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THE ROLE OF GENDER IN READING COMPREHENSION: AN ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE-LEVEL EFL STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION OF DIFFERENT GENRES

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of gender on comprehending different types of genre. The study involved 60 first year college students (30 males and 30 females) who were taking an advanced reading course at a government university in Turkey. The students were given three reading passages of different genres such as historical fiction, essay and fantasy and were asked to answer comprehension questions related to the passages. Descriptives statistics, one-way ANOVA and repeated measures ANOVA were employed to analyse the relationship between gender and the test scores for each text type. The results showed that (1) the participants, in general, were significantly better at understanding the essay than historical fiction and fantasy (2) there was not a statistically significant difference between males and females regarding comprehending the different types of genres (3) both the male and female participants were significantly better at understanding the essay than historical fiction and fantasy. The study offers suggestions regarding incorporating different types of genre in the classroom.

Keywords: reading comprehension, gender, genre, English as a foreign language

1. Introduction

Gender has been an area of particular concern to many researchers who work within scholarly disciplines including but not limited to sociolinguistics, anthropology and education, opening new perspectives and questions as to how certain behaviors are shaped by gender alone. In education, for instance, research on gender and classroom interaction identified behaviors different for each gender. According to a study conducted by Swan (1993), it was found that boys tend to be more outspoken, assertive, and talkative than girls; boys receive more attention from their teachers and occupy more space than girls etc. Similar results were also reported in Sommers and Lawrence (1992) and Redpath (1989). However, Swann also notes that as the behaviors of boys and girls may change depending on the context, the findings regarding gender differences should be interpreted as tendencies.

The present study raises the issue of gender differences in reading comprehension that is not only shaped by gender alone but by other factors such as genre. The study draws on research regarding gender and reading in the native language as well as reading in English as a foreign language (EFL). Before referring to such research, it is necessary, at this point, to digress briefly to mention about the factors that are involved in the reading process. Comprehending a text is a complicated process which requires knowledge about certain areas and the usage of a variety of skills. One has to have knowledge about vocabulary, grammar, information structure, and features of genre in order to understand a text. In addition, they should be able to identify the main and specific ideas in a text by skimming and scanning, determine the organization of a text, make inferences from the text, respond critically to the text and analyze the content information.

What is also highly important in understanding a text is using previously acquired knowledge. Referred to as Schema Theory in the literature, it involves using prior knowledge to understand and learn from a text (Rumelhart, 1980). Although the theory has been widely accepted among scholars, how it actually works for reading comprehension is still vague (Grabe, 2012). Scholars

(Carrell 1991; Hudson 1988; Rumelhalt 1980) began using the concept of “schema” in reading comprehension to emphasize that background knowledge plays an important role in understanding a text. Schema was defined as “a data structure for representing the genetic concepts stored in memory” (p.34) or “an abstract knowledge structure” (Anderson and Pearson 1984, p.42). Researchers came to realize that understanding a text well can only be possible if readers can make a connection between the text and their prior knowledge. As Tannen (1993a) states production and interpretation of both spoken and written texts are affected by peoples’ previous experiences, expectations and assumptions. When a reader becomes aware of textual stimuli during reading, he/she draws the relevant schema from memory into the text and schema is activated (Li & Cheng 1997).

Researchers (Carrell 1988; Urquhart & Weir 1998) proposed four kinds of schema: *formal*, *content*, *cultural* and *linguistic* and stated that if readers do not possess such background knowledge, they may have serious problems in understanding texts (Carrel & Eisterhold, 1983). Briefly, *formal schema* is associated with the background knowledge of the rhetorical structure of the text. In other words, formal schema refers to having background knowledge regarding how different types of texts are organized. For example, having knowledge about what novels are made up of i.e. setting, characteristics, events etc. constitutes formal schema. *Content schema* is related to the content of a text. It requires readers to know about a certain subject such as making reservations for a trip which involves asking questions, choosing dates, places and paying for the tickets. *Cultural schema* has to do with cultural knowledge in that when a reader reads a text, he/she makes a connection between the content of the text and his/her own beliefs, attitudes and values. Finally, *linguistic schema* refers to a person’s grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The more advanced this knowledge is, the better a reader can comprehend a text (Carrel & Eisterhold, 1983).

2. Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the role that gender plays on comprehending different types of genres both in a native language and in a foreign or second language. Studies that explored this kind of relationship analyzed the reading behaviors of first grade through graduate students coming from different cultural backgrounds. To give an example of younger students’ preferences, Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, and Shapiro (2007) conducted a study to determine the book preferences of first-grade boys and girls studying at four different schools in Canada. Data were collected from 40 students (20 males and 20 females) who were expected to select two books for school or home reading and explain the reasons for their selection. The findings showed that boys preferred to select storybooks and girls, information books. In a more recent study, Gallo and Ness (2013) examined 46 third-grade students’ (24 females and 22 males) perceptions of informational text, which the authors define as “factual accounts of social and natural occurrences and answers to questions” (p.111). Data collection occurred at a public school’s literacy program and included a student survey, individual interviews, and teacher observations during independent reading time. The results demonstrated that 17 male students chose an informational text, while 20 female students chose a fictional text. Similar results were also evident in Mead (2012) whose study involved a total of 12 students who were between the ages of 9 and 12. Based on the data that included multiple questionnaires and interviews, the author found that girls preferred to read mystery, fantasy, realistic fiction and historical fiction stories more than boys. Boys, on the other hand, preferred to read science fiction and non-fiction stories.

Studies also involved older students. In a study that examined students’ attitudes towards reading and writing and their preferences for books, Merisuo-Storm (2006) conducted a study that involved 145 fourth-grade students (67 males and 78 females) at a Finnish comprehensive school. The students’ ages ranged from 10 to 11. The students completed McKenna and Kear’s

Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (1999) according to which boys chose to read texts about comics followed by humor and adventure. The girls also preferred to read the same kinds of texts, however, their first choice was adventure followed by humor and comic. There was a significant difference between boys and girls with respect to reading comic books. Boys also preferred to read books about humor more than the girls but the difference between boys and girls was not significant. Moreover, poems, stories and fairytales were the least preferred texts by boys. The girls had significantly more positive attitudes towards poems than boys. Similar results were obtained by Willoughby (2010) who investigated the effects of gender stereotypes on book selection in a literacy tutoring program at a private college in western New York. Five 10 year old students (2 males and 3 females) participated in this study. The author brought the students to the library and asked them to choose three books that the students were interested in. After the students selected the books, they filled out a short questionnaire about the selection process of each book. The questions in the questionnaire involved the genre and the topic of the book, students' prior knowledge about the book, the author's background and other factors that may have had an effect on the book selection. The results showed that the most favorite types of books for both boys and girls were adventure, humor, followed by comics. Two boys and one girl were especially interested in adventure and comedy.

The effect of gender on understanding different types of genres has been examined in foreign or second language learning situations by many scholars and is increasingly being recognized. Brantmeier (2004b) conducted a study to determine the relationship between topic familiarity levels and reading comprehension of college students who were given two different authentic texts about violence along with a written recall task, a multiple-choice test, and a questionnaire. The results showed that females recalled more idea units and obtained higher scores on the multiple-choice test than the males. AL-Shumaimeri's (2005) study into content familiarity examined the differences between male and female students in terms of text comprehension. 132 college level EFL students (66 female and 66 male) who were enrolled at the College of Languages and Translation at King Saud University, Riyadh participated in the study. The students were expected to answer multiple-choice questions about two gender-neutral texts. The findings showed that content familiarity had a significant effect on participants' test scores. The study also showed that male students had significantly higher scores than female students. Keshavarz and Ashtarian (2008) examined the relationship between the gender of Iranian EFL learners and the reading comprehension of three types of texts including essay, history and short story. Sixty-two EFL students (28 males and 34 females) studying at Razi University in Iran participated in the study and answered a total of 24 multiple-choice items related to the passages. The results showed that females, in general, were better comprehenders of the passages. The results also showed that both males and females were better comprehenders of essay followed by history and short story.

Some studies found no significant differences between males and females with respect to text comprehension. Yazdanpanah (2007) carried out a study involving 187 intermediate-level students studying in Cyprus. The author gave the participants three reading comprehension passages. The topics of the two passages were male-oriented and one was gender neutral. According to the results, males were better at finding specific information in the passage, identifying referential information and matching titles with paragraphs than females while females obtained higher scores than males on identifying main ideas, guessing meaning from context and text coherence questions. Gender did not have a significant effect on reading comprehension. A recent study (Asgarabadi, Rouhi & Jafarigohar, 2015) analyzed whether male and female learners differed from each other with respect to their reading comprehension as well as use of reading strategies in descriptive and narrative macro-genres. A total of 50 EFL intermediate students (21 male and 29 female) were asked to answer questions regarding six

short macro-genre-based reading passages and reading strategies. The authors found no significant difference between males' and females' reading comprehension in the macro-genres.

3. The Present Study

The research discussed so far has been concerned with gender differences and reading comprehension in contexts outside of Turkey. Despite this research evidence that reports on the role of gender in comprehending different types of genres, little progress has been made with respect to investigating the same topic within a Turkish setting and with Turkish learners of EFL. Thus, given that each cultural context presents its challenges, the purpose of the present study is to examine whether or not gender would shape college-level students' understanding of texts of different genres. The following research questions are the foci of the present study.

1. When all the Turkish EFL students in the study are taken into consideration, is there a significant difference among the three types of genres with respect to comprehension?
2. Is there a significant difference between Turkish male and female students regarding understanding the three different types of genres?
3. Considering the Turkish male students only, is there a significant difference among the three types of genres with respect to comprehension?
4. Considering the Turkish female students only, is there a significant difference among the three types of genres with respect to comprehension?

3.1 Method

3.1.1 Participants

The participants were 1st year college students enrolled in the English Language Teaching Department at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey. Sixty students (30 males and 30 females) between the ages of 18-19 participated in the study. The students in the program are trained to be English language teachers. Students were at the same levels of English language proficiency. Before students enter the program, they have to prove that they have sufficient English language proficiency to continue with their academic studies. Thus, they take a proficiency exam prepared by the School of Foreign Languages at Hacettepe University. Students who pass the exam can take departmental courses whereas those who cannot have to take additional English language courses for a semester or a year at the School of Foreign Languages. The participation in the study was voluntary.

3.1.2. Data Collection

Data collection occurred in an advanced reading course, which is a required course for first year students in the program. In this course students learn how to identify topics, main ideas, details in a text, purpose and tone of the author, facts and opinions, point of views, figurative language, bias, as well as evaluate evidence and analyze arguments.

Data were collected via three reading passages taken from a book called *The Art of Critical Reading* by Mather and McCarthy (2009). The book consists of reading selections that are mostly nonfiction taken from a variety of sources such as books and journals. The topics of passages range from education to psychology to science to art. The passages that were given to students represent three different genres: historical fiction, fantasy, and essay. The first passage entitled "Gilbert's living with art" by Mark Getlein is about art; the second passage is a fable by Aesop and is called "the country mouse and the town mouse" and the third passage is an essay called "black men and public space" written by Brent Staples. The passages were about one page

long. In order to determine if the reading passages are at the correct reading level, Fog's readability Formula was used. The passages had an index of 7, which according to Fog is an ideal score for readability. All the passages were followed by eight multiple choice questions. The participants were expected to read the passages and answer a total of 24 comprehension questions related to the passages. The questions were taken from the book and the test proved to be reliable (0.66) based on Cronbach's alpha formula.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. First, descriptive statistics was conducted to determine whether or not the participants, in general, were better comprehenders of a certain genre. The independent variable here was genre and the dependent variable was participants' reading comprehension scores. The following table presents the results.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Means and standard deviations of understanding different genres for all participants

	Genre	N	M	SD
Gender	Historical fiction	30	5,97	1.28
	Fantasy	30	5,65	1,45
	Essay	30	7,45	.76

As can be seen in Table 1, when the whole sample is taken into consideration, the participants were better at understanding the essay ($M= 7.45$ $SD = .76$) than historical fiction ($M= 5.97$ $SD = 1.28$) and fantasy ($M= 5.65$ $SD = 1.45$). Given this result, repeated measures ANOVA was also performed to find out if the mean differences among the genres were statistically significant.

Table 2

Bonferroni Comparison for Genre and all participants

Comparisons	Mean Difference	Std. error	95% CI	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Historical fiction vs. Essay	-1.48*	.194	-1.96	-1.00
Fantasy vs. Essay	-1.80*	.187	-2.26	-1.34

* $p = 0.00$

Table 2 shows a significant effect of genre, Wilks' Lambda = ,34, $F(2,58) = 55,31$, $p = .000$, multivariate partial eta squared = ,65. There was a significant difference between historical fiction and essay and between fantasy and essay. No significant difference between historical fiction and fantasy was identified.

The third analysis involved comparing the reading performances of male and female participants on the three different text types. For this, first, descriptive statistics was performed.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics: Means and standard deviations of understanding different genres for male and females

Gender	Genre	N	M	SD
Male	Historical fiction	30	5,97	1.29
	Fantasy	30	5,87	1,19
	Essay	30	7,53	.73
Female	Historical fiction	30	5,97	1,29
	Fantasy	30	5,43	1,67
	Essay	30	7,37	.80

Table 3 shows that both male and female participants comprehended the essay (*males*, $M= 7.53$ $SD = .73$; *females*, $M= 7.37$ $SD = .80$) better than historical fiction (*males*, $M= 5.97$ $SD = 1.29$; *females*, $M= 5.97$ $SD = 1.29$) and fantasy (*males*, $M= 5.87$ $SD = 1.19$; *females*, $M= 5.43$ $SD = 1.67$). In addition, a One-way Anova was conducted to determine whether or not there are differences between males and females regarding comprehension of the different genres. The results, which can be seen in the following table, were not significant.

Table 4

One-way Anova: Differences between genders regarding comprehension of genres

Source		df	SS	MS	F	p
Historical fiction	Between groups	1	,00	,00	,00	1.00
	Within groups	58	97,93	1,68		
Total		59	97,93			
Fantasy	Between groups	1	2,81	2,81	1,33	,25
	Within groups	58	122,83	2,11		
Total		59	125,65			
Essay	Between groups	1	,417	,41	,70	,40
	Within groups	58	34,43	,59		
Total		59	34,85			

In order to answer the third and fourth research questions, a One-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to evaluate whether or not there is a difference in understanding the three different genres for male students.

Table 5

Bonferroni Comparison for Genre and male participants

Comparisons	Mean Difference	Std. error	Lower bound	Upper bound
95% CI				
Historical fiction vs. Essay	-1.56*	.294	-2.31	-.81
Fantasy vs. Essay	-1.66*	.237	-2.26	-1.06

* $p = 0.00$

According to the results, there was a significant effect of genre, Wilks' Lambda = ,31, $F(2,28) = 30,67$, $p = .000$, multivariate partial eta squared = ,68. As the table shows, there was a significant difference between historical fiction and essay and between fantasy and essay for male students. The same analysis was performed for female students.

Table 6

Bonferroni Comparison for Genre and female participants

Comparisons	Mean Difference	Std. error	Lower bound	Upper bound
Historical fiction vs. Essay	-1.40*	.256	-2.05	-.74
Fantasy vs. Essay	-1.93*	.291	-2.67	-1.19

* $p = 0.00$

Once again, the table shows a significant effect of genre, Wilks' Lambda = ,36, $F(2,28) = 24,14$, $p = .000$, multivariate partial eta squared = ,63. There was a significant difference between historical fiction and essay and between fantasy and essay for female students.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to add to our understanding of the role that gender plays in reading comprehension of Turkish EFL learners. The first question involved whether or not there is a significant difference among the three types of genres with respect to comprehending them for all participants. The results showed that all participants were significantly better at comprehending the essay than the others. Some factors may have helped the participants to have a better understanding of this text than the others. In the essay entitled “Black men and public space”, the purpose of the narrator is to explain how, as a black person, he is unfairly judged by people and his opinion about this matter. Weidner (2012), in his analysis about the essay, states that readers can emotionally relate to the sentences in the essay. In addition, the organization the essay is one of a chronological type which makes it easier for readers to see the causes and effects.

The second research question was related to the difference between males and females in terms of comprehending the three different types of genres. No significant difference was found between genders. This finding is also in line with Asgarabadi, Rouhi and Jafarigozar (2015) who found no significant difference between males and females with respect to their reading comprehension as well as use of reading strategies in descriptive and narrative macro-genres. The authors attributed this result to the fact that both male and female students were in the same field of study and had a common background in which they dealt with reading comprehension problems in similar ways. The same situation may hold true for Turkish EFL students in the current study. That is, the majority of the Turkish students graduated from the same type of high school but more importantly, in order to pass the nation-wide university exam, they attended a private course in which they are trained to use similar reading strategies. The finding also seems to support the Gender Similarities Hypothesis proposed by Hyde (2005). Hyde conducted meta-analyses to determine whether or not males and females are similar to each other on several psychological variables such as cognitive, verbal or nonverbal communication, social or personality variables, psychological well-being, motor behaviors, along with miscellaneous variables, such as moral reasoning. Her findings showed that males and females were similar with respect to some domains, which included reading comprehension as well.

Finally, the third and fourth research questions required analyzing male and female students’ understanding of the different genres separately. According to the results, both males and females were significantly better at understanding the essay than historical fiction followed by fantasy. This finding supports one of the findings of Keshavarz and Ashtarian (2008) in which Iranian males and females comprehended an essay better than history and short story. In the present study, one reason that students had more difficulty in understanding the passages about art and fable might be that the passage about art consists of abstract concepts and the fable, literary devices such as metaphors, which may have made it harder for students to process information.

As a consequence, more important than providing this group of students texts that are gender-oriented, instructors should enable students to interpret abstract concepts and have students work on activities that require students to notice literary devices and use them. A primary means to accomplish this is to bring into the classroom interesting and contemporary texts of different genres that would attract students’ attention. As Merisuo-Storm (2006) states “One has to know what texts appeal to pupils to be able to motivate them to continue reading.” (p.7)

In conclusion, the results of the present study can at the moment be generalized to all Turkish EFL students who would be dealing with the same types of texts included in the study. However, given that gender differences are culturally influenced (McKay and Hornberger, 2009) and cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes may change over time, the study of the relationship between gender differences and genre should remain as a research area that should receive renewed interest from scholars.

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