave the way toward autonomy in that they can build on what they already know or what they have explicitly learned in their classrooms.

Last but not least, based on the findings of this study, course designers and language curriculum writers can develop a flexible language curriculum that facilitates language learning, within, across and beyond the confines of a curriculum, which would allow more freedom to the participants in the learning process. Consequently, the selection of the texts for use in the classroom can be left to the teacher and learner, depending on the learners’ interest, motivation and purpose. This will make the learner more sensitive to the use of different text types for various communicative purposes. Thus, curriculum writers must ensure that there is a balance in the selection of different texts in the curriculum to enable the learners to perform a broad range of social purposes.

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