

Learner's Gender, Reading Strategies, and Reading Performance in Expository and Argumentative Macro-genres

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Abstract

This study investigated whether learners' gender could make differences in their reading comprehension and use of reading strategies in the expository and argumentative macro-genres. To this end, six short macro-genre-based reading passages with the same readability indices and length were prepared from which appropriate reading tests were constructed and administered to a total of 50 EFL intermediate male (n = 21) and female (n = 29) students. This was followed by administering reading strategies questionnaires to explore the learners' use of reading strategies in the macro-genres. Results of the study indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female students' reading comprehension in the macro-genres. It was also shown that there was no significant difference between male and female learners in the overall use of reading strategies in the same macro-genres. The findings of the study hold implications for language teaching and testing, teacher training, and curriculum design.

Key Words: gender, macro-genre, reading strategy, reading

The role of reading in man's life seems to be unquestionable. Reading skill has always been the focus of attention in instructing people and developing literacy among societies and it has been investigated in many different aspects (e.g., L1, L2, and ESP, reading styles, reading strategies, reading models). Such an important role along with the research findings has opened the eager and curious minds to work on new fields of the reading skill or to replicate the others' studies in new conditions and contexts to see if the same findings can be obtained. Learners' use of reading strategies in reading texts is one of the interesting topics on which many research studies have been conducted. Furthermore, the role of the learners' gender in reading comprehension, on the one hand, and their employment of reading strategies, on the other, seem to be interesting enough for language practitioners to study. Even more interesting are the learners' behaviors in understanding macro-genre-based reading texts like the argumentative and expository ones with respect to the employment of reading strategies and reading comprehension. Male and female learners may not behave similarly in understanding genre-based reading texts (e.g., argumentative, expository). Although these two types of macro-genres are used in the academic courses of language learners a lot, they are underrepresented in EFL/ESL literature. This study aims to explore the male and female learners' performances in comprehending the argumentative and expository macro-genre-based reading texts as well as their employment of reading strategies in these macro-genres.

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1. Review of Literature

1. 1. Gender Differences and Reading Comprehension

Gender refers to the social characteristics of people which are commonly associated with being male or female (Millard, 1997). Differences in the learner's gender identity often lead to differences in intellectual activities including reading. The characteristics associated with being male or female provide a better predictor of the learner's reading skill or motivation to read. From an early age, reading has been recognized as an activity more closely associated with females than males (Millard, 1997). For example, in a survey, learners reported that their mothers read more than their fathers, and that their mothers played a more significant role in teaching them how to read (see Millard, 1997). This point may help explain why learners consider reading to be more a feminine activity (see Dwyer, 1974). Reading can be contrasted with other academic subjects, such as mathematics, science, and sports, which are usually associated more with males (Meece et al., 2006). Indeed, in a review of the literature in this area, Meece et al. (2006) found that boys considered mathematics, science, and sport as interesting topics while girls placed a higher value on reading.

1. 2. Gender Differences in Strategic Behavior

Strategy employment and use in the context of second language acquisition may vary depending on the specific language skill that is being examined. There are few studies that have investigated the strategy use in specific L2 tasks and its relationship with gender. Among the few examples are Young and Oxford (1997) who investigated strategy use by males and females in L1 (English) and L2 (Spanish) settings; they found no significant difference in strategy use in L2 reading comprehension. However, males reported monitoring their reading pace and paraphrasing strategies more often than females did. In light of these results, it can be concluded that gender-based differences in strategic behavior can be related to the level of specific strategies used to comprehend L2 passages.

1. 3. Expository Tasks and Reading Comprehension

Expository texts are written to convey, describe, or explain non-fictional information (Yopp&Yopp, 2006). Such text types include structural organization of the concepts and propositions which differentiate them from the rest of texts. In comparison with narrative tasks, for instance, expository tasks are more difficult for ESL/EFL learners to understand because they have specific text structures, contain technical vocabulary, and require readers to have more background knowledge (Yopp&Yopp, 2006). Moreover, compared to both descriptive and narrative genre types, this task type seems to be more demanding for learners because of the kind of lexical items and specific structures of the text. It also seems to be more difficult in the assessments provided by the learners based on their perceived difficulty of the task (Yopp&Yopp, 2006).

Previous familiarity and background information of expository task type is an asset. Readers who know how an expository text is organized and how it works have a better idea of how to read and understand its content (Storch, 2001). When the learners know that a text has a cause and effect structure, for instance, they can focus on finding the cause(s) and result(s) that the text is highlighting. Once they know what to focus on while reading, they get a clear thought-frame of the text, which helps them use more efficient reading strategies and better comprehend the content of the reading material.

1. 4. Argumentative Tasks and Reading Comprehension

Argumentative tasks are defined as the use of a statement in a logical process of argumentation to support or weaken another statement whose validity is questionable or contentious. The purpose of argumentation task is to resolve a difference of opinion (Nemeth &Kormos, 2001). This argumentative statement may be in verbal or written mode of the language. Argumentation is, furthermore, an interaction that arises in the context of other interactional businesses in which there exists a difference of opinion between two parties (Nemeth &Kormos, 2001).

A feature of argumentative tasks is the reasoning demand in the processes of resolving an argumentation. In a study conducted by Kuiken and Vedder (2007), the role of reasoning demands in such tasks was investigated. The study findings partially supported Robinson's (2001a) cognition hypothesis, in which greater accuracy was elicited in the more complex version than in the less complex one, but no significant effect of task complexity was found on syntactic and lexical complexity. Another characteristic of the argumentative task is that it provides more scaffolding, both in terms of more extensive task input and the dialogic nature of the collaborative talk (Bygate, 1999).

1. 5. Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. *Is there a significant difference between male and female learners' reading comprehension in the argumentative and expository macro-genres?*
2. *Is there a statistically significant difference between the male and female learners' use and employment of reading strategies in the argumentative and expository macro-genres?*

1. 6. Research Hypotheses

H₁: There is a significance difference between male and female learners' reading comprehension in the argumentative and expository macro-genres.

H₂: There is a significant difference between the male and female learners' use and employment of reading strategies in the argumentative and expository macro-genres.

2. Method

2. 1. Participants

In this study, 50 male (n= 21) and female (n= 29) students majoring in English in the English department of Lorestan University (Iran) were randomly (based on systematic random sampling) selected as the intended sample. The participants were second year students having at least seven years of experience in English in academic centers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 with an age mean of 19.6. Based on the scores the learners got from a proficiency test (a standard test administered to determine participants' proficiency level in English), they were judged to be at the intermediate level [the criterion for specifying the participants' level was based on "Guide to EFL Exams and Levels: Cambridge International Book Center" (intermediate level falls between 43 and 61 of TOEFL test score)]. The participants expressed that they were voluntary and eager to take part in the study; they were also aware of how long the test might last and the test steps. They reported having no special experience in attending formal or informal preparatory classes for genre-based reading texts. The participants reported Lacki (a regional language spoken in the north of Lorestan province, Iran) and Lori (the dominant language spoken in the center and some other regions of Lorestan province, Iran) as their first languages and Persian as their second language.

2. 2. Design

This study employed a descriptive and correlational between-group design in which the male learners' use of reading strategies as well as their reading comprehension was compared with those of the female learners in the argumentative and expository macro-genre-based text types through running *t*-tests.

2. 3. Materials

Two main instruments were used in this study: reading strategies questionnaire, developed by Oxford (1990), and short reading texts for each of the argumentative and expository macro-genres.

In the case of the reading strategies questionnaire, Cronbach alpha, a measure of internal consistency, was chosen as the most appropriate reliability index. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient is used on continuous data such as the Likert-type scale in the reading strategies questionnaire (see Oxford & Burry, 1995). With the Persian translation of reading strategies questionnaire with 50 participants, the reliability index was .90. Concurrent criterion-related validity was employed to determine the validity of the instrument [criterion-related validity involves either predictive or concurrent relationships between the key variable, in this case reading strategy use, and other important variables, in this case language proficiency. Concurrent validity, as one form of criterion-related validity, is demonstrated when data are collected for all variables at one time (see Oxford & Burry, 1995)]. The correlation between the reading strategies questionnaire and participants' scores in general English proficiency test was statistically significant, $r = .70$, $p = .030$. Besides, to prepare comparable reading texts, Coh-Metrix Common Core formula as the reading Text Ease and Readability Assessor (TERA), developed by Crossley and Greenfield (2008), was used. Moreover, in order to determine the proficiency level of the participants, a standard proficiency reading test was used.

2. 4. Procedures

In the first step, some passages for the argumentative and expository macro-genres were selected and their readabilities were computed through running the Coh-Metrix formula (TERA: text ease and readability assessor) (see Crossley & Greenfield, 2008). Coh-Metrix analysis provided the readability indices for the selected reading texts. Furthermore, in the pilot study for the selected reading passages administered to the pilot group (20 EFL majors studying in Payame Noor University, Khorambad Branch, Iran), all the items meeting the item facility value between .25 and .75 and item discriminatory value more than .30 (see Baker, 1989) were selected to be used in the testing stage. Furthermore, Kuder-Richardson 21 formula was applied to determine the texts reliability figures. The reliability indices were .85, and .75 for the argumentative and expository macro-genres, respectively. Then, texts falling in the intermediate range in each macro-genre were selected and given to 80 EFL students. Based on Cambridge Guide to TEFL Exams and Levels, the students whose scores fell between 49% and 60% of the total score (taken from TOEFL proficiency Test) were judged to be in the intermediate level. Fifty participants with scores in the intermediate level were, finally, selected as the research sample.

As long reading passages may lead to learners' boredom and consequently reduce the reliability and validity of the test (see Henning, 2012), for each macro-genre instead of using one long text, three shorter ones were prepared and appropriate reading tests were constructed. For the two macro-genres, accordingly, six short reading texts were prepared for administration, altogether. Preliminary instructions of how to perform the test were given to the participants as well as proctors before taking the test. In the first week, the argumentative macro-genre reading tests were administered. This was followed by the reading strategies questionnaire. With three days interval, the same steps were followed for the expository macro-genres. Moreover, to obtain more valid and reliable results, the reading strategies questionnaire was translated into Persian. Correspondences between the original and Persian equivalents of each item in the questionnaire were judged by three experienced English teachers. The translation output was, finally, judged and approved of by an expert in the field. Learners' options in reading strategies and their performances in reading macro-genre texts were, then, compiled for statistical analysis.

3. Results

3. 1. Results for Male and Female Groups in the Use of Reading Strategies

As shown in Table 1, the mean scores of the female participants in the argumentative and expository macro-genres in the use and application of reading strategies are bigger than those of the males.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Female and Male Groups in Reading Strategies

Macro-genre	Sex	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Argumentative	Female	29	99.17	16.61	3.08
	Male	21	91.71	25.83	5.63
Expository	Female	29	101.3	17.10	3.17
	Male	21	93.76	25.64	5.59

Note: SD and SEM stand for standard deviation and standard error of means, respectively.

As indicated in Table 2, in the argumentative macro-genre, the differences between the male and female groups in the use of reading strategies did not reach statistical significant level, $t = 1.24$, $p = .220$. In the expository macro-genres, there were no statistically significant differences between the compared groups, either, $t = 1.24$, $p = .218$.

Table 2 Independent Samples of *t*-Test for Male and Female Groups in Reading Strategies in the Argumentative and Expository Macro-genres

Genre		CI								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	MD	SED	Lower	Upper
Argumentative	EVA	.761	.387	1.24	48	.220	7.45	-6.00	4.6	19.52
	EVNA			1.16	37.73	.254	7.45	6.42	-5.63	20.55
Expository	EVA	.625	.433	1.24	48	.218	7.54	6.04	-4.59	19.69
	EVNA			1.17	32.54	.249	7.54	6.43	-5.54	20.64

Note: EVA, EVNA, CI, MD, SED stand for equal variance assumed, equal variance not assumed, confidence interval, mean difference, and standard error difference, respectively.

Results of descriptive statistics indicated that female participants outperformed the male participants in the use of reading strategies. The results of *t*-test comparisons conducted between male and female groups regarding the use of reading strategies in the two macro-genres, however, indicated that the two groups belonged to the same population and there was no statistically significant difference observed between them with the alpha level set at .05. Accordingly, research question one of the current study cannot be supported.

3. 2. Results for Male and Female Groups in Reading Performance

In reading comprehension in the argumentative and expository macro-genres, the male learners outperformed the female learners with respect to the simple statistics: the mean scores of male learners were bigger than those of female learners in both the argumentative and expository macro-genres (see Table 3).

Table 3 Group Statistics for Reading Performance in the Argumentative and Expository Macro-genres

Genre	Sex	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Argumentative	Female	29	9.58	5.98	1.11
	Male	21	9.61	4.12	.90
Expository	Female	29	6.27	4.55	.84
	Male	21	7.90	3.65	.79

Note: SD and SEM stand for standard deviation and standard error of mean, respectively.

As shown in Table 4, there were no significant differences between the two groups (i.e., males and females) in the argumentative, $t = -.022$, $p = .98$, and expository, $t = -1.35$, $p = .18$, macro-genres in terms of the participants' reading performances.

Table 4 Independent Samples of *t*-Test for Comparing Groups in the Argumentative and Expository Macro-genres in Reading Performance

Genre		CI								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(two	MD	SED	Lower	Upper
Argumentative	EVA	4.24	.045	-.022	48	.983	-.032	1.51	-3.08	3.01
	EVNA			-.023	47.92	.982	-.032	1.43	-2.90	2.84
Expository	EVA	2.58	.098	-1.35	48	.183	-1.62	1.20	-4.05	.79
	EVNA			-1.40	47.42	.168	-1.62	1.16	-3.96	.71

Note: EVA, EVNA, CI, MD, SED stand for equal variance assumed, equal variance not assumed, confidence interval, mean difference, and standard error difference, respectively.

The general finding from the male and female groups compared in reading comprehension in the argumentative and expository macro-genres was that the involved groups belonged to the same population in terms of reading comprehension. The differences between the groups compared did not reach statistical significance with alpha level set at .05. Research question two of the current study cannot, therefore, be supported.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study was motivated by the assumption that the learner's gender might make significant differences in the employment and use of reading strategies as well as reading comprehension in the argumentative and expository macro-genres. Results of *t*-test comparisons between the male and female groups indicated that there was no statistically significant difference observed between the two groups in the use of reading strategies in the argumentative and expository macro-genres.

Both male and female groups have the same field of study and it seems that this common background might have led them to use the reading strategies in similar ways: the previous learning experiences in text types may have developed in parallel ways so that both groups had comparable repertoires of reading strategies. The way both genders approached the comprehension of the two macro-genre texts might have also been influenced by the students' previous experiences of tackling the reading problems in such text types. Previous experiences may have affected both genders' reading comprehension in similar ways, as well. Selection of intermediate level passages might have made the groups not to use specific reading strategies so that the differences between the groups involved were kept unnoticed. Presenting the students with higher levels and more challenging texts may, accordingly, contribute to the appearance of significant differences between the groups compared regarding the employment of reading strategies. Passage of time can decrease the gender differences in intellectual abilities including reading comprehension as well as reading strategy employment between the male and female learners (Rao et al., 2007; Zhang & Annul, 2008). Viewed psychologically, lack of significant difference between male and female students may also be attributed to the point that the students were at a level (in terms of psychological maturation and development) that the differences between them regarding reading strategy use levelled off.

The current study findings corroborate those reported by Solak and Atlay (2014) where similar uses of reading strategies (in terms of frequency and type of reading strategies) in understanding reading texts by both genders were found. The current findings also support Tahiri and Divsar's (2011) findings claiming that gender and educational level cannot make significant difference between EFL students' reading performance. The findings of this study are, moreover, compatible with Taki and Soleimani's (2012) findings reporting no significant difference between males and females in the use of reading strategies in understanding reading passages.

The next issue examined in this study was the relationship between males' and females' reading comprehension in the argumentative and expository texts. Results of the comparisons conducted between the male and the female learners revealed that there were no significant differences between the groups involved with regard to their reading comprehension. The current finding may be related to background information and previous experiences as a result of common course of study for both genders. The two groups of learners might have employed similar reading techniques and strategies which, in turn, led to comparable reading performance. The finding may also be attributed to the selection of reading passages not being challenging enough for the differences between the groups to appear. Presenting the groups with more challenging passages probably lets the differences between the two groups show themselves. Participants of this study reported having similar language backgrounds (i.e., Lacki and Lori) which might have made the students process the reading passages similarly. Equal time spent on studying English might also have contributed to the lack of significant difference between the male and female learners' reading comprehension in these macro-genre-based texts.

The current study findings are in line with those reported by Meece and Miller (1999), Durik et al. (2006), Logan and Johnston (2009), and Sotoudehnama and Asadian (2011) in which no significant differences between male and female learners' reading comprehension were indicated. The findings of the study are, however, in contradiction with those of Coles and Hall (2002), Hall and Coles (1999), Sainsbury and Schagen (1999), and Smith (1990). In these studies, females were reported to significantly outperform the males in the comprehension of the reading texts. Bügel and Buunk (1996), and Dörnyei (2005), and Al-Shumaimeri (2006) showed that the male students performed significantly better than the female students in their reading performance of a familiar and an unfamiliar text. The findings of the current study hold implications for genre-based reading materials, teacher training, ESP courses, and testing.

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