



The Impact of Gender on Using Reading Sub-skills in Iranian EFL Learners Reading Comprehension

Kamran Janfeshan* (Corresponding Author)

*Assistant Professor of TEFL, Department of English Language Teaching,
Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran.*

Email: Dr.kjnfeshan@iauksh.ac.ir , dr.kjanfeshan@gmail.com

Mohammad Mahdi Pourarian

*M.A. Student in TEFL, Department of English Language Teaching,
Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran.*

Email: M.M.Pourarian93@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the impact of gender on using reading sub-skills and reading comprehension skill of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, four sub-skills involved in the reading comprehension process were selected. Then some reading passages whose comprehension questions were believed to measure the intended sub-skills were chosen. Eighty-eight EFL adult upper-intermediate learners forming two groups of forty-four males and females participated in the present study. At first, they were homogenized through a Nelson test and then a reading comprehension test was given to the learners. The comparison of the means of the two groups in the sub-skills clearly showed that, in two of the sub-skills, i.e. making a logical inference and understanding the mood, tone, or impression of a reading passage, males and females differed significantly with males outperforming the females in the first sub-skill and females outperforming the males in the second one. However, no significant differences were found in the other two sub-skills, i.e. getting the main idea of a reading passage and guessing the meaning from context.

Keywords: Individual differences, Gender, Reading Sub-skills, Iranian EFL Learners, Study skills

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Introduction

Gender is rooted so deeply in human's actions, beliefs, and desires that it appears to be completely natural (LoCastro, 2001). However, scholars and researchers are arguably expected to look beyond what appears to be common sense in order to empirically find out the realities behind gender. In the realm of neurology, gender differences have also been widely noted. Among all, Lenneberg (1967) has contended that "lateral specialization appears to exist more distinctly in males than in females, meaning the female brain utilizes both hemispheres more diffusely" (p. 80). This idea, however, has been challenged by some other researchers. For example, Grabowska, Herman, and Iwona (1994) has argued that, although some data support the idea that the female human brain is less lateralized than that of males, the issue is very complicated and requires further investigations in which the dynamics of hemispheric asymmetry and the effect of social-psychological factors should be considered. In the field of language learning and teaching, reading has widely received much attention (Pae, 2003). This might be attributed to the importance of this skill in the process of learning a foreign language. For one thing, reading skill empowers the three other language skills (Al-Nujaidi, 2000). Moreover, many learners need to read the materials related to their specialties in English as a foreign language. Keeping what has been said so far in mind, it is not surprising to see the number of researchers who have investigated the effect of gender on reading comprehension process (Brantmeier, 2003; Pae, 2003; Cameron, 2005; Hyde, 2005; Epstein, 1988). Brantmeier (2003) conducted a study on Spanish learners and found a significant relationship between readers' gender and passage content. In another study on Korean EFL learners, Pae (2003) found that items classified as mood, impression, tone tended to be easier for females, whereas items classified as logical inference were more likely to favor males regardless of item content. The wide gap between the educational success achieved by males and females has been the center of much debate (Machin and McNally, 2007). In Iranian educational realm, where the number of applicants for academic education is ever increasing, having a "gender-blind approach" towards educational programming by the authorities might have many dire consequences. It is what often gives rise to conducting gender-based studies in different fields and subfields. Considering the fact that examining the interaction between reader and text variables is essential to understanding the nature of reading process, in most reading-related research, the common practice is to divide it into two separate factors: the reader and the text (Alderson, 2000). When it comes to reader variables, gender is one of the significant reader variables. As a result, in the current study, gender is one of the independent variables and reading comprehension skill is the dependent variable. EFL literature is replete with many checklists related to reading sub-skills offered by reading researchers (Nuttall, 1998; Munby, 1978; Brown, 2001, Jordan, 1997; Grabe, 1986;

Davis, 1968, among many others). Still, it should be mentioned here that, although these checklists vary, four reading sub-skills have been unanimously confessed to be critical in comprehending a reading passage. They are as follows:

1. Drawing a logical inference from a reading passage.
2. Finding out the mood or tone of a reading passage.
3. Guessing the meaning of unknown words from context.
4. Getting the main idea of a reading passage.

Thus, this study tries to investigate the effect of these four sub skills as the most critical ones which appeared in almost all the valid checklists ever presented. (Nuttall, 1998; Munby, 1978; Brown, 2001, Jordan, 1997; Grabe, 1986; Davis, 1968). Indeed, this study was an attempt to see if gender can be considered as differentiating factor in the process of reading comprehension by Iranian EFL learners. To improve students' reading ability seems most crucial and urgent for almost all EFL learners (Al-Nujaidi, 2000). Perhaps the most noticeable premise of the current study is related to high school students. Indeed, how to boost their reading skill seems most crucial and urgent. Admittedly, school students require a considerable level of reading skills to enter universities. Moreover, in universities and later in their workplaces, they might have many opportunities to read effectively English articles. Consequently, it will broaden their horizons thereby offering them educational or professional benefits. One of the primary objectives of the current study is to enhance teaching pedagogy of reading in Iran and thus facilitate the learning process of this skill. To this end, research is needed to understand the learners' reading problems and evaluate their progress as they go through EFL programs in the educational system. This can be attained by investigating the nature of reading comprehension as well as the factors that might have some effect on it. Among all these factors, gender is what this study is devoted to investigate. To date, few gender studies in the realm of reading comprehension has ever been conducted in the west part of Iran with Iranian EFL in upper-intermediate level. This lends more support to the importance of conducting this study. As the last point, an additional advantage of the current study lies in improving gender equity throughout Iranian educational system. This study will seek statistically valid answers to the following questions:

- 1 Does gender make any significant difference in how Iranian EFL learners get the main idea of a reading passage?
- 2 Does gender make any significant difference in how Iranian EFL learners understand mood, tone, or impression of a reading passage?
- 3 Does gender make any significant difference in how Iranian EFL learners guess the meaning of unknown words from context?

- 4 Does gender make any significant difference in how Iranian EFL learners draw a logical inference from a reading passage?

Review of Literature

Research findings over the past years have suggested that one of the reasons of why some foreign language learners outperform others lies in learner attributes such as age, gender, interest, or aptitude etc. Individual differences refer to dimensions of enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people are different by degree (Dornyei, 2005). In addition, Rau (2006) examined Individual differences in learning achievement. His results indicated that girls' achievement in foreign language learning is enhanced by the interaction of neurological, cognitive, affective, social and educational factors. Each factor is activated in a different way for boys and girls. It indicates that boys and girls are equipped with different systems of variables. In the case of girls, superior verbal intelligence, high aptitude, more motivation, a social role of modelling behavior and supporting communication, the assumption of tasks requiring verbal interaction (teaching, child-caring), etc. These variables build a network of influences which is believed to be responsible for girls' language learning success.

Classifications of Individual Differences

Ellis (1985) mentioned a distinction between personal and general factors. Personal factors are mostly individual features of each individual's view to learning an L2 (e.g. anxiety). The general factors are variables that are characteristic of all learners and differ not only in whether they are present in a particular individual's learning, but in the extent to which they are present, or in the manner in which they occur. In another study conducted by Ehrman and Oxford (2003), individual differences are classified into four groups. They are learning style, learning strategies, affective variables, and demographic variables.

Gender and Foreign Language Learning

The first initial steps taken to examine individual differences in learning a foreign language was taken by Scovel (1988) and Lenneberg (1967). In a research by Lenneberg (1967), it was stated that a limited period of sensitivity which underlies language development accounts for the contrast in speed, ease and success of normal child language development and the failure in later language acquisition when no relevant linguistic input was available during early childhood. Similarly, Scovel (1967) strongly held the idea that there is a clear critical period for the acquisition of second language phonology whereas there are no such constraints on the acquisition of various other aspects of a second language, such as syntax. The underlying assumption of both of these studies is the "Critical Age Hypothesis", which is widely referred in many studies.

Reading Skills

Reading skill is an essential component of literacy and a key to the communication of information and ideas. In countries where literacy rate is high, it is almost impossible for people to live their daily lives without being able to read. In a world labeled as 'global village', the importance of reading will inevitably extend to reading in foreign languages (Al-Nujaidi, 2000). Hence, just as reading - and writing - are the main components of literacy in one's first language, so is being able to read in a foreign language efficiently part of being considered literate in that language, too. In the same vein, foreign language learners, teachers and researchers have widely recognized the critical role of reading in foreign language learning (Huckin and Haynes, 1993; Anderson, 1999; Grabe, 1991). Like one's efficient reading ability in his L1, efficient L2 reading helps learners develop language skills quickly (Anderson, 1999). Alderson (1999) contended that in order to configure reading one needs to have some notion of what it means to read texts and understand them. However, that is an enormous task. For all the studies and insights, it remains an enigma for reading researchers. It is still an experience that is 'complex, untidy, and inevitably partial: as well as 'invisible and private' (Mackey, 1997, p.428 cited in Hirvela, 2002, p. 330). However, Alderson (2000) points out that it is widely accepted to draw a distinction between the process of reading and the result of that process, the product. The process is what one means by 'reading' *per se*: the interaction between a reader and the text. During that process, it would appear that many things are happening. The reader is looking at print, deciphering the symbols on the page, deciding what they 'mean' and how they relate to each other. The reader is presumably also 'thinking' about what he or she is reading: what it means to him or her, how it relates to other things he or she has read, to things he knows, to what he expects to come next in texts like this. He or she is presumably thinking about how useful, entertaining, boring or crazy the text is.

Some Empirical Studies

Inourzadeh (2005) investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' gender and their use of reading strategies at high school. He finally found that the females showed more strategy awareness than male participants. Still, there were cases in which both groups were not conscious of reading strategies. The final study to be discussed here is the one conducted by Rezazadeh and Tavakoli, (2009) in which they investigated gender difference regarding test performance anxiety. The result of this study revealed that females reported significantly higher levels of test anxiety than males. They further argued that the difference in the socialization patterns of males and females has been the primary explanation for this difference. More pressure is placed on females to succeed in school than males. This leads to the increase in test anxiety levels because girls essentially are afraid to fail. The

other point implied by their findings was that there is a negative relationship between test anxiety and educational achievement.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of study were ninety EFL Iranian upper-intermediate students selected among all the upper-intermediate students at Zabansara English Institute. However, after running a Nelson test with the intention of homogenizing the participants, two language learners were excluded from the study based on the results of the tests. It means that the study proceeded with eighty-eight participants. Also, the participants' ages ranged from twenty-one to twenty-eight. The native language of all participants was Farsi.

Participants were then divided into two groups, namely the group of males (N=Forty-four) and the group of females (N=Forty-four). Except for their gender, these groups were not different in a significant way regarding other relevant features including language proficiency and learning experiences.

Instruments

The instrumentation of the current investigation comprised two basic measures. First, a Nelson test was used to gauge the participants' L2 proficiency, thereby making them homogenized. The second measure was a reading comprehension test taken from TOEFL test which was administered to assess the learners' reading comprehension ability regarding each sub-skill.

Procedures

Two single-sex branches were chosen. First, the researcher called for permission from the principal of the institute to use the students' collected data to do the research. Second, in order to assure that all the procedures for all classes were standardized and identical, the same syllabus and teaching materials were presented by the researcher. As the next step, Nelson test was administered to both male and female groups to make them homogenized. Having amassed the results of the proficiency test, two of the participants were excluded. Then, the main reading comprehension test was administered in both male and female groups. Here, three 30-minute sessions were allocated by the main test administration job. The tests were not carried out in consecutive sessions, but care was taken not to make the sessions too far from each other to prevent the effect of practice. Moreover, the participants were said that a question had been written at the end of each reading passage asking if the passage was interesting to them or not. The learners were supposed to answer this question by selecting from among the five Likert options it

has, namely: *Not at All, Little, Not Sure, Much, Very Much*. As the last point, the participants were asked to stick to the time limit each test had.

Results

The descriptive statistics of the participants' scores in both groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, Minimum Score and Maximum Score

		Min	Max	M	SD
Male group	Making logical inference	1	10	7.20	2.09
	Getting mood and tone	0	10	4.45	2.43
	Getting the main idea	2	9	5.13	2.20
	Guessing the unknown words	0	10	6.34	2.15
Female Group	Making logical inference	1	10	4.45	2.34
	Getting mood and tone	0	10	7.15	1.85
	Getting the main idea	1	9	5.61	2.34
	Guessing the unknown words	1	10	6.79	1.98

According to Table 1, mean score of male learners in making logical inference is 7.20 and female learners is 4.45, in getting mood, tone, and impression, the mean score of male learners is 4.45 and female learners is 7.15, in getting the main idea, the mean score of male learners is 5.13 and female learners is 5.61, in guessing the unknown words, the mean score of male learners is 6.34 and female learners is 6.79. The data obtained from the Table. 1 is illustrated in the Figure1 in the form of a bar graph.

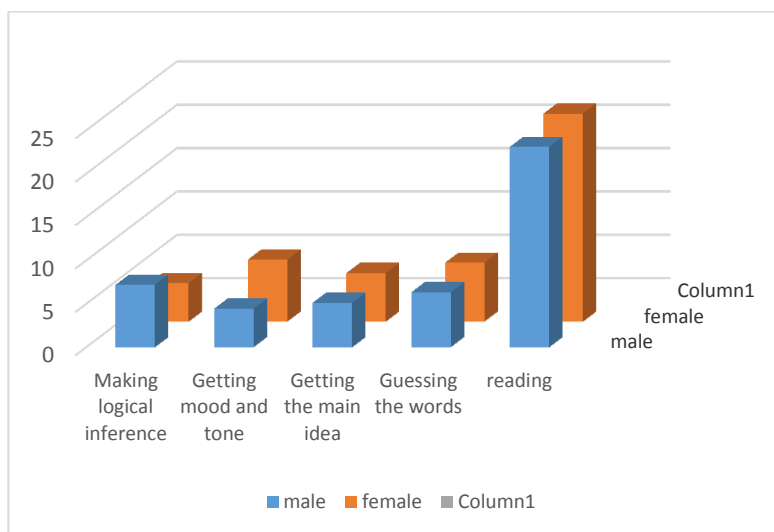


Figure 1. The bar graph to show groups' mean score in skills

The distribution of scores for dependent variables should be normal for each value of the independent variable. To check this assumption, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was utilized. Table 2 shows the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk test.

Table 2. the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk Test for Normality of the Distribution of the Data

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	N	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Making logical inference	.159	88	.199	.960	88	.548
Getting mood and tone	.217	88	.140	.906	88	.052
Getting the main idea	.138	88	.200	.936	88	.200
Guessing the unknown words	.172	88	.123	.958	88	.513
reading	.191	88	.054	.902	88	.051

Table 2 shows that the assumption of normality of variables has been observed ($P > .05$).

To check the homogeneity of variances, Levene's statistic was used. Levene's statistic tests the assumption that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

Table 3. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances^a

Sub-skills	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Making logical inference	1.127	1	86	.291
Getting mood and tone	5.306	1	86	.240
Getting the main idea	.192	1	86	.662
Guessing the unknown words	.291	1	86	.591
Reading	.094	1	86	.759

As displayed in Table 3 above, the results of Levenes test were not significant ($P > .05$). Based on these results, it can be concluded that there were not any significant differences between the variances of the groups. In other words, gender makes difference in how Iranian EFL learners dealt with a reading passage. Further details are presented below.

Addressing the Research Questions

Addressing the First Research Question

The first research question in this study was whether gender makes any significant difference in how Iranian EFL learners draw a logical inference from a reading passage. The descriptive statistics showed that the male participants achieved

significantly higher scores on the first sub-skill. Male group mean and standard deviation are $M=7.20$ and $SD=2.10$, for female group mean and standard deviation are $M=4.45$; $SD=2.35$. In order to analyze whether this difference was meaningful or not, the Independent Samples T-Test was utilized. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent Samples T-Test between the Female and Male Learners

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
5.795	86	.000	2.75000	.47455	1.80663	3.69337

Based on the results presented in the Table 4, it can be concluded that with the 95% confidence there was a significant difference between the mean scores of male and female learners ($t= 5.795$ $P<0.05$). Based on the results presented in Table 4, a significant change was observed in male scores in comparison to female scores. It can be stated that male learners performed better in the scores of making logical inference in comparison to female learners. In other words, gender makes difference in how Iranian EFL learners draw a logical inference from a reading passage.

Addressing the Second Research Question

With regard to the second research question in this study which was whether gender makes any difference in how Iranian EFL learners understand mood, tone, or impression of a reading passage, the descriptive statistics showed that there was a difference between two groups in this sub-skill for male group mean and standard deviation are $M=4.45$ and $SD=2.43$, for female group mean and standard deviation are $M=7.15$; $SD=1.85$. In order to analyze whether this difference was meaningful or not, the Independent Samples T-Test was utilized. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-Test between the Female and Male Learners

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
-5.862	86	.000	-2.70455	.46140	-3.62179	-1.78730

Based on the results presented in the Table 5, it can be concluded that with the 95% confidence there was a significant difference between the mean scores of male and female learners ($t= 5.86$, $P<0.05$). Consequently, a significant change was observed in female scores in comparison to male scores. In other words, according to the results presented in the Table 5, female learners performed better in the scores of getting mood and tone in comparison to male learners. In other words, gender makes difference in how Iranian EFL learners understand mood, tone, or impression of a reading passage.

Addressing the Third Research Question

The third research question in this study was whether gender make any difference in how Iranian EFL learners get the main idea of a reading passage. the descriptive statistics showed that there was a difference between the two groups in this sub-skill for male group mean and standard deviation are $M=5.14$ and $SD=2.20$, for female group mean and standard deviation are $M=5.61$; $SD=2.21$. In order to analyze whether this difference was meaningful or not, the Independent Samples T-Test was utilized. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Independent Samples T-Test between the Female and Male Learners

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
-.990	86	.325	-.47727	.48203	-1.43552	.48097

Based on the results presented in the Table 6, it can be concluded that with the 95% confidence there was no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female learners ($t= -.99$, $P>0.05$). Thus, a significant change was not observed in female scores in comparison to male scores. Hence, gender makes no difference in how Iranian EFL learners get the main idea of a reading passage

Addressing the Fourth Research Question

The fourth question in this study was whether gender make any difference in how Iranian EFL learners guess the meaning of unknown words from context. the descriptive statistics showed that there was a difference between the two groups in this sub-skill for male group mean and standard deviation are $M=5.14$ and $SD=2.20$, for female group mean and standard deviation are $M=5.61$; $SD=2.21$. In order to analyze whether this difference was meaningful or not, the Independent Samples T-Test was utilized. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 7. Independent Samples T-Test between the Female and Male Learners

t-test for Equality of Means						
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
-1.029	86	.306	-.45455	.44165	-1.33252	.42343

Based on the results presented in the Table 7, it can be concluded that with the 95% confidence there was no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female learners ($t = -.99$, $P > 0.05$). Accordingly, a significant change was not observed in female scores in comparison to male scores. Based on the results presented in the Table 7, gender makes no difference in how Iranian EFL learners get the main idea of a reading passage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Some noticeable findings were reported through this study. First of all, items classified as logical inference, as specified in the current study, were easier for males than for females with equal ability, consistent with the trend reported in the literature (Carlton and Harris, 1992; Lawrence and Curley, 1989; Tae-II, 2002). On the other hand, items classified as mood, tone, and impression tended to be easier for females, which is analogous to the prior findings that ‘females tended to perform better than males with equal ability on items with more contextual information’ (Carlton and Harris, 1992; O’Neill and McPeck, 1993; Wendler and Carlton, 1997; Tae-II, 2003). Though somewhat small, the difference between males and females regarding the third sub-skill cannot be ignored at all; rather, this is of special importance to this study because it is actually showing a departure from the typical trend found in the literature. Although the result is not unique (Gafni, 1991), most researchers have insisted that there is a *significant* difference between males and females in getting the main idea of a reading passage with the males being lower than females (Tae-II, 2002; Drasgow, 1987, among others).

The reading process remains a phenomenon whose exterior is observable, but whose interior can only be hypothesized (LeLoup, 1993). Such studies as the present one can, however, contribute to the database in an attempt to substantiate the theoretical reading process. The analysis and comparison of the obtained data clearly confirmed that gender can be considered as a factor involved in the way a learner processes a reading passage. Indeed, males and females appeared to be different in the four sub-skills measured. This difference was not consistently significant, though. This study identified a number of implications that could be useful to pedagogical Iranian EFL learners and teachers’ contexts. English teachers can

consider the results of this study as a starting point from which to pay due attention to Individual differences. This is simply because Individual differences are of great importance in determining students' processes on reading comprehension occurs. As a result, Individual differences investigations assist in considering the most appropriate skills and sub-skills that should be presented to learners at certain times during their learning of reading. Indeed, instructors who teach L2 reading should take account of Individual differences as a diagnostic tool to improve their instruction and enhance their students' achievement. To do so, they can implement reading strategies in reading classroom as a 'scaffolded instruction tool' (Darabie, 2000). This can include metacognitive explanation, modeling, and activities that focus on a particular strategy (ibid, p. 96). Future research should also consider employing additional variables. For example, the participants of the current study were adult, upper-intermediate learners; replications should be made using participants of diverse age groups and proficiency levels. On the other side, other sub-skills involved in the reading comprehension process can be measured too. Apart from that, three other skills of L2 learning - speaking, listening, and writing - can be investigated against gender to find out whether or not males and females will act differentially in each of them.

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Author Biography



Kamran Janfeshan is an Assistant Professor and full time faculty member in Department of English, College of Literature and Humanity, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran. He obtained his MA in Applied Linguistics from Tehran university for Teacher Education, Iran in 1995. His MA supervisor was Professor Hossein Farhady. He obtained his PhD in TEFL from the University of Pune, India in 2009. His main research interests are language teaching methodology, Computer-Assisted language learning (CALL), and material developments. He has published a couple of books and many research articles. He teaches teaching language skills, practical teaching and test development courses at post-graduate level. He has presented 15 papers in international and national conferences in India and Iran. At present he is a member of editorial team of five international TEFL journals all around the world.



Mohammad Mahdi Pourarian is an M.A student of TEFL at Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran. He has been teaching English at Iran National Language Institution for one year. He has participated in two national and international conferences, and has presented two papers in national conferences. His areas of interest include discourse analysis, materials development, teaching methodology, teacher and student education, techniques and principles in language teaching.