The Relationship between Sources of Situational Interest and Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners at Intermediate Level

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Submitted by

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IN THE NAME OF GOD,
THE MERCIFUL,
THE COMPASSIONATE

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my beloved sister, Nora, who opened my eyes to the world and instilled the importance of hard work, higher education, success, and above all love to me. I also dedicate this work to my friend, Mr. Mosadeghi, who believed in me from the very beginning.

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Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

L1: A Person's First Language

L2: A Person's Foreign or Second Language

MRQ: Motivation for Reading Questionnaire

SI: Situational Interest

SIQ: Sources of Situational Interest Questionnaire

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

ABSTRACT

Although interest is generally described as an interactive relation between an individual and certain aspects of one's environments (Krapp, 1999), researchers have conceptualized it in various ways. Moreover, many researchers have distinguished its two basic types; that are, individual or personal interest versus situational interest (Ainley, 2006; Hidi, 2000; Schraw & Lehman, 2001). The problem with almost all of these studies is the context of the research which is mostly constrained to the L1 environment. The significance of the attempted work was to provide a new perspective to the field by examining situational interest in an Iranian EFL context where the concept has not been investigated. The present study attempted to investigate the relationship between different sources of situational interest and reading comprehension performance, reading motivation, and gender of 70 EFL Iranian intermediate level students of a private language institute. Situational interest was operationalized in this study as an interest aroused by particular text factors and their associations with aspects of the participants' preferences or values. It was measured by the use of Sources of Situational Interest Questionnaire. To elicit data, two questionnaires (Sources of Situational Interest Questionnaire and Motivation for Reading Questionnaire) as well as four reading comprehension texts followed by three comprehension tasks (i.e., True / False, Multiple-choice, and Written recall) were presented to the participants during five successive sessions. The Multiple Regression Analysis was used to test the null hypothesis of no significant relationship between sources of situational interest and reading comprehension (H_0: R=0) at $\alpha < .05$. Chi-square analysis was also applied to test the null hypotheses of no systematic relationship between sources of situational interest and reading motivation as well as gender. All assumptions for the statistical tests were found to be met and the correlation coefficients obtained were not significant. The results of this study are beneficial for Iranian EFL teachers and text developers since it can help them develop their classroom-material-selection techniques, so that the texts chosen to improve EFL students' reading comprehension would focus more on the specific text features that trigger EFL learners' interest.

Keywords: Situational Interest, Sources of Situational Interest, Reading Comprehension, Reading Motivation

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Preliminaries

Interest has been considered as an energizer and regulator of behavior throughout the human life. It can be generally defined as an individual's engaged interaction with a specific object. It is regarded as a central precondition of intrinsic motivation. It is energetic feature of the human organism and is central in determining how we select and persist in processing certain types of information in preference to others. It is regarded as a result of an interactive process between an individual and his or her environment. Among the many conceptualizations of interest the most common are to consider interest as a state and/or as a disposition. It has also been demonstrated that interest has both cognitive and affective (emotional) components.

Interest plays a critical motivational role in human learning and development (Alexander, Jetton & Kulikowich, 1995). For many years, scholars in educational and cognitive psychology have done lots of research (Dewey, 1913; Kintsch, 1980; Schank, 1979; and Hidi, 1990 – 2000) and now they stand in the position where they can confirm a strong relationship between interest and learning. Individuals interested in a domain, activity, topic or thing (henceforth "object") are more persistent, engaged and attentive when interacting with the object of interest (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002; Renninger, 2000).

Decades of research have also led in lots of similar findings in respect to interest and reading comprehension as it has been stated that both reader- and text-based interests have been found to positively and consistently influence comprehension and learning in a wide range of conditions and reading proficiency levels (Hidi, 2000). But most of these studies have been conducted in L1; and, it is surprising that so few studies are dedicated to investigate the influence of interest on L2 reading comprehension in order to clearly indicate any kind of relationship between the two factors.

Generally, two forms of interest are distinguished in the literature: personal (or individual) interest and situational interest. Since the present study investigates the relationship between situational interest and reading comprehension of Iranian English learners at Intermediate level, it is beneficial to give a very short conceptual definition of this significant type of interest. In this work the term situational interest (SI) refers to short term interest raised spontaneously while reading a text. The reason behind this is the existence of some factors within the text (sources of situational interest) that catch the readers' attention and encourage them to go on reading. Research on this type of interest has determined many different sources for it but most scholars agree upon four sources of situational interest which were introduced by Schraw, et al. (1995) for a reading comprehension text. These four sources include prior knowledge, engagement, ease of recollection, and emotiveness. Other sources distinguished by other scholars can be somehow classified under these four major categories.

The relationship between these four sources of situational interest and reading comprehension of EFL students should be examined in order to give a more comprehensive perspective of the elements that can absorb an L2 learner's attention and encourage him/her to do the task of reading, even though he or she is not personally interested in it. A study should be carried out to find out if the existence of any of these four sources of situational interest in a reading passage can improve reading comprehension of the readers as well as their motivation to pursue reading based on a more personal attitude or interest rather than external (i.e., situational) factors within a text.

In this chapter, a general overview of the gaps that should be filled with the results, the significance of the study as well as its objectives will be presented. Three questions lead this study and all of them are supposed to investigate the relationships between different sources of situational interest, as proposed by Shcraw, et al. (1995), and three variables of

reading motivation, gender and reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level. Moreover, the key terms significant to grasp theoretical views of the study will also be defined.

1.1.   Statement of Problem

Reading is considered a complex cognitive and social process. Reading skill is said to be the most difficult aspect of second language learning and teaching since a lot of learners are not personally motivated to read. The problem has been touched on by many scholars such as Grab: "The students often are not motivated to read, because they have not yet experienced the pleasure of reading material that they want to read. […] Most students do not read much, or enjoy reading in their first language either". (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 281).

When it comes to second language, the issue seems more problematic because most of them consider second language learning as equal to speaking in L_2. Based on this false assumption, Nunan refers to reading as a "Cinderella skill" since "for most people, being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 238).

On the other hand, interest has the potential of having a considerable impact on learning. So if reading comprehension is the goal, for example, an assumption may be that students will learn more if they are interested in the reading material. So it seems crucial to develop some sources of interest – even situational interest – among students, mostly suitable for those personally unmotivated ones, to encourage them to read and comprehend.

In many EFL contexts, reading texts, selected for a particular group of students, are provided based on teachers' subject of interest or the goals predetermined by course designers and/or curriculum planners. Therefore the students may encounter a large number of texts to them they do not have any particular kind of interest. As a result

teachers confront a group of uninterested, bored students whose reading comprehension performance is not as good as it is expected.

Although a rich and contentious literature has addressed the effect of interest on readers' comprehension processes, nearly all of these works have dealt with reading in one's native language. Thus, much remains to be determined to understand whether and how text interest would affect foreign and second language reading processes.

Moreover, despite its great importance in the field of English Language teaching as a foreign language, the concept of situational interest (SI) has not drawn any attention of Iranian ELT scholars yet; and, this happens where most of Iranian English learners' specific purpose of learning English, particularly in universities, is to read and to comprehend their specialized texts in English.

1.2.   Objectives of the Study

The present study attempted to investigate the relationships among sources of situational interest and three different comprehension assessment tasks (i.e., written recall, True/False items, and multiple choice items), reading motivation and gender of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

The prospective purpose of the study has been to provide some evidence on the relationship between sources of situational interest and reading comprehension; so that, through which, the task of selecting reading text becomes a more clear and easier one for teachers, educational administrators, and syllabus and textbook designers. Moreover, students can benefit from reading texts in which they are – at least situationally – interested because they can comprehend it better.

1.3.   Significance of the Study

Affective factors often figure prominently in discussions of second language acquisition (SLA) (Gardner & Lambert, 1973; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1992). An exploration of the role of affect in the L2 reading process must consider the reader and his or her background, environment and individual differences (Bernhardt, 2003). Certainly one important difference that readers bring to the reading process is the level of interest in the text they are reading.

It is important to encourage language learners to read in L2 and to comprehend it, but it is certainly not possible to find the same level of individual interest towards one single text in a classroom. Therefore, arising situational interest towards the text available to students at a given moment seems crucial. Studies and research done exclusively in this regard are very limited. Especially in EFL situations there is too little evidence of carrying such kinds of research to be able to allocate a definite area of research to that. The present study was significant since it has been the first research done in an Iranian context related to this issue. Another originality that the present work brought to the field was investigating the relationship between these situational interest sources and gender of EFL learners which had not been dealt with before.

1.4.   Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Is there any relationship between sources of situational interest in reading texts and reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level?

2. Is there any relationship between sources of situational interest in reading texts and reading motivation of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level?

3. Is there any relationship between sources of situational interest in reading texts and reading comprehension of male and female Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level?

The hypotheses tested in order to address the above research questions were that there is no difference among four sources of situational interest in a text regarding participants' gender and / or reading motivation as well as their reading comprehension; that is, none of the four factors has a priority over the others in the opinion of participants of the study. The null hypotheses taken as the basis of all three posed questions was assumed to help and neutralize the procedure of finding results by taking no particular position. This possibility that the results will show no relationship between the variables can be stated more precisely by numbering each hypothesis according to its relevant question; they take the following forms:

1. H_0 : There is no significant relationship between sources of situational interest in reading texts and reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

2. H_0 : There is no significant relationship between sources of situational interest in reading texts and reading motivation of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

3. H_0 : There is no significant relationship between sources of situational interest in reading texts and reading comprehension of male and female Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level.

1.5.   Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Despite the meaningful implications for practical teaching and learning, this study has some limitations and delimitations as well. One of the major limitations of the study dealt with not using language proficiency test. Policies of the Kish institute did not permit the researcher to set any kind of language proficiency test - because of economy of class time -

; but still, the researcher was almost convinced of the veracity of language level of subjects since all of them had passed internationally acceptable tests of PET and KET.

The results of this study are not directly generalizable to every text genre because only expository and narrative texts were used. Moreover, as only Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level participated in the study, it may not be possible to generalize the results of this study to every proficiency level group and to every EFL learner.

Delimitation of the study deals with the number of samples. The sampling procedure of the study was not a random one but a convenience sampling in which the number of participants was deliberately selected as only 70 subjects because of the problem of accessibility to human resources. For the same reason the proficiency level of participants was selected as only intermediate students. Since the participants must have been at the appropriate proficiency level to be able to comprehend the texts; therefore, beginners could not be appropriate choices. Advanced learners of English in Iranian EFL context are so limited in number, especially in the limited context of the language institute where the study was carried out.

Another delimitation of the study was decreasing the number of original SI questionnaire items from 30 items to 13. The reason behind this was that the original questionnaire was constructed to be applied only after reading a story, as it was the only genre used in the original study of Schraw, et al. (1995), but since two different text genres were used in this study, those deleted questions were irrelevant as they are exclusively about events happening in stories.

1.6.   Definition of Key Terms

Situational Interest – an emotional state aroused by features of environmental or textual stimuli. Also known as spontaneous or context – specific interest, it is an

environmentally – oriented interest which lasts as long as the place and environment activate it. It has been divided into 3 categories of Text – based, Task – based and Knowledge – based. With respect to the purpose of this study, the first type of situational interest (i.e., text – based situational interest) is investigated. Regarding a text, it is conceptualized as a temporary state that is elicited by specific features of a text. Schraw, et al. (1995) identified four basic sources of situational interest regarding a literary text. These sources are prior knowledge, engagement, ease of recollection, and emotiveness.

Reading motivation – the ''motivational drive" to read. It is a multifaceted construct with multiple constituents. Its nine components have been identified as 1) curiosity, 2) preference for challenge, 3) involvement, 4) self- efficacy, 5) competition, 6) recognition, 7) grades, 8) social interactions, and 9) work avoidance. By nature, each of these components can be more related to one of the two types of reading motivation. Intrinsic reading motivation refers to students' curiosity about new books and topics, immersion in reading for long periods of time, and preference for longer challenging texts. In contrast, extrinsic reading motivation refers to grades or competition as reasons for reading.

Reading Comprehension – refers to the act of "extracting" and "constructing" meaning from the text read and/or interpreted by the reader. It does not simply mean passive perception of the meaning in a text but active co-construction of it with a text. In this case, reading comprehension can be considered as a "transaction" of meaning between prior knowledge, purpose and/ or life experiences the readers bring with them and the text.

Intermediate Level of English Language Proficiency **-** According to English Language Development (ELD) Standards, reading comprehension abilities of Intermediate level English language learners consist of identifying main ideas of a text, drawing inferences