Learners' Gender, Reading Comprehension, and Reading Strategies in Descriptive and Narrative Macro-genres

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Abstract—This study investigated whether learners' gender could make difference in their reading comprehension and use of reading strategies in descriptive and narrative macro-genres. To this end, six short macro-genre-based reading passages with the same readability 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 administrating reading strategies questionnaires to explore the learners' use of reading strategies in the descriptive and narrative macro-genres. Results of the study indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female students' reading comprehension in these macro-genres. It was also shown that there was no significant difference observed between male and female learners in the overall use and employment of reading strategies in the descriptive and narrative macro-genres. The findings of the study hold implications for language teaching and testing, teacher training, and curriculum design.

Index Terms—descriptive and narrative macro-genres, reading strategy, reading comprehension

I. INTRODUCTION

In the area of reading research, gender is frequently explored as a mode of analysis (e.g., Logan & Johnston, 2010). Males and females have been shown to differ in many aspects of their reading choices (Coles & Hall, 2002; Merisuo-Storm, 2006), frequency of reading (Coles & Hall, 2002), attitudes towards reading (Coles & Hall, 2002; Logan & Johnston, 2009; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004), motivation to read (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010), competency beliefs in reading (Wigfield et al., 1997), value of reading (Durik, Vida, & Eccles, 2006; Marinak & Gambrell, 2010; Wigfield et al., 1997), and reading skill (Ming-Chui & McBride-Chang, 2006; Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007). There are some studies (e.g., Brantmeier, 2004; Chiu & McBride-Chang, 2006) on the role of the learners' genders where significant differences between male and female learners in the reading comprehension have been reported. The authors of these studies reported that females outscored the males in their reading comprehensions, in general. There are, however, some other studies (e.g., Fahim & Barjesteh, 2012; Sotoudenama & Asadian, 2011) in which no significant difference between male and female learners' reading performance were indicated. Almost any reading text employed to develop the learners' proficiency in the reading skill at different levels of instruction shares some characteristics of these two macro-genres. Whether learner's gender plays any substantial role in understanding these text types and in employing the required reading strategies are issues of interest in the literature where no considerable study has been reported.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. 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 (Millard, 1997). This point may help explain why learners consider reading to be more a feminine activity (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. Learners' motivation to read is an area where consistent and substantial gender differences are found (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). This characteristic is stronger among the female learners than the male ones. Motivation is the individual characteristic that is supposed to play an important role in a learner's reading comprehension. The learners' success in the reading skill is associated with their motivation to read because it is regarded as an activity requiring deep involvement on the part of the readers (Gottfried, 1990; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

It is very likely to find variations in the extent to which males and females identify themselves with masculine and feminine traits; therefore, it is interesting to examine whether learners' reading attainment or motivation to read is better predicted by their gender identity. Pajares and Valiante (2001), for instance, found that gender differences in performance and motivation could be explained by gender orientation. It seems logical to think that if gender differences are found in reading motivation and reading comprehension, then gender identity can explain more variance in these variables. It is also implied that gender identity may explain significant variances in the performance of learners in reading various text types.

B. 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, reading strategies, and paraphrasing strategies more often than females did. In light of these results, it may be concluded that gender-based differences in strategic behavior can be related to the level of specific strategies used to comprehend L2 passages. Similarly, Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, and Sumrall (1993) and Oxford and Nykos (1989) reported that females used more cognitive strategies than males. A number of studies in this field (e.g., Kaylani, 1996; Sheorey, 1999) also found that females used significantly higher number of metacognitive strategies than males. Based on the research findings reported by Chavez (2001), it may be proposed that the main goals behind understanding strategy use and gender differences are to make L2 teachers aware of how gender can affect development and achievement of L2 reading, to support L2 teachers to use strategy awareness, to help the students of both genders improve their L2 reading skill through employing appropriate reading strategies.

C. Narrative Tasks and Reading Comprehension

Narrative task is a well-established task type in EFL/ESL literature which is frequently researched. Such a task type usually involves the creation of a story in response to some kind of stimulus: a picture strip or a short film, for example. As in most of the cases, the stimuli given are purely visual and their verbal representations depend on the storyteller to a great extent, though it is also used in the written mode. This task type, further, seems ideal as far as the manifestation of creativity is concerned (Albert & Kormos, 2004).

It is supposed that different task types make learners use a set of specific linguistic features and enforce them to resort to certain reading strategies. Narrative tasks, for example, are more complex both syntactically and lexically in comparison with argumentative tasks (Albert & Kormos, 2004). Such complexity in structure makes learners use specific reading strategies to overcome the possible comprehension problems. Robinson (1995), who studied narrative tasks of varying cognitive complexity, found that lexical variety (measured by the type-token ratio) and accuracy (measured by the number of error-free communication units) increased in cognitively more complex narrative tasks. Moreover, grammatical structure of narrative tasks affects learners' performance, that is, L2 performance is affected in predictable ways by design features and the structure of narrative tasks (Tavakoli & Foster, 2008). Cognitive load is another factor affecting learners' performance in understanding narrative tasks. The low cognitive load of narrative tasks requires the learners to take the narration in the present tense while they read the narrative text. This condition is called the here-and-now condition. High cognitive load, on the other hand, requires them to read the text and perceive the narration in the past tense which is called the there-and-then condition (Robinson et al., 1995). Evidence gathered from both child first language acquisition and adult SLA research shows that past time reference to events dislocated in time and space like that in a high cognitive load of a task is a more effortful and later developed ability than present tense reference to contextualized events like that of a low cognitive load of a narration task (Robinson et al., 1995).

Narrative tasks which require learners to signal time relations, to locate events and actions appropriately may cause difficulty for the readers. Such reading tasks can lead learners to focus on the internal and textual connections between elements of a narrative (Bygate, 1999). These tasks might be expected to make greater demands on learners' imaginative resources and on their ability to develop a fictitious scenario and maintain the discourse single-handedly, which could affect the difficulty of the reading task used and the number and type of strategies that they use while reading.

D. Descriptive Tasks and Reading Comprehension

Describing the characteristics of someone or something is the basic feature of descriptive tasks which can distinguish them from other task types. The language used in the description has ostensible patterns. In producing linear

descriptions of figures, for example, learners tend to facilitate the task by sequencing the content in one of a small number of ways, leading to specific patterns in the language (Al-Sohbani, 2014; Bax, 2006). The physical characteristics of the intended thing to be described can affect the grammatical structures required for the description. The nature of objects physically related within a room, for instance, whose layout is to be described, can affect the order in which nouns are combined within prepositional phrases, and this can affect the choice of preposition (Hyland, 2008). In other words, not only the discourse structure of genre but also the use of specific grammatical features can be affected by the nature of the descriptive task. These textual features are thought to affect the learners' reading comprehension in such texts.

In descriptive reading tasks, the reader may perceive the description of what he/she reads in the text using different techniques and strategies for descriptions. Therefore, the reading strategies which are employed for the description task are influenced by the structure of the task which can, in turn, affect the learners' understanding of the descriptive task. The description can be done from various angles depending on the context and learners' experience, inclinations, and the perceived difficulty of the descriptive task (Butzkam, 2000; Bygate, 1999; Zhou, 2011). Understanding such description can also be interpreted and made in various ways.

Although the language teaching literature is rich with regard to research studies and findings on various aspects of the concepts somehow related to the current study, in some specific fields and teaching areas not much work has been carried out and a sense of gap is felt. The correlation between male and female learners' reading comprehension of different macro-genre-based text types (i.e., descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and expository) as well as their use of reading strategies in the same texts, for example, seem to be important for EFL practitioners for which there seems to be a gap in literature. To fill the gap, the following research questions are posed:

1. *Is there a significant difference between male and female learners in their reading performances in the descriptive and narrative macro-genre-based text types?*

2. *Does gender make significant difference between male and female groups in their use of reading strategies in the descriptive and narrative macro-genres?*

III. METHOD

A. Participants

For this study, 50 participants from among students majoring in English in the English department of University of Lorestan were randomly (based on systematic random sampling) selected as the intended sample. Both males (n= 21) and females (n= 29) took part in the study. 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; they were at the intermediate level based on the scores they got from the proficiency test (a standard test administered to determine participants' proficiency level in English). The criterion for specifying the intermediate level of the participants 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 were voluntary and eager to take part in the study; they were also aware of how long the test might last. 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 northwest of Lorestan, Iran) and Lori (the dominant language spoken in the center and some other regions of Lorestan province) as their first languages and Persian as their second language.

B. Design

This study employed a descriptive and comparative between-group design in which the learners' use of reading strategies served as the independent variable and their reading comprehension in the four macro-genre-based text types as the dependent variable. Comparisons of the performance of the two groups in the four major text types were examined through running *t*-tests.

C. Materials

Two main instruments were used in this study: reading strategies questionnaire, developed by Oxford (1990), and three short reading texts for each of the two 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 (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 (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.

D. Procedures

For this correlational study, attempts were made to gather data from both qualitative and quantitative sources from the very beginning. In the process of selecting the intended reading texts for the research, some passages for the two macro-genres were selected and their readabilities were computed through the Coh-Metrix formula (Crossley & Greenfield, 2008) (TERA: text ease and readability assessor). 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, Lorestan, 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 .77 and .83 for the selected descriptive and narrative macro-genres, respectively.

Then, texts falling in the intermediate range in each 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 regarded as being in the intermediate level. Fifty participants with scores in the intermediate level were, finally, selected as the research sample.

Moreover, 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, 6 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, descriptive macro-genre reading texts were administered. This was followed by the reading strategies questionnaire. With three days interval, the same steps were followed for the narrative 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.

IV. RESULTS

A. 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 descriptive and narrative macro-genres in the use and application of reading strategies were bigger than those of the males.

TABLE 1.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR FEMALE AND MALE GROUPS IN READING STRATEGIES

Genre	Sex	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Descriptive	Female	29	100.06	15.55	2.88
	Male	21	94.28	12.79	2.79
Narrative	Female	29	96.89	15.35	2.85
	Male	21	89.80	25.27	5.51

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

Independent samples of t-test for male and female groups in the use of reading strategies in descriptive and narrative macro-genres showed that the differences between the compared groups were not statistically significant in the descriptive macro-genre, $t = 1.39$, $p = .169$; neither was the difference between the two groups statistically significant in the narrative macro-genre, $t = 1.23$, $p = .224$ (see Table 2).

TABLE 2.
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES OF T-TEST FOR MALE AND FEMALE GROUPS IN READING STRATEGIES IN DESCRIPTIVE AND NARRATIVE MACRO-GENRES

Genre		CI								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	MD	SED	Lower	upper
Descriptive	EVA	.285	596.	1.39	48	.169	5.78	4.14	-2.55	14.11
	EVNA			1.44	47.14	.156	5.78	4.01	-2.29	13.86
Narrative	EVA	1.72	195.	1.23	48	.224	7.08	5.75	-4.48	18.66
	EVNA			1.10	30.56	.263	7.08	6.20	-5.58	19.75

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

B. Results for Male and Female Groups in Reading Performance

As shown in Table 3, descriptive statistics results show that males outperformed the females in reading performance in the descriptive macro-genre. In the narrative macro-genre, in contrast, females outscored the males in reading comprehension.

TABLE 3.
GROUP STATISTICS FOR READING PERFORMANCE IN THE DESCRIPTIVE AND NARRATIVE MACRO-GENRES

Genre	Sex	N	Mean	SD	Standard error of Mean
Descriptive	Female	29	10.62	4.44	.82
	Male	21	12.38	3.38	.73
Narrative	Female	29	10.82	4.05	.75
	Male	21	10.76	4.66	1.01

Note: N and SD represent number of participants and standard deviation, respectively.

TABLE 4.
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES OF T-TEST FOR COMPARING GROUPS IN THE DESCRIPTIVE AND NARRATIVE MACRO-GENRES IN READING PERFORMANCE

Genre						CI				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	Mean Difference	Standard Error difference	Lower	Upper
Descriptive	EVA	3.62	.063	-1.52	48	.135	-1.76	1.15	-4.08	.56
	EVNA			-1.59	47.84	.118	-1.76	1.10	-3.98	.46
Narrative	EVA	.313	.578	.053	48	.958	.065	1.23	-2.42	2.55
	EVNA			.052	39.41	.959	.065	1.26	-2.49	262

Results of *t*-test comparisons drawn between males and females' reading performance in the descriptive macro-genre showed that there was no significant difference between the groups involved, $t = -1.52$, $p = .135$ (Table 4).

As shown in Table 4, there were no significant differences between the two groups in the narrative macro-genre, $t = .053$, $p = .95$, in terms of the participants' reading performances.

The general finding from the male and female groups comparison in reading comprehension as well as reading strategy use in the two macro-genres (i.e., descriptive and narrative) was that the compared groups belonged to the same population. The differences between the groups compared did not reach statistical significance with alpha level set at .05.

V. 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 descriptive and narrative 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 descriptive and narrative 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 strategies in similar ways: the previous learning experiences in such 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 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 leveled off.

In EFL/ESL literature, for the role of gender in learners' performance, two psychological hypotheses are referred to: the similarities hypothesis (Hyde, 2005) and the differences hypothesis (Buss, 1989). In the gender similarities hypothesis, Hyde (2005) holds that males and females are alike on most (but not all) psychological variables including the learner's reading comprehension. Extensive evidence from meta-analyses of research studies on gender differences supports the gender similarities hypothesis (Hyde, 2005). A few notable exceptions are some motor behaviors (e.g., throwing distance) and some aspects of sexuality, which show large gender differences. It is time to consider the costs of overinflated claims of gender differences. Arguably, such claims cause harm in numerous realms, including females' opportunities in the workplace and their performances in educational contexts (Hyde, 2005). The findings of the current study are in line with the gender similarities hypothesis because in reading comprehension as an intellectual activity, the gender made no statistically significant difference between the male and the female learners. Thus, at the intermediate level and EFL context, the gender similarities hypothesis is given credence and is supported.

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 Tahriri 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.

There are, however, other contradictory research findings regarding males and females' use of reading strategies. Alexander and Jetton (2000), for instance, found that females' overall strategy use was significantly higher than males. Lee (2012) found that males reported greater number of strategies use than females in the use and application of reading strategies. In both of these studies, the reported findings indicate that the learner's gender contributes to significant differences between male and female groups regarding their employment of reading strategies.

The next issue examined in this study was the relationship between males' and females' reading comprehension in the descriptive and narrative 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 (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.

Females are usually more motivated, both intrinsically and extrinsically, to read texts on various topics (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010; Pajares & Valiante, 2001). In EFL context and at the intermediate level, this motivation may have acted equally for both groups of learners which, in turn, did not let the differences in reading comprehension between the two groups reach the significant level.

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.

<h3 align="center">REFERENCES</h3>

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