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**ALTERNATION IN THE CHOICE OF TOPIC FOR READING  
PASSAGES BY THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS**

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**In The Name of God**

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## ABSTRACT

This study was an examination of two approaches to teaching reading: STS and TTS as we termed the approaches. In plain terms the study was to examine whether it is better and more efficient to teach reading based on the students' topic selection (TTS) or the teacher's topic selection (STS), and also to investigate which of the two genders would perform better on a typical reading comprehension task when granted the power to choose topics of their own interest. To answer these questions, a 12-week reading course was offered to both STS and TTS groups, where in the former, the teacher dictated the topics, whereas in the latter the students chose topics of their own interest. An independent t-test run to compare the performance of the two groups revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups such that the TTS group significantly outperformed the STS group. Moreover, the study determined that when granted the option to choose their favorite topics, there was no difference between men and women in their performance on a reading comprehension task. Some implications are provided and suggestions are made for future studies.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

TTS	students' topic selection
STS	teacher's topic selection
EFL	English as a Foreign Language

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**Running head:** ALTERNATION IN THE CHOICE OF TOPIC FOR  
READING PASSAGES BY THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS

Alternation in the choice of topic for reading passages by the teacher and the  
students

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Overview

The idea that topic choice has an impact on both reading comprehension and learning is not new. Nearly two centuries ago, (Herbart 1806, cited in Schiefele, 1992) believed that there is a very close relation between interest and learning, arguing that interest is a primary force behind recognition of an object, meaningful learning, long-term storage of knowledge, and motivation for continued learning.

Reading is the method for learning anything one desires. It is an essential tool if one is to continuously increase the level of knowledge throughout his/her lifespan; however, adolescents today are not actively engaged in daily reading by taking advantage of the books at their disposal. According to Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999), it appears that most students in senior high schools do not read for enjoyment or for feeding their imaginations. Most middle school students are not reading for comprehension or knowledge, but for a grade. Generally, middle school students read to complete assignments, nothing more. The assignments pertaining to reading comprehension given by teachers and educators confound the problem. Most students detest what they are forced to read, but read it because they have to. In turn, reading becomes more like a chore and constantly a problem is created (Worthy, et al., 1999).

According to recent research, there is a link between motivation and achievement (Gambrell & Marzano, 2003). Because reading is an effortful activity that often involves choice, motivation is crucial to reading engagement. Motivation theorists attempt to understand the choices that individuals make among different activities available to them and their effort and persistence at the activities they choose (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Wigfield & Excel, 2002). Even the reader with the strongest cognitive skills may not get good achievement in reading if he or she is not motivated to read. Students will expend much effort and keep interest in text topics and activities that match their values, needs, and goals.

According to Wigfield and Guthrie (1993), it is more difficult to get students to read as they move to the middle school level because of lack of interesting reading materials available to them. Thus, the present study intends to examine whether it is better and more efficient to teach reading based on the students' topic choice or the teacher's topic choice, and also to investigate which of the two genders, males or females, would perform better on a typical reading comprehension task when granted the power to choose topics of their own interest.

## **1.2. Statement of the problem**

Little attention has been paid to students' interest in reading comprehension classes at Iranian high schools in the past few decades. Readers who are interested in the

material and motivated to understand are more likely to demonstrate a level of engagement that promotes deeper levels of comprehension. For example, readers who have interest in a text may more willingly engage in thoughtful consideration and be more apt to making personal connections with text ideas (Guthrie, 1996). The influence of affective processes such as interest and motivation on reading comprehension and literacy development has become a central focus in numerous recent studies, and efforts to improve reading instruction (Cramer & Castle, 1994).

More recently, L1 researchers have concentrated on this topic (Hidi & Baird, 1986). Research questions have been narrowed down and specified to differentiate the effects of individual or personal interest and situational interest. The general conclusion is that “both individual and situational interests have a positive influence on text comprehension” (Schiefele, 1992, p.152). The affective factor of interest, then seemingly is conducive to L1 reading comprehension. Because of the differences between L1 and L2 reading processes, the next step is to see whether the relationship between interest and reading comprehension obtains in L2 area.

### **1.3. Significance of the study**

It is widely accepted in educational environments that providing students with choice and control over their reading material enhances their involvement with and enjoyment of reading. More generally, choice has been linked to increased

educational outcomes, such as greater levels of intrinsic motivation, greater persistence, better performance, more positive affect and higher satisfaction (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Giving individuals control and providing them with choice is believed to lead to independent thinking, greater personal responsibility for the activity and feeling of autonomy (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

The findings of the research can be of great value to Iranian English teachers to enrich their teaching of reading in English classes. They can also force the authorities in charge of planning the educational strategies to reconsider their perspectives on this issue. They can decide whether to allow free choice of topic in reading classes or not.

#### **1.4. Research Questions**

The study intends to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Which of the two approaches is conducive to greater reading comprehension: allowing students to select the reading material topics or sticking with the teacher as the one who makes the choices?
2. Do males and females perform differently on a reading task when they have their own choice of topic?

### 1.5. Research Hypotheses

H1. There is no difference in the rate of reading comprehension achievement when students choose topics as opposed to when teachers choose topics.

H2. There is no difference in the rate of reading comprehension achievement between different genders when granted choice of topic.

### 1.6. Definition of the key words

**Authentic Text/Passage** : Authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question. (Harmer, 1983, p. 146)

**Extrinsic Motivation**: effort directed toward obtaining external recognition, rewards, or incentives (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan,1991).

**Intrinsic Motivation**: An emphasis on curiosity and interest in the activity one is doing and a mastery orientation toward tasks (Gottfried,1990)

**Motivation**: the characteristics of individuals, such as their goals, competence-related beliefs, and needs that influence their achievement and activities ( Guthrie, igfield, Metsala, and Cox, 1999).



**Middle School students:** In this study, it refers to Male and female individuals aged between 16 and 17 studying in the third grade of middle school.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1.Introduction

One of the biggest issues in teaching reading to middle school students is the choice of reading materials because it must match the attitudes and interests of the adolescents. Lack of student motivation in the topics dictated to them by the Ministry of Education can play a big role in lowering literacy competence. How does the topic of reading texts imposed on middle school students compare with their reading interests? Are there significant differences in the choice of topic among genders? When students become interested in what is being read, curiosity develops into motivation to read more. Instructional approaches or materials that are motivating, as well as teachers who show interest and enjoyment in the subject or activity, can sometimes create long-term interest (Worthy, et al., 1999). When students are interested in what is being taught and when they have access to interesting materials, learning, motivation, effort, as well as attitude all improve (ibid).

This chapter examines the factors that influence students' reading comprehension level, such as topics of interest, motivation, readers' self-concept, and gender. It explains motivation and the theories related to it. In addition, the chapter also explores the relationship between topic choice and motivation on the one hand and engagement in the text on the other hand.

## **2.2. Factors that influence students' reading**

### **2. 2.1. Motivation to read**

Teachers have long recognized that lack of motivation contributes to many of the problems we face in teaching young children to read. The value teachers place on motivation is supported by a robust research literature that documents the link between motivation and achievement (Gambrell et al., 1996). According to Guthrie (1996), highly motivated readers generate their own learning opportunities, and, in doing so, they begin to determine their own destiny as literacy learners. There is recognition that students need both the cognitive skill and the motivational will to do well in school (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

According to Wigfield and Guthrie (1993), motivation is of two distinct types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation has to do with pleasurable internal feelings or thoughts. Intrinsic motivation refers to being motivated and curious to be engaged in an activity for its own sake, rather than for reasons of reward (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Feeling proud or having a sense of accomplishment following an "A" on a test in a difficult class is an example of extrinsic reward. Wigfield and Guthrie (1993) believe that readers' engagement in reading is greatly facilitated when they are intrinsically motivated to read and find personal meaning in the reading when they do.

In the extrinsic motivation, external factors motivate the individual to do a specific task. For example, adults go to work to get a paycheck, which in turn pays the bills. A common nation-wide method used for providing motivation is rewarding students for reading, an extrinsic motivation. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich put this principle into practice by implementing a program called Learning by Earning. Gingrich paid students in a Washington D. C. classroom two dollars for reading a book and answering questions about it. Similar programs that offered rewards have been implemented elsewhere to motivate students to read. Maehr (1976) defined continuing motivation as an individual's engagement in a learned activity outside of the context in which it was learned. He argued that schools focus too much on learning in school and not enough on promoting children's continuing motivation to learn outside of the school setting. Oldfather (1992), who examined studies of children's engagement in school reading and writing activities, found that students' motivation to learn declined as they went into junior high school. Oldfather also discussed how the students' ownership of their literacy learning dropped while in middle school. Once in middle school, students' goal orientations turned more to grades and other extrinsic purposes, rather than to the intrinsic rewards associated with learning.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) identified dimensions of intrinsic motivation such as curiosity and preference for challenge. Individuals who are intrinsically