independent variable of level of proficiency (elementary, intermediate, and advanced) has a significant effect on the two independent variables of RT and RWT. The third null hypothesis, "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of elementary Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages", was investigated by the application of a t-test. The obtained results, i.e. the difference between the t-observed and the t-critical, as shown in Table 10, are enough proof for the rejection of this hypothesis. The fourth hypothesis proposed to investigate whether "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of the intermediate Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages". The achieved data shown in Table 12, is considered as acceptable criteria for the rejection of this hypothesis. The fifth null hypothesis, "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of the advanced Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages", after conducting a t-test, through data analysis, was also rejected. The investigation of the third, fourth, and fifth hypothesis was done, in fact, to provide more statistical support for the previous first and second hypotheses. The sixth null hypothesis, "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in RT passages, considering the factor of sex" however is not rejected. So, it can be concluded that in RT passages males and females performed fairly the same. The seventh null hypothesis, "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in RWT passages, considering the sex factor", was rejected.

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❑

question to be answered through the next analysis.

Investigation of Question 7

In contrast to the previous hypothesis, as it is evident in Table 16, the seventh null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant difference in the performance of male and female Iranian EFL students concerning the comprehension of passages without topic. In other words, females performed significantly better for passages without topic.

Table 16

T-test for Comparing the Subjects' Comprehension in RWT Tests Considering the Sex Factor

Sex	No. of Cases	Mean	SD	SE
Male	64	11	5.033	0.629
Female	69	9.31	4.526	0.545

Pooled Variance Estimate				Separate Variance Estimate			
F-value	2-Tail Prob.	t-value	DF	2-Tail Prob.	t-value	DF	2-Tail Prob.
1.24	0.390	2.03	131	0.054	2.02	126.84	0.046

Considering the data in Table 16, it is clear that the t-value observed, which is 2.02, is more than the t-value critical, 1.64. Thus, we can safely claim that there is a difference in the comprehension of males versus females considering passages without topic. The females performed better, i.e. the females in this study have comprehended passages without topic better than the males who have participated in this study.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the present study was an attempt to answer the question of whether there was any significant difference between subjects' rate of comprehension in passages with and without topic. In this regard, a t-test was conducted to compare the reading scores of passages with and without topic in relation with subjects' level of proficiency. The result showed that there is a significant difference between the comprehension of subjects in RT and RWT passages.

The first null hypothesis of this study, "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in RT passages", was rejected. The second null hypothesis, "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in RWT passages", was rejected, too. As the results of the statistical analysis performed indicated, the

Table 13

Mean, SD, and SE of Advanced Subjects' Scores on RT and RWT Tests

Variable	No. of Cases	Mean	SD	SE
RT	46	18.86	3.47	0.51
RWT	46	13.13	4.86	0.71

Table 14

T-test for Comparing the Comprehension of Advanced Subjects in RT and RWT Tests (difference)

Mean	SD	SE	t-value	DF
5.73	3.81	0.56	10.20*	45

P<0.05	* denotes significance	t-critical=1.67

As the results shown in Table 14 indicates, there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the advanced students in RT and RWT passages. The grteat gap between the t-observed and t-critical is a sufficient proof for the rejection of the fifth null hypothesis. So, for advanced students the presence of topic can decisively change their comprehension.

Investigation of Question 6

Due to the analysis of data, there was no significant difference in the comprehension of passages with topic for male and female Iranian EFL students. In other words, the males and females who participated in this study were not significantly different in their comprehension of passages with topic.

Table 15

T-test for Comparing the Subjects' Comprehension in RT Tests Considering the Sex Factor

Sex	No. of Cases	Mean	SD	SE
Male	64	15.4688	4.892	0.612
Female	69	14.5652	5.054	0.608

Pooled Variance Estimate				Separate Variance Estimate			
F-value	2-Tail Prob.	t-value	DF	2-Tail Prob.	t-value	DF	2-Tail Prob.
1.07	0.796	1.05	131	0.297	1.05	130.75	0.297

As Table 15 shows, the t-value observed is 1.05 and t-value critical at the 0.05 level of significance is 1.64. Hence, one can conclude that the sixth null hypothesis is not rejected. Therefore, the males and females performed fairly the same on the passages with topic. But what about passages without topic? Do the males and females perform similarly in these passages too? This is the

The results in Table 10 shows that the t-observed exceeds the t-critical, in other words, through the above t-test the suficient reason for the rejection of the third null hypothesis is provided. Although the existance of topic for reading passages is also important for this group, elementary, the effect of reading with topic is more crucial for the intermediate and advanced levels. The reason could be their low language proficiency in general.

Investigation of Question 4

The fourth null hypothesis of this study holds that "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Intermediate EFL university students in RT and RWT passages." The investigation of this hypothesis is done by another t-test. The necessary elements of this t-test are shown in Table 11.

Table 11
Mean, SD, and SE of Intermediate Subjects' Scores on RT and RWT Tests

Variable	No. of Cases	Mean	SD	SE
RT	58	14.62	3.98	0.52
RWT	58	8.84	4.33	0.56

After the calculation of the above Table a t-test was done to see whether the fourth hypothesis should be rejected or not.

Table 12
T-test for Comparing the Comprehension of Intermediate Subjects in RT and RWT Tests (difference)

Mean	SD	SE	t-value	DF
5.77	4.21	0.55	10.45*	57

| P<0.05 | * denotes significance | t-critical=1.67 |

Table 12 provides enough criteria for the rejection of the fourth null hypothesis of the study. Therefore, at the intermediate level the presence of topic for university students can effectively improve their comprehension.

Investigation of Question 5

The fifth null hypothesis of this study was proposed to see whether "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of the advanced Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages." Tables 13 and 14 provides the needed data for the elaboration of the fifth hypothesis.

Mean	Group	
7.86	Elementary	
8.84	Intermediate	
13.13	Advanced	**

The findings of the second TUKEY test show that in reading passages without topic (RWT), the advanced group comprehend significantly better than the other two groups. However, as the results show, as far as passages with topic were concerned, subjects from the advanced level performed significantly better than the elementary and intermediate ones. While with regard to passages without topic, there is no significant difference between these two (intermediate and elementary) groups.

The previous data analysis showed that the presence or absence of topic creates a significant difference in the comprehension of subjects. Besides, by application of the two TUKEY tests the exact location of this difference among the three proficiency groups was shown. Now, the researcher is determined to investigate the comprehension of each group (E, I, A) in RT and RWT passages separately.

Investigation of Question 3

The third null hypothesis of this study put that "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of elementary Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages." To discuss this hypothesis, at first the Mean, SD, and SE of the RT and RWT scores of elementary students was estimated as shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Mean, SD, and SE of Elementary Subjects' Scores on RT and RWT

Variable	No. of Cases	Mean	SD	SE
RT	30	9.63	3.14	0.574
RWT	30	7.86	3.23	0.591

Then as shown in Table 10, a t-test was carried out.

Table 10

T-test for Comparing the Comprehension of Elementary Subjects in RT and RWT Tests (Difference)

Mean	SD	SE	t-value	DF
1.76	4.68	0.85	2.93	29

$P < 0.05$ t-critical = 1.69

Table 7 shows that the obtained F-ratio is much greater than the critical F, 3.07. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a difference in the comprehension of the three proficiency levels of this study. To find where this difference lies, a TUKEY test was performed.

Mean	Group	9.63	Elementary	
9.63	Intermediate	14.62	Intermediate	∗
18.86	Advanced	18.86	Advanced	∗∗

The results show that the mean for reading comprehension passages with topic (RT) is significantly different among three proficiency levels of this study. In other words, the advanced levels performed much better than the intermediate and elementary levels. The Intermediate level, too, performed much significantly better than the elementary one. But this was quite predictable. The question to be answered in this research is to see whether these results change if the passages have no topic. Further analysis provided answer to this question.

Investigation of Question 2

The second null hypothesis of this study stated that "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages whithout topic considering their proficiency level". In order to precisely compare the comprehension of subjects in different proficiency levels in reading passages without topic (RWT), another one-way ANOVA was conducted as follows:

Table 8
One-way ANOVA for the Comparison of Subjects' Comprehension in RWT Tests

Source	DF	SS	MS	F-Ratio
Between Groups	2	663.45	331.72	17.83∗
Within Groups	131	2436.28	18.59	
$P < 0.05$	∗ denotes significance	F-critical = 3.07		

A close study of Table 8, reveals that the F-ratio is much greater than the critical F, 3.07. Therefore, it can be safely claimed that proficiency level has a role in comprehending passages without topic. In order to show the exact location of this difference, the result of the second TUKEY test is a matter of great assistance.

reading passage can result in various levels of understanding, at first the mean, SD, and Standard Error Measurment of the subjects' scores on the two reading tests, i.e. RT and RWT, was calculated, Table 5.

Table 5
Mean, SD, and SE of Subjects' Scores on RT and RWT Tests

Variable	No. of Cases	Mean	SD	SE
RT	133	14.96	4.97	0.430
RWT	133	10.09	4.82	0.417

After this stage, a t-test was conducted. The computation of this statistical analysis is shown in Table 6.

Table 6
T-test for Comparing the Means of RT and RWT Tests

Difference

Mean	SD	SE	t-value	DF
4.86	4.48	0.387	12.56^*	133

$P<0.05$ * denotes significance   t-critical=1.64

As it is clear from the findings presented in Table 6, the t-observed value of 12.56 exceeds significantly the t-critical value which is 1.64 at 133 DF. In other words, it can be claimed that the presence or absence of topic has a determining role in reading comprehension. So, the main null hypothesis is rejected. The main null hypothesis as stated in the abstract was as follows: "There is no significant difference in the comprehension of passages with and without topic for Iranian EFL university students."

Investigation of Question 1

The first null hypothesis of this study stated that "there is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages with topic considering their proficiency level." To compare the comprehension of subjects in different proficiency levels in RT passages a one-way ANOVA was carried out. The finding of the analysis are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
One-way ANOVA for the Comparison of Subjects' Comprehesion in RT and RWT Tests

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-Ratio
Between Groups	2	1560.97	780.48	58.90^*
Within Groups	131	1735.83	13.25	

$P<0.05$ * denotes significance

4. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the inter-mediate EFL university students in RT and RWT passages.
5. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the advanced EFL university students in RT and RWT passages.
6. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the Iranian EFL university students in passages with topic considering the sex factor.
7. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the Iranian EFL university students in passages without topic considering the sex factor.

The investigation of the questions are explained in the following section.

At first separate tables of frequency for the subjects' scores on the three tests of this study were provided. See Appendix 1 for the Neslon Test (NT), Appendix 2 for the tables of frequency and histograms of the subjects' scores on the NT, Appendix 3 for the Reading Comprehension Passages with Topic (RT), Appendix 4 for the tables of frequency and histograms of the subjectls' scores on the RT test, Appendix 5 for the Reading Comprehension Passages Without Topic (RWT), and Appendix 6 for the tables of frequency and histograms of the subjects' scores on the RWT test. Then the mean and standard deviation of each test were computed. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Mean and Standard Deviation of the Three Tests

Level of Proficiency	NT		RT		RWT	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Advanced	87.04	4.42	18.86	3.47	13.13	4.86
Intermediate	69.95	6.07	14.62	3.98	8.84	4.33
Elementary	48.90	6.48	9.62	3.14	7.86	3.23

The maximum and minimum scores of the students on the Nelson Test, reading comprehension with topic, and reading comprehension without topic are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Maximum and Minimum Scores on NT, RT, and RWT Tests

Level of Proficiency	NT		RT		RWT	
	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.
Advanced	97	80	25	8	23	2
Intermediate	79	60	23	5	20	2
Elementary	58	37	19	4	17	2

To determine precisely to what extent the presence or absence of topic in a

Definition of Terms

reading comprehension is considered as the independent variable in this study. In this study reading comprehension refers to the students' scores on the reading comprehension passages of the 1992 TOEFL.

Proficiency Level is considered as the independent variable. Regardless of the subjects' grade levels their proficiency level is measured by "Nelson Quickcheck Test A, 1978". Subjects' grade level has not been a criteria in this regard because as their scores are presented in Appendix 2, some lower grade students performed better on their proficiency test than some higher grade ones and vis a vis. Based on subjects' achievements on the Nelson Quickcheck Test, the researcher conventionally classified them as shown in table 1.

Table 1
The conventional Classification of Subjects According to Their NT Scores

Range of Scores	Conventional Level of Proficiency
35-59	Elementary
60-79	Intermediate
80-100	Advanced

Delimitations of the Study

In carrying out this study there existed some delimitations.

1. The subjects were all Iranians.
2. The number of subjects was limited to 182.
3. Subjects were selected from among the students who were majoring in TEFL and English Literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Restatement of the Problem

As stated in Chapter I of this study, an attempt was made to answer the following questions:

1. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the Iranian EFL university students with topic considering their proficiency level.
2. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of the Iranian EFL university students in passages without topic considering their level of proficiency.
3. Whether there is a significant difference in the comprehension of element-ary Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages.

university students in passages without topic considering their level of proficiency.

3. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of the elementary Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages.
4. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of the inter-mediate Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages.
5. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of the advanced Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages.
6. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages with topic considering the sex factor.
7. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages without topic considering the sex factor.

Significance of the Study

Although much research is done in the field of reading in relation to the effect of schematic knowledge on readers' comprehension, just a few of them are directly related to the role of topic in EFL reading comprehension.

Another justification for the significance of this study is that the outcome of this study could be helpful to those dealing with language teaching as well as those concerned with materials development and testing.

EFL teachers who seek for some ways to help their students to improve their reading comprehension ability can benefit from the results of this study. Sometimes students are in the elementary or intermediate levels, i.e. those who generally have a very restricted vocabulary span and less sufficient knowledge of the structure of the language. In this case, teachers should select appropriate topics for the reading comprehension passages. Definitely, precision upon the selection of topic is of great importance in this regard.

Those who are responsible for developing textbooks can take the findings of this study into consideration. Now that the research has revealed a signifi-cant difference between the comprehension of passages with and without topic, appropriate selection of topic for reading comprehension passages should be part of their activities.

The area of language testing can also benefit from the results of the study. They can provide reading comprehension tests with topic for elementary and intermediate levels, the levels which form two-thirds of one's education. At these levels, our students will receive appropriate presupposition on the script of the passage by reading the topic.

but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language. Barnitz (1985, p.3) holds:

> Reading is a complex communication process in which the mind of the reader interacts with the text in a particular setting or context. During the reading process, readers construct a meaningful representation of text through an interaction of their conceptual and linguistic knowledge with the cues that are in the text.

Statement of the Problem

Although much research is done in the field of reading in relation to the effect of schematic knowledge on readers' comprehension, just a few of them are directly related to the role of topic in EFL reading comprehension.

This study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages with topic considering their level of proficiency?
2. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages without topic cosidering their proficiency level?
3. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of the elementary Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages?
4. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of the inter-mediate Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages?
5. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of the advanced Iranian EFL university students in RT and RWT passages?
6. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages with topic considering the sex factor?
7. Is there any significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages without topic considering the sex factor?

Hypotheses

To systematically investigate the proposed questions the following hypotheses were stated in the null form:

1. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL university students in passages with topic considering their level of pro-ficiency.
2. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of Iranian EFL

thus, the ability to skim through an article, pick out important ideas in a paragraph, and make deduction from passages is one of the most important factors in one's educational success.

reading is said to be the most important skill for university students primarily because it is the major means by which they become acquainted with the content of the subject area they are studying and the most important way in which they contribute to develop their knowledge of the language itself. Varzegar (1978, p.1) puts:

> Reading is a complex activity which involves the identification of letters, recognition of words, visual discrimination, and thereby sampling of ideas, predicting of the forthcoming content and decoding the intended meaning of the message. Reading is a process of idea construction, confirmation, reflection, and semantic interpretation.

Widdowson (1979) defines reading as the process of getting linguistic information via print. Underlying his definition is the traditional linguistic view whereby linguistic information can be transmitted either via print (reading) or via sound (listening). This view implies a close relationship between listening and reading.

Thorndike (1974) views reading as a complex activity similar to mathematical problem solving. Goodman (1971) has described reading as a "syclical process by which a reader reconstructs a text by sampling, predicting, testing and confirming", (p.125). The main argument in Goodman's words is that the good reader takes advantage of the redundancy inherent in language which enables a reconstruction of the whole text although only a part of the material has been extracted. The next stage for the reader is to contrast the accuracy of the gained information with that of his/her previous information. Previous information can be the information extracted from a text as well as the reader's background knowledge on the topic of a text. When the reader confirms that the reconstruction is in agreement with previous knowledge then the cyclical process of sampling begins again. Goodman (1967, p.126) also described reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game in which the reader reconstructs as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display". He further adds that the reader does not use all the information available to him; rather the reader selects from the available information only those needed for predicting the forthcoming ideas.

According to Rivers (1981), reading is the most important activity in any language class not only as a source of information and pleasurable activity,

معنی‌داری بین درک مفهوم متون عنوان‌دار و بی‌عنوان وجود نداشت. با این حال،
روشن شد که اگرچه زن و مرد از درک مفهوم یکسانی در خصوص متون عنوان‌دار
برخوردارند، اما، در خصوص متون بی‌عنوان، زنان درک بهتری دارند.

The present study was an attempt to answer the question of whether the presence or absence of topic had any role in EFL reading comprehension. Thus the following questions were raised.

1. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of passages with and without topic for Iranian EFL university students considering their level of proficiency.

2. There is no significant difference in the comprehension of passages with and without topic for Iranian EFL university students considering the sex factor.

One hundred and eighty two university students majoring in English from Ferdowsi and Azad Universities in Mashad comprised the population of this study. First of all, the Nelson Quickcheck Test A (1978), which consists of one hundred multiple-choice items, was administered. This test was used to measure the subject level of general English proficiency. Then, after a light refreshment the reading comprehension passages were distributed. In this part ten reading comprehension passages from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL, 1992) were chosen. The first five passages had topic, but the last five ones did not. Each of the passages were followed by five reading comprehension questions.

The data obtained were analyzed through the statistical techniques of one way ANOVA, T-Test, correlation, and Tuckey test.

As a result, it became clear that at the elementary and intermediate level both males and females had better comprehension of passages with topic. While, at the advanced level there was no significant difference between their comprehension of passages with and without topic. Furthermore, it was revealed that while males and females had a similar level of comprehension of passages with topic, females performed better than males on passages without topic.

Introduction

Reading is one of our most complex forms of information processing skills. It involves the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange of information from one person to another. Reading requires the reader to focus attention on the reading materials and integrate the previously acquired knowledge and skills to comprehend what someone else has written.

Among the language skills, reading comprehension has been given a crucial role in all academic studies and specially in the EFL field. It is regarded as an essentially acquired characteristic to people's success in their academic studies. In modern life, learning depends upon one's ability to interpret the printed page accurately and fully. In educational settings, one must read a great deal,

The Role of Topic in EFL Reading Comprehension

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چکیده (Abstract)

در تحقیق حاضر سعی شده است به این سؤال پاسخ گفته شود که آیا حضور یا غیبت عنوان (topic) نقشی در درک مطلب دانشجویان ایرانی، که زبان انگلیسی را به عنوان زبان خارجی فرا می‌گیرند، دارد یا نه. در این باره دو فرضیه مطرح شده است:

۱. هیچ اختلاف معنی‌داری بین درک مطلب عنوان‌دار و بی‌عنوان برای دانشجویان ایرانیِ زبان انگلیسی در سطح دانشگاه وجود ندارد.

۲. هیچ اختلاف معنی‌داری بین دانشجویان مذکر و مؤنث در درکِ مطلبِ باعنوان و درکِ مطلبِ بی‌عنوان وجود ندارد.

به منظور آزمودن فرضیه‌های فوق یکصد و هشتاد دانشجوی دانشگاه آزادِ و دانشگاه فردوسیِ مشهد نمونهٔ آماریِ این تحقیق در نظر گرفته شدند.

در مرحلهٔ اول همهٔ این دانشجویان در آزمون Nelson Quickcheck Test شرکت کردند. یکصد سؤال چند گزینه‌ای بین این جامعهٔ آماری توزیع شد. آنگاه پس از استراحتی کوتاه متون درک مطلب بین آنها توزیع گردید.

در این مرحله ده متن درک مطلب از تستِ TOEFL 1992 انتخاب شد: پنج متنِ دارای عنوان و پنج متن بدون عنوان. دربارهٔ هریک از این دو نوع متن پنج سؤال مطرح شد و نتایج به‌دست‌آمده از طریق تکنیک‌های آماری، چون Anova و غیره، تحلیل گردید. آنگاه روشن گردید که در سطح ابتدایی و متوسط هر دو جنس (زن و مرد) درک مفهوم بهتری از متونِ باعنوان داشتند، اما، در سطح پیشرفته، هیچ اختلاف