

*In the name of the  
Almighty*



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## **Title:**

The Role of Gender and Topic-Familiarity in Reading Comprehension  
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*To the memory of my father*

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# *List of Abbreviations*

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IDV	Individual Difference Variables
MC	Multiple-choice
ID	Item Discrimination
IF	Item Facility
MANOVA	Multivariate Analysis of Variance
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
FCE	First Certificate in English

## The Role of Gender and Topic-Familiarity in Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

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**Abstract:** One important issue that any material or test designer should bear in mind is to be careful about developing teaching and testing reading materials which would not be to the benefit of a group of readers or examinees and to the detriment of some others. One of the factors which may cause difference between the performances of English learners or test takers is the selection of reading tests with which some learners have familiarity and others not. This study sets forth to analyze whether gender and topic-familiarity can be determining factors in the differences among the performances of foreign language learners on reading comprehension tests. For this purpose, 64 (34 females and 30 males) intermediate students of Bayane Salees institute in Tehran completed a topic-familiarity questionnaire and took three tests of reading, composed of one male-oriented text (Car Maintenance), one

female-oriented text (Women's Shoes) and one neutral text (Beliefs about Numbers). Two different measures were used to assess comprehension: Multiple-choice and free recall. Findings revealed that males had better performance on the male-oriented text and females did better on the female-oriented text. The performances of males and females on the neutral text were seen to be the same. It was also evidenced that males did better on the male-oriented and females did better on the female-oriented test on multiple choice tasks; on the neutral test, both genders performed the same. However, in the free recall tasks, the males outperformed females in all three tests. This result brings about the assumption that males might be better at free recall kind of reading measurement. Yet further research is needed to support this assumption.

# *Chapter One:*

## *Introduction*

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### **1.1. Introduction**

Among the variables which would affect the results of reading comprehension of the testees are their sex differences (Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006). Gender, as a kind of individual difference can affect how readers perceive the text, as it is generally believed that the difference between the schema and background knowledge different sexes possess will lead them to have varying grasps of a certain text. This difference becomes influential when it comes to the situations where the results of reading comprehension tests are taken as determining items which may be destructive or beneficial to the lives of the testees. Therefore, in deciding what kind of texts to select for the purpose of including in tests or even textbooks, it is highly effective if factors such as sex difference be brought into consideration.

The existing literature in this area has also indicated the influence of reading passage on the varying results between males and females. Yet these differences have been at variance depending on the factors involved. For instance, topic-preferences and reading/viewing habits were factors illustrating “strong sex differences” in reading comprehension (Bugel and Buunk, 1996, cited in Macaro, 2003, p. 125). Also, the nature of reading

tasks and the level of instruction have shown to have determining effects on how male and female performances on reading comprehension tasks would differ (Chavez, 2001, cited in Brantemeier, 2003a). Generally, it is shown that factors such as gender, passage content, and topic familiarity can greatly increase the reading burden (Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006; Brantemeier, 2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2003d; 2004a).

As the above mentioned researches have shown, topic familiarity can be at variance between two sexes. Therefore it can be regarded as an item of sex differences in language performance. Topic familiarity of two sexes can be presumed to be a social factor as it differs from one culture and context to another. This study set out to examine how the performance of the participants of both sexes in reading comprehension tests is affected by sex-oriented texts in Iran.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

Learners of English are often required to read English texts and answer comprehension questions in many learning and testing situations. Studies on the difference among the performances of different learners and also between the two genders have shown great fluctuations some of which have been proved to be the result of the lack of learners' background knowledge in the topic of the passages. As Carrel (1988; cited in Stott, 2001) claims, "some students' apparent reading problems may be problems of insufficient background knowledge." This lack of knowledge and information on the topic may be related to the learners' gender. Gender- or content-oriented texts are said to have great influence on the performance of the learners in reading comprehension tasks (Bugel and Buunk, 1996,

cited in Macaro; Brantemeier, 2001; Brantemeier, 2003a). Hyde and Linn (1988) argued that the great difference between the scores of males and females on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was largely as a result of the content of the reading materials in the test. According to them, the reading passages on the verbal section of the SAT have covered more technical topics (e.g., physics or chemistry), thus disadvantaging females in the performance on the test.

Doolittle and Welch (1989) also found gender differences at the item level for US college students. Their study revealed that reading items based on humanity-oriented passages favored females, whereas those based on science-oriented passages favored males. Therefore, in the selection of passages for textbooks or tests, one important factor to consider is to observe how to include gender-oriented texts so that the content of the text would not contribute to a biased result of the learners' performance.

Looking at this issue from another angle we can apply this gender-bias in reading texts as a way to trigger learners' interest. As the experience of the researcher as a teacher suggests, students who pass English courses during their high school years and also pre-university and have not experienced the communicative teaching methods of language schools claim to have lost interest in learning English and see it as an intimidating course. Their experience of English learning seems to be a tedious mechanical memorization of rigorous grammatical formulae rather than a communicative tool that they can make use of in their lives.

As we know grammar and reading skill both are given much importance in school curriculum. Reading is a skill students of any major will make use of in their further studies no matter which major they will be



studying. Therefore we can elevate the quality of the reading passages in an effort to modify the textbooks into more motivating ones. On the other hand, it is widely accorded with that prior knowledge and interest play significant roles in the comprehension of the passage. So textbook designers should think of including reading passages with which learners have more prior knowledge about and a higher level of interest in.

These gender specified textbooks can incorporate some, if not fully, gender-oriented passages which are related to learners' own issues and hence, learners presumably have familiarity with them or enthusiasm to know about them more.

Having considered this as a great opportunity to promote learners' motivation toward English courses, the researcher concluded to examine how the performances of Iranian intermediate learners (both genders) were affected by texts which are biased toward either gender.

### **1.3. Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Research in the area of reading comprehension has shown great difference among the scores of learners especially between two genders. For example some studies have shown that girls tend to outperform boys in some reading tasks (Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006, p. 1). It has also been suggested that among those diagnosed as having reading disability, boys tend to outnumber the girls (Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006). Chavez (2001; cited in Brantmeier, 2003a) found out that "the higher the level of instruction, the wider the gap becomes between male and female students...Females outnumber males four to one in the literature courses" (p. 2). Therefore, no generalization can be done to claim that one gender

precedes another in terms of reading comprehension. The reason for this instability lies within the fact that, as Maccoby (1998) points out, gender should be considered along with other variables such as the context in which learners are developing and learning. Since the context of this study is Iran, the researcher aims to investigate whether and how gender-oriented texts influence the performance of learners in the area of reading comprehension.

On the other hand, along with gender, other variables like text content and familiarity with the text have shown to influence the level of comprehension. Several researches have investigated the influence of passage content and background knowledge on L2 reading with English-as-a-second-language students of many different English proficiency levels.

Results of these studies have shown that prior subject knowledge of students significantly influences the comprehension of L2 reading material (Carrell 1981, 1983a). Brantmeier (2003b) asserts that "for a text which a learner has familiarity with, there are schema related to, which can help them recall and comprehend the text better" (p. 2).

A study done by Bugel and Buunk (1996; cited in Macaro, 2003) which was conducted on the university students studying Spanish as a second language in the United States revealed that males scored higher on texts with male-related content such as football players, cars, and thermometers; and also females performed much better on texts related to their own gender such as midwives, a sad story, and a housewife's dilemma.

As the context and the culture in which learners are developing and learning influence the performance of learners on reading comprehension

tasks, this study investigated how gender-related contents of passages affect the reading comprehension task performance of the Iranian EFL learners.

Investigating the relationship among gender, content familiarity and reading comprehension would lead testers to bring into consideration what kind of texts to administer to different learners for the test of reading comprehension in order to have fairer and more reliable test scores (Brantmeier, 2003a). Also, the result of such a study might be applicable to course textbooks, too.

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

The present study was aimed at examining the effects of reader's gender and passage content on L2 readers' comprehension among Iranian intermediate learners of English as a foreign language. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Does the gender-oriented passage content of the foreign language reading text affect learners' comprehension (multiple-choice and free recall)?

1a. Does the female-oriented passage content (i.e. Women's Shoes) of the foreign language reading text affect learners' reading comprehension (multiple-choice and free recall)?

1b. Does the male-oriented passage content (i.e. Car Maintenance) of the foreign language reading text affect learners' reading comprehension (multiple-choice and free recall)?

1c. Does the gender-neutral passage content (i.e. Beliefs about Numbers) of the foreign language reading text affect learners' reading comprehension (multiple-choice and free recall)?

2. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in free recall and multiple-choice reading comprehension performances scores?

2a. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in free recall and multiple-choice performance scores on the female-oriented passage (Women's Shoes)?

2.a.1. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in free recall performance scores on the female-oriented passage?

2.a.2. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in multiple-choice performance scores on the female-oriented passage?

2b. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in free recall and multiple-choice performance scores on the male-oriented passage (Car Maintenance)?

2.b.1. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in free recall performance scores on the male-oriented passage?

2.b.2. Is there any significant difference between EFL males and females in free recall performance scores on the male-oriented passage?