The Role of Gender in Reading Comprehension of Short Stories Taught Through Awareness-Raising

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Abstract

The present study examines the role of gender in reading comprehension of short stories taught through awareness-raising among Iranian EFL learners. In so doing, twelve male and eighteen female learners with lower intermediate English proficiency were selected as the research sample. Next, they were randomly divided into two fifteen-member groups (i.e., a control group and an experimental group). The control group followed the conventional methods and the experimental group was taught the same short stories using awareness-raising activities. Consequently, an independent sample t-test was run. The obtained results indicate the experimental group demonstrates a better performance than the control one. According to the means, the female learners in both groups outperformed the male ones.

Keywords: Gender, Short Stories, Awareness-Raising, Reading Comprehension, EFL Learners

1. Introduction

In reading comprehension many interactive processes such as previous experience, topic familiarity, activation of relevant schemata, and purpose setting seem to be involved. One of the factors that seems to deserve more attention in this regard is the gender. Brantmeier (2004, p.4) argues that "only a small number of L2 reading studies have been conducted where gender is examined in the procedures and analysis and the findings reported in these studies are inconsistent." Reading is a process involving the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange of information from one person to another. Reading requires that the reader focus attention on the reading materials and integrate previously acquired knowledge and skills to comprehend what someone else has written. There have been a lot of researches on reading and reading comprehension. One of the most interesting areas in reading comprehension is related to schemata theory. This interesting line of research in the second language area concerns the effect on reading performance of readers' own internalized models or emotions and beliefs, consequently different internalized models or schemata, males will have greater comprehension achievement if they read the text which sound masculine and females will have greater comprehension achievement provided that they read text which are about feminine topics (Shah Mohammadi, 2011). Having a look at the revised pre-university English course book, one can truly recognize that nearly all of the text in this book with the topics such as sports and exercise (with a picture of man in running), global warming and man and space (with a picture of man in the space) are male oriented .Based on the result of previous researches on reading comprehension, Shah Mohammadi (2011) suggests:

• including balance of reading material, one half male oriented and one half female-oriented;

• including topics such as space, war, competition, sports for males;

• including topics such as house chores, humanities and baby sittings for females in high school levels of English course book; That both male and female have the equal chance to activate their pre-existent knowledge to comprehend the text.

A number of researches examining prior knowledge or familiarity of content and gender as key variables in comprehension have come to different conclusions. According to some studies, prior knowledge does not have much effect on reading comprehension (Hammadou, 1991; Peretz & Shoham, 1990). Gender differences studies reached different conclusions, some favoring males and others favoring females (Brantmeier, 2001, 2003; Bügel & Buunk, 1996; Yongqi, 2002). Most of these studies used gender-oriented reading texts and the findings suggest that there is a need for more research on L2/FL reading comprehension using gender-neutral text.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

To choose a homogeneous research sample, Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) was administered to 54 English learners from Iran Language Institute of University Students in Ahvaz, Iran. They were all supposed to be intermediate learners since their English language proficiency had been evaluated by experienced instructors of the institute earlier and entrance placement exams had been administered before their enrollment. However, only 32 of them were qualified to participate in this study. Finally, 30 learners with lower-intermediate English proficiency were selected based on their availability. All

the participants were Iranians, L1 speakers of Persian, and English learners. The participants were both male and female whose ages ranged from 20 to 30 and had been learning English as a foreign language for at least two years in the aforementioned institute. Next, they were arranged in two groups and were randomly assigned as control (n=15, receiving no treatment) and experimental groups (n=15, receiving treatment).

The researcher also used another 30 learners with the same proficiency and age range for the pilot study. The participants in the pilot study were selected from Sadegh Language Institute of Namin, Ardebil, Iran. Considering age range, gender, and proficiency, the participants in the pilot study were approximately similar to the participants of the main study. However, to make sure of their proficiency, they were given the Oxford Quick Placement test.

2.2. Instruments

At the first stage of the study, a general proficiency test was administered to choose a homogeneous sample. Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT) (Geranpayeh, 2003) was used since it is a flexible test of English language proficiency developed by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL to give teachers a reliable and time-saving method of finding a student's level of English. It is also quick and easy to administer and is ideal for placement testing and examination screening. The QPT consists of two parts. Part 1 (questions 1-40) is taken by all candidates and is aimed at students who are at or below intermediate level. The second part (questions 41-60), is taken only by candidates who score more than 35 out of 40 on the first part and can be used for higher ability students. It has sixty multiple-choice questions including 30 multiple-choice questions dealing with reading comprehension and another 30 multiple choice questions on grammar and vocabulary. The QPT takes 30

minutes to administer and the test taker's level is determined according to the obtained score.

Two researcher-made achievement tests designed to evaluate the participants' reading comprehension proficiency of short stories administered at the end of each session were the second instrument in the study. The achievement tests were the same for both groups and consisted of 18 and 20 multiple choice items on reading comprehension of James Joyce's *Araby* and James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, respectively. The validity of the tests was examined by the experts in Applied Linguistics at Shahid Chamran University and the reliability of the tests was calculated by implementing a pilot study among another lower intermediate language learners and analyzing the obtained data by Kuder and Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20). The reliability of multiple-choice reading comprehension tests for James Joyce's *Araby* and James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* were calculated 0.65 and 0.79, respectively. Also, item difficulty for all the tests was calculated and those tests which did not fall within 60%-80% item difficulty range were omitted.

2.3. Material

The materials in the study consisted of two short stories, including James Joyce's *Araby* and James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* according to which the control group was taught through ordinary methods of short story teaching including a warm-up that gets students thinking about topic of the short story, comparison activities, that is, to point to similarities and differences between the short story and non-literary texts (Shackleton, 1987), pre-teaching new vocabulary, and asking some general comprehension questions after the students have read the story. On the other hand, the experimental group was

taught the same short stories using Awareness Raising technique, which will be completely explained in the next part.

2.4. Treatment

Each short story was taught in one seventy-five-minute session to both groups separately. The control group did not receive any special treatment for teaching the short stories and followed the conventional methods. Conversely, the experimental group was taught the same short stories in the same course of time using awareness raising activities, such as teaching the elements of short stories such as theme, symbol, characterization, point of view, and plot, providing a list of key words and specific words contextualized in some sample sentences, and raising the awareness of the learners about the cultural elements to enhance their knowledge of the cultural issues of considered short stories. The participants of the experimental groups were also provided with the biographical information on the author to raise the learners' awareness of the context of the short story in question.

2.5. Procedures

At the first step, a proficiency test was administered to homogenize the participants. Then, they were randomly divided and assigned into two groups i.e., an experimental group and a control one. Next, a pilot study was conducted by the researcher on another group of learners to explore the reliability of the researcher-made multiple choice questions of the said short stories. The pilot study was run with 30 lower intermediate language learners. After the reliability of the questions was confirmed, the researcher used them in the study.

The control group did not have any specific treatment and was taught short stories using the conventional methodology, one short story in each session. The participants, then, read the short story and answered the comprehension questions. It took the participants of this group about forty-five minutes to an hour to be taught the stories and answer the questions.

On the other hand, the experimental group received treatment sessions. Depending on the length and the difficulty of the short stories, treatment sessions took about an hour to seventy-five minutes and continued for two sessions. The process went on for two sessions, one session for each short story. At the end of each session the participants took the corresponding test.

3. Results

After the required data were collected, using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS)version 21, the researcher ran descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) for describing the collected data. To investigate any possible differences between the experimental and control groups' reading comprehension of the short stories, an independent sample t-test was run.

3.6.1. Descriptive Results of James Joyce's Araby

Table 1 provides the descriptive results of both control and experimental groups' performance in James Joyce's *Araby*.

Table 1. *Descriptive Results of both Groups in James Joyce's Araby*

Araby	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	15	12.6667	2.35028
Control	15	11.6000	2.26148

Results in the table 1 indicate that the mean of the experimental group is 12.6667 and the mean of the control group is 11.6000 which means that the experimental group had better performance than the control one.

Table 2. *Descriptive Results of males and Females Performance in James Joyce's Araby*

Araby	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental group Females	10	12.9000	2.13177
Males	5	12.2000	2.94958
Control group Females	8	12.1250	2.03101
Males	7	11.0000	2.51661

As shown in table 2, the mean score of females in the experimental group is 12.9000 and the mean of females in the control group is 12.1250. Also, the mean of males in the experimental group is 12.2000 and the mean of males in the control group is 11.0000 which means the females in both groups outperformed the males.

3.6.2. Descriptive Results of James Thurber's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

Table 3 indicates the descriptive results of both control and experimental groups' performance in James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

Table 3. *Descriptive Results of both Groups in James Thurber's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	15	16.6000	2.22967
Control	15	15.0667	2.46306

The table shows that the mean of the experimental group is 16.6000 and the mean of the control group is 15.0667. Therefore, the outperformance of the experimental group is concluded.

Table 4. *Descriptive Results of Males and Females Performance in James Thurber's the Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental group Females	10	17.6000	1.17379
Males	5	14.6000	2.60768
Control group Females	8	16.2500	2.31455
Males	7	13.7143	1.97605

According to table 4, the mean score of females in the experimental group is 17.6000 and the mean of females in the control group is 16.2500. Also, the mean of males in the experimental group is 14.6000 and the mean of males in the control group is 13.7143 which means the females in both groups outscored the males.

3.6.3. Inferential Results of *James Joyce's Araby*

Table 5 contains the results of both groups' performance on reading comprehension of James Joyce's *Araby*.

Table 5. Results of the Comparison between Control and Experimental Groups'
Performances in James Joyce's Araby

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Diff.	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.101	0.754	1.267	28	0.216	1.06667	0.84214	-0.65839	2.791
Equal variances not assumed			1.267	27.959	0.216	1.06667	0.84214	-0.65850	2.791

There is strong evidence of the lack of difference in the mean scores of both groups and it is assumed that the two sample means are the same. The p-value is 0.76 (rounded) and since it is greater than 0.05 the assumption of equality of variances is not rejected. So, a t-test based on this assumption is made and this way leads to p-value=0.216 that suggests there is no difference in the size of the score variances ($p>0.05$). Consequently, it may not be appropriate here to use the alternative version of the t-test given in the second row of the table.

3.6.4. Inferential Results of James Thurber's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

Table 6 indicates the SPSS output results for the performance of both groups in reading comprehension of the said short story. The table contains the results of applying two versions of the independent samples t-test, as it is described in the

following, among which this study has to do with the first row i.e., homogeneity of variance.

Table 6. *Results of the Comparison between Control and Experimental Groups' Performances in James Thurber's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.028	0.86	1.78	28	0.08	1.533	0.857	-0.223	3.290
Equal variances not assumed			1.78	27.72	0.08	1.533	0.857	-0.233	3.291

As it can be seen, the results given in the first row (t=1.78, df=28, *p*> 0.05), indicate that there is strong evidence of the lack of difference in the mean scores of both groups and it is assumed that the two sample means are the same. The p-value is 0.86 and since it is greater than 0.05 the assumption of equality of variances is not rejected. So, a t-test based on this assumption is made and this way leads to p-value = 0.08 that suggests there is no difference in the size of the score variances (*p*>0.05). Consequently, it may not be appropriate here to use the alternative version of the t-test given in the second row of the table.

4. Discussion

The present study investigated the role of gender in reading comprehension short stories taught through awareness raising. According to the findings, in the stories females had better performance than their male counterparts in both groups. It may result from the fact that in reading comprehension many interactive processes such as previous experience, topic familiarity, activation of relevant schemata, and purpose setting seem to be involved.

The results also confirmed that awareness raising activities had a positive effect on the reading comprehension of the Iranian EFL learners although the effect was not significant. In other words, teaching literary elements of short stories and giving the awareness of how to read short stories to the participants of the experimental group enhanced their reading comprehension of the aforementioned short stories. The outperformance of the experimental group suggested that the participants who received awareness raising activities were more successful in comprehension of the short stories than the participants who did not have any specific treatment and followed the ordinary methods of short story teaching. The participants of the experimental group were also much more involved and interested in the course. Therefore, the results of the present study can support the previous findings that awareness raising enhances learning, in general, and reading comprehension, in particular.

These results are also in line with those studies conducted by Nosratnia and Roustayi (2014) and some other studies revealing the facilitative role of awareness raising in enhancing reading comprehension. Awareness raising results in a great improvement in the degree of the motivation of language learners in their more efficient performance on reading comprehension of literary texts.

5. Conclusion

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive skill in which the reader should construct meaning by using all the available resources from both the text and background knowledge (Essays, UK). Several studies, which have investigated some independent variables that are linked to students' abilities to comprehend different texts, have conflicting findings. While some found important differences in boys' and girls' verbal abilities in favor of girls, some others did not find gender differences in their subjects' comprehension abilities (Essays, UK).

This study explored gender differences in reading comprehension of two selected short stories. According to the obtained results, the female students outperformed the female counterparts in their comprehension of both short stories in both groups. This outperformance may result from many factors including previous experience, topic familiarity, activation of relevant schemata, and purpose setting. These results suggest that further studies are still required to examine the role of gender in SLA.

As an innovation, the present study used the concept of Awareness-Raising (AR) for teaching the literary genre of short story and examined the role of gender in reading comprehension of short stories. Regarding the obtained results, the facilitative role of AR in reading comprehension of the short stories is accepted. Thus, it is recommended to examine the effect of AR in teaching other literary genres.

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