

The Effect of Gender on Comprehending Culturally Familiar/Unfamiliar Texts

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Abstract

The present study investigated the role played by gender in comprehension of culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts. One hundred university intermediate TEFL students (50 males and 50 females) participated in this study. These students were given an Iranian (culturally familiar) and an English (culturally unfamiliar) story to read in two separate sessions. After reading these texts, they went through two reading comprehension measures. First, they were asked to write down in their mother tongue anything they could remember from the texts immediately after they finished reading them. Then, they completed a set of reading comprehension questions at the end of the study. The results of this study showed no significant effect of gender on reading both the familiar and unfamiliar texts. The findings are discussed and pedagogical implications are provided.

Keywords: Culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts, EFL learners, Gender, Reading comprehension

1. Introduction

One of the significant personal features that can create differential results with regard to reading comprehension is the gender of the learners. Through decades of research on the differential characteristics of men and women, it was established that indeed some psychological, in addition to a number of physiological, differences exist between males and females. One of these differences lies in the corpus callosum (Oxford, 2002). This set of fibers connecting the two hemispheres of the brain is discovered to be thicker in the women's head. This case can be expected to lead to more brain functioning and also more amount of information exchange across the two sides of the females' brain than the males'. In addition to these biological or physiological differences, some psychological dissimilarities between girls and boys are found as well (Oxford, 2002). For example, girls are discovered to be better than boys in verbal skills and boys tend to be superior in spatial ones (Oxford, 2002). Moreover, it is also revealed that females are feeling oriented and enjoy cooperative learning whereas males are thinking oriented and prefer individual learning. Finally, women are discovered to be more apt to use strategies than men (Oxford, 2002).

Due to the above mentioned superiority of females in verbal abilities, it is largely believed that women are better readers and as a result better vocabulary learners than men. Although this has been proved in some studies (Keshavarz & Ashtarian, 2008), a number of researchers have been provided evidence calling this belief into question (Long & Johnston, 2010; Brantmeier, 2003; Al-Shumaimeri, 2005; Yazdanpanah, 2007). For example, in a recent review of the studies conducted to investigate gender differences in reading comprehension, Long and Johnston (2010) concluded that these differences between males and females either do not exist or they are small or negligible. However, regarding this clash of results in the domain of gender differences and reading, it is worth mentioning that all the just named scholars have advised that further research should be conducted in order to discover more clearly the relationship between one's gender and his/her reading comprehension performance. So, the current paper can be considered as an answer to this request in an attempt to shed more light on the differences between males and females regarding the reading comprehension ability. In addition, examining the role the learners' gender plays in language learning process in general and reading comprehension in particular can provide us with such fundamental benefits as helpful

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information about what female and male learners prefer to read, what they do when they read texts, and which group needs more help to do well on foreign texts. This information can help us be better prepared in meeting the needs of the learners and solving the problems they face in the process of reading and comprehending English or any foreign texts. Specifically, this paper tries to see whether gender of readers has any effect on comprehending texts having culturally familiar/unfamiliar content.

2. Literature Review

In an attempt to shed more light on the differences regarding strategy use between males and females, Yazdanpanah (2007) examined the performance of a group of girl and boy students on different reading comprehension questions in a formal testing context. She gave her participants, 187(59 female and 128 male) students studying English at the intermediate level at one of the North Cyprus universities, three passages, one having neutral topic and two having masculine topics, with 25 questions each as the final exam of the course. These questions came in different forms, such as true-false, fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice, and were supposed to tap different information and to require the readers to interact differently with the passage. These questions are divided into six categories as: (a) identifying main idea, (b) reading for specific information, (c) guessing meaning from context, (d) identifying referential information, (e) matching titles with paragraph, and (f) text coherence. The findings of this study shows that the overall performance of male and females was not significantly different which implies that the sex differences in reading comprehension tests are not significantly influenced by the text topic. So, this research study downplays the role of the topic in making any differences in reading comprehension. Furthermore, male and female participants are found to perform differently on the different question items. Females scored higher than their male counterparts on identifying main idea, guessing meaning from context, and text coherence questions. On the other hand, males outperformed females in reading for specific information, identifying referential information, and matching titles with paragraphs. However, the gender effect was more noticeable in only two cases: guessing meaning from context and text coherence in favor of the females. The just mentioned results relating to the subjects' performance on the different question items, Yazdanpanah concludes, reconfirm the idea of existing significant differences

between girls and boys with regard to strategy use with girls being better strategy users than boys.

Brantmeier (2003) examined the effects of readers' gender and passage content on reading comprehension of intermediate Spanish learners as a second language. She had her seventy eight subjects, 29 men and 49 women, read two passages. One of these passages was written by a female author picturing the life of a frustrated mother and wife who visits her college roommate after several years. The all characters in this text were females. The other story which was written by a male writer and all its characters were men talked about male spectators at a boxing match. In addition to these passages, the participants also did a recall task in which they wrote down as much as they could remember from the texts they just read and answered a group of multiple-choice questions. They also completed or answered to a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their degree of topic familiarity with the just introduced texts. The analysis of the data provided from the assessment tasks used here showed that there are no significant differences between male and females in the written recall and multiple-choice comprehension scores across passages, a result which goes in contrast with the other previous studies suggesting female superiority over males in reading comprehension. Additionally, a significant interaction was found between topic familiarity and reading comprehension by the participants' gender. Male students recalled more idea units and performed better than their female counterparts on multiple choice questions for male oriented text, and girls recalled more idea units and scored higher than boys on the multiple choice questions for female-oriented story. According to these results, Brantmeier concludes that subject familiarity is a facilitative factor for reading comprehension at the intermediate level of language learning and that language knowledge by itself is not a determinant for reading deficiency at this level.

In another study, Brantmeier (2004) investigated the role of gender on reading comprehension. A total of 68, 19 men and 49 women, advanced Spanish learners read two violence-oriented stories. One of the stories involved violence from a male to a female and the other one involved violence from a male to an animal. The analysis of the data obtained from the participants' answers to multiple-choice questions and also their recall protocols revealed that their performance on the passage illustrating the violence directed from a male to a nonhuman character showed no gender difference. On the contrary, with regard to the second passage in which a female is killed by a male character, women recalled more idea units and performed

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better than men on multiple-choice questions. Although Brantmeier gave the gender of the victim as a reason for the better performance of the female participants on the text involving violence from a boy to a girl, she does not exempt other people from further research on this issue.

In a study by Kehasvarz and Ashtarian (2008) investigating the relationship between text type and the gender of Iranian EFL students and its effect on reading comprehension, they conclude that gender and text type are important and critical for the process of the reading comprehension. They gave their participants who were 28 male and 34 females of the same proficiency level three different types of texts including history, essay, and short story. Based on these passages, a 24-item multiple-choice reading comprehension test was constructed and administered to the above mentioned subjects. The results of this study revealed that males and females differed in their reading comprehension ability with females being better in comprehending English passages. Moreover, it is also found that all the subjects, both girls and boys, performed better on essays than on history and short story. This finding shows that the participants comprehended different texts differently regardless of their gender.

Al-Shumaimeri (2005) tried to investigate the differences between Saudi tertiary level male and female EFL students in the comprehension performance of gender-neutral texts. In this study, 66 male and 66 female undergraduate English students at two universities in Saudi Arabia were given two different types of gender neutral texts, one familiar and one unfamiliar, and were asked to answer some multiple-choice questions based on these texts after reading them. The findings of this study provided an extra evidence for the positive effect of text content on reading performance and reveal that content familiarity has a facilitative effect on reading comprehension. It is also found that male students significantly outperformed their female counterparts on both gender neutral texts.

As it was mentioned elsewhere in this paper, this study tries to repeat the abovementioned studies which investigated the role of the learners' gender in reading comprehension. Through this research study, it is hoped to obtain helpful insights into such areas as the preferences of female and male learners in reading, the things they do during the reading process, and the weakness points of each group in reading comprehension. The results of this paper can help us as language teachers and material designers to be as better prepared as possible in meeting the needs of the learners and solving the problems they encounter in the process of reading and comprehending L2 texts. Especially, this paper tries to see whether gender of readers has any

role to play in understanding texts containing culturally familiar/unfamiliar content. In fact, this study hopes to find an answer to the following research question:

Does the gender of the learners have any significant effect on comprehending culturally (un)familiar texts?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

One hundred Iranian university students in two intact classes served as participants of this study. All of these students majored in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at Azad university of Ahwaz, a southwestern province in Iran. The participants were comprised of 50 women and 50 men. The students aged between 18 and 30 with the age average of 24. These students were studying in this university to achieve an Associate degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). Because the participants had intensively received courses in all language skills such as grammar, vocabulary, listening, and reading which all were produced and prepared for the intermediate level learners of English, they were assumed to be at the intermediate level of language proficiency.

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. The passages

The passages selected for this study were an English translation of an Iranian story entitled “the little sugar beets vendor” and an English short narrative “the winepress”. The Iranian story was written by the great Iranian author Samad Behrangi which happens in an Iranian village and depicts the hard life of an orphan Iranian boy and his struggle to protect his family. Since this story takes place in an Iranian context, it has Iranian characters, and portrays the fight to save the honor of the family represented in a female character typical to Eastern and Iranian tradition. It was expected that the students would comprehend it easily. The other short tale was written by Josef Essberger and was about a retired French politician telling his friends strange stories about the different kinds of wines he drinks. This short story happens in France; it has foreign characters, and is full of French names and also replete with the names of the different types of wine, a beverage forbidden in Iran because of this country’s Islamic culture. Therefore this

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passage is somehow strange to a typical Iranian ear. This made us to anticipate that our participants will face difficulties understanding this story efficiently.

It is worth noting here that every essential step was taken to make these two passages as equal as possible. A mere look at the tables 1 and 2 which were obtained through using the Flesh software of readability calculations shows that both passages are relatively easy to read and are relatively equal in terms of the readability (Flesh Reading Ease Scores were 75.61 and 79.26 for the Iranian and English stories respectively).

Table 1. The Winepress (the foreign story) readability scores

Flesh Kincaid Grade Level:	5.88
Flesh Reading Ease Score:	75.61
Sentences:	117
Words:	1,492
Average Syllables per Word:	1.40
Average Words per Sentence:	12.7

Table 2. The Little Sugar Beet Vendor (the Iranian story) readability scores

Flesh -Kincaid Grade Level:	6.28
Flesh Reading Ease Score:	79.26
Sentences:	133
Words:	2,182
Average Syllables per Word:	1.31
Average Words per Sentence:	16.41

A comparison between the figures of these two tables shows that while the two passages differ in the number of words (1492 and 2182 for the Persian and English narrative respectively) and sentences (133 in the Iranian text and 117 in the other one), their readability grades are nearly equal (Flesh Kincaid Grade Level: 5.88 and 6.28 and Flesh Reading Ease Score: 75.61 and 79.26 for the Iranian and English stories respectively). So, it can be surely concluded that the two short stories we have selected for this study are the same regarding the degree of reading difficulty. This readability formula was developed firstly by Rudolf Flesch (1948) and was modified by Farr, Jenkins, and Paterson (1951) and the U.S. Navy (1976) (as cited in Du Bay, 2004). In this formula, as it is shown in the table 3 below, the scores ranging from 70 to 80 represent the fairly

easy texts which are suitable for a 7th grade student. So, due to the fact that the reading ease scores of the texts used in this study were within this range (the Iranian story: 79.26 and the foreign story: 75.61), we can conclude that these two texts are fairly easy to read by an intermediate second language reader.

Table 3. Flesh Reading Ease Scores and their implications

Reading Score	Ease	Style Description	Estimated Reading Grade
0 to 30		Very Difficult	College graduate
30 to 40		Difficult	13th to 16th grade
50 to 60		Fairly Difficult	10th to 12th grade
60 to 70		Standard	8th and 9th grade
70 to 80		Fairly Easy	7th grade
80 to 90		Easy	6th grade
90 to 100		Very Easy	5th grade

3.3. The measurements

3.3.1. Comprehension measurements (Comprehension questions)

The comprehension questions consisted of the following sections:

a) Sentence verification or true/false measure:

This part of the reading comprehension questions was comprised of six items. The students here were required to indicate which items were right or wrong according to the passage.

b) Multiple-choice question test:

The multiple-choice section of the reading comprehension questions in this study had comprised six questions for the Iranian story and ten question items for the foreign story. All the items were provided with four possible responses: three distractors and one correct response.

c) Essay type questions:

In this part which was also created to assess the participants' comprehension of the passages they read, the students were asked to give their answers, in much detail as they could, to the open

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ended questions derived from the passages. In the current study reliability estimates (Cronbach's α) were .92, .93 and .89 for a, b and c respectively.

3.3.2. Written recall task

The free written recall protocols or tests have been used in a number of studies to measure the quantity of idea units recalled from the L2 texts (Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979; Johnson, 1982; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982; Brantmeier, 2003, 2004, 2005). In this kind of task, the readers are required to remember and write down as much as they can of what they have just read without looking back at the passage. The validity of recall protocols has been questioned because of the effects that such intervening variables as memory and writing ability may have on the quality of the recall. For example, Anderson (2000) claimed that one's ability to remember something is different from their ability to understand it. So, he concluded that in recall we can not distinguish remembering from comprehending. Yet, some researchers (Bernhardt, 1991; Brantmeier, 2003, 2004, 2005) do not share this view. They argue that in the recall tests: (a) the readers are not confined by the predetermined tasks, and (b) the role of the reader is recognized in meaning construction. Bernhardt (1991), as a major proponent of utilizing recall protocols, claimed that performing a recall task does not influence the readers' understanding of the text in any way while their performance on other instruments such as multiple-choice or open-ended questions is affected by the intervening interactions which may take place among, texts, readers, testers, and even among the questions themselves. Furthermore, the presence of retrieval clues in the multiple choice and open-ended questions may have a facilitative effect on the amount of recall.

In order to control for the effects of intervening variables associated with the recall procedure such as that of memory and not to overwhelm and overburden the participants of this study with the English writing ability, they were asked to complete the task in their native language, Persian and immediately after they had finished reading the passages (Bernhardt, 1991).

3.3.3. Pre and post test questionnaire

Two measures were used to check the participants' familiarity with the two passages they were assigned to read. The first one was given to the participants before they begin reading each

passage. It was a 4-item questionnaire asking the participants if they were familiar with the author of the passage or his/her works and if they had read or heard anything about the story they were going to read. The students were instructed to provide "yes" or "no" as an answer to each item.

The post-test questionnaire was given to the students immediately after finishing reading each passage. It was a Likert Scale Questionnaire asking the students to identify their degree of familiarity with the content of the text they had just read. This questionnaire had five response options ranging from completely familiar to completely unfamiliar of which the students were supposed to choose only one alternative. The primary purpose of this test was to check if the students were precise enough in answering the pretest questionnaire and to see if the texts were truly familiar or unfamiliar. Cronbach's $\alpha = [.91]$.

3.4. Procedure

The study was conducted during the regular class time, in the middle of the second semester, and in the presence of the instructors of the classes. In addition, in all phases of the data collection, the researchers were present and provided any help the participants needed. The students were first told that they were going to be given a passage to read for comprehension and nothing was mentioned about any test that might follow.

The participants read the stories and completed the exercises accompanying them in two separate sessions. In each of these sessions, to mitigate the effects relating to ordering of passages, the presentation of the texts and their tasks were counterbalanced. In addition, each gender group was randomly divided into two halves. So, one half of the students received the Iranian narrative and answered its exercises and the other half read the foreign story and completed the measurements following it.

In the discussed sessions dedicated to the current study, as mentioned above, the students were first given the pre-test questionnaire. Then, they were asked to read the story. Immediately after they finished reading the text, the participants completed the post-test questionnaire. Then, they were asked to write in their mother tongue, Persian, as complete a recall as they could from the story they had just read. Finally, they answered the reading comprehension questions.

4. Results

Scoring

Before going through the results of the data analysis, it is helpful to discuss the process of coding or scoring the measurement instruments used in this study. Each of the two forthcoming paragraphs will be devoted to explaining the procedures followed in rating each of the tests and tasks utilized in the current research investigation.

The three sections of the reading comprehension questions task of the Iranian story were scored using the subsequent method. The six items of the true/false section was given three points, 0.5 for each item. The multiple choice part of the reading comprehension questions consisting of 6 items received 4.5 points or 0.75 for every question item. The first two items of the essay type questions were granted 0.75 each and the last three items got 2 points each. So, it was supposed that the one answering the whole items in all three sections of the reading comprehension questions would be awarded 15. The three parts of the reading comprehension questions of the foreign text were scored nearly the same as their counterparts of the Persian narrative. The only difference was that in the former, the first three question items of the essay type questions were given one point each and the last two items received 0.75 each.

The written recall tasks of the two stories were scored using idea units. A total of 23 sentences representing a summary of the foreign story “the winepress” and a total of 18 sentences giving an overall picture of the events of the Iranian story “the little sugar beet vendor” were gathered. If these idea units or their paraphrases had been present in the recall protocol of each student, each correctly recalled sentence would have been awarded one point. If the participants had provided only part of each idea unit or its paraphrase, they would have received a partial (i.e., 0.5) point. On the other hand, if the participants had provided wrong idea units, ideas not present in the original story, they would have been given a zero point.

The Assumed Familiarity or Unfamiliarity of the Texts used

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of the pretest and posttest questionnaires of the Iranian story. As you can see nearly all the participants, precisely about 96.4 percent of them, indicated they had not known the author of the Iranian story or read his works. Nor had they read the story they were supposed to read or even heard anything about it. Statistically speaking, 100 percent had

not read the story and 98.2 percent had not heard anything about it. So, we can safely conclude that the students had not read this text before. However, although before reading the Iranian narrative, the students demonstrated that they had not read it or even known its writer, they found its content to be familiar after they finished reading it. About 78 percent of them found the story to be either completely or mostly familiar whereas only 21 percent said that the text was half familiar and half unfamiliar. As it can be seen from these figures, we can conclude that the Iranian story was familiar to the participants.

Table 4. Responses to the pre-test questionnaires

The participants' responses to the pre test questionnaires of the Iranian and foreign story

The items	The Answers	
	Yes	No
Do you know Samad Behrangi?	3.6%	96.4%
Have you ever read his stories?	3.6%	96.4%
Have you ever read his Little Sugar Beet Vendor?	0	100%
Have you ever heard any thing about this story?	1.8%	98.2%
Do you know Josef Essberger?	0	100%
Have you ever read his stories?	0	100%
Have you ever read his The Winepress?	0	100%
Have you ever heard any thing about this story?	0	100%

Although the results obtained through the pretest questionnaire of the foreign story and those gained from the set of questions given prior to the Iranian passage were almost similar, they went in a quite opposite direction with regard to the results obtained in the posttest questionnaire. As it can be noticed through Table 4, all the students stated that they had neither known the author of the foreign story nor read his other works. They also unanimously indicated that they had not read the chosen story and even had not heard anything about it leading to the conclusion that the participants had not had any prior experience with this story. After the participants had finished

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reading the foreign story, their responses to the question coming immediately after this text showed that this passage was unfamiliar to a high proportion of them. Table 4 shows that 83 percent of the population expressed that the story was either completely or mostly unfamiliar (completely unfamiliar: 48.2% and mostly unfamiliar: 35.7%). Moreover, finally, only 16.1 percent of the students served as the participants of the study indicated that the content of the foreign story was half familiar and half unfamiliar to them. Therefore, our assumption that the foreign story was unfamiliar to the participants was actually confirmed through these percentages.

Table 5. The responses to the posttest questionnaires

The participants' responses to the posttest questionnaires of the Iranian and foreign stories

The items	The options				
	Completely familiar	Completely unfamiliar	Mostly familiar	Mostly unfamiliar	Half familiar/unfamiliar
The content of the Iranian story was?	50%		28%		21.4%
The content of the foreign story was?		48%		35%	16.1%

Does the gender of the students have any effect on comprehending culturally familiar or unfamiliar texts?

The attempt to explore any difference between the male and female participants' reading comprehension performance on both the Iranian and foreign stories was made through an independent-samples t-test statistical procedure. Here, the scores that each gender group obtained in the reading comprehension questions and written recall task were compared. As it is evident through Tables 6 and 7, with regard to the Iranian narrative, there was no significant difference in the written recall and reading comprehension questions scores for males (M= 9.37, SD=4.04 in the recall task & M=7.81, SD=3.44 for the reading comprehension questions) and females (M=10, SD= 3.85 for the recall task & M=7.99, SD=3.04 for the reading comprehension questions; $t(54) = -.54, p>.05$ for the recall scores & $t(54)= -.19, p>.05$ for the reading

comprehension questions). However, although no significant difference was found between the girls' and boys' performance on both comprehension tasks of the Iranian story, a close study of Table 6 shows that females (M=10, SD=3.85 in the recall task & M=7.99, SD=3.04 in the reading comprehension questions) outperformed males (M=9.37, SD=4.04 in the recall task & M=7.81, SD=3.44 in the reading comprehension questions) on the both tasks measuring the reading comprehension of the Iranian story.

Table 6. Independent samples test of the gender differences in the comprehension of the Iranian story

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
The recall scores of the Iranian story	.32	.57	-.54	54	.591	-.625	1.15673	-2.94	1.69410
The reading comprehension scores of the Iranian story	.673	.416	-.19	54	.847	-.18125	.93422	-2.05	1.69175

Table 7. Group Statistics for the males and females performance on the comprehension tasks of the Iranian story

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The recall scores of the Iranian story	Male	50	9.3750	4.04763	1.01191
	Female	50	10.0000	3.85640	.60975
The reading comprehension scores of the Iranian story	Male	50	7.8125	3.44178	.86044
	Female	50	7.9938	3.04216	.48101

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The same statistical procedure was also conducted on the scores the participants obtained in the comprehension exercises of the foreign story. It showed similar results to those of the Iranian story. As you can see in the Table 7 and Table 8, there were no significant differences between the males (M=5.68, SD=3.38 in the recall task & M= 5.62, SD=2.24 in the reading comprehension questions) and females performance (M=6.27, SD=3.32 in the recall task & M=5.38, SD=2.27 in the reading comprehension questions) on the tasks that followed the foreign passage ($t(54) = -.59, p = .55$ for the recall task & $t(54) = .36, p = .71$ for the reading comprehension questions).

Table 8. Independent Samples Test of the gender differences in the comprehension of the foreign story

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
The recall scores of the Foreign story	.000	.994	-.59	54	.55	-.58	.98	-2.56	1.39
The reading comprehension scores of the Foreign story	.041	.840	.364	54	.71	.243	.67	-1.10	1.58

So, as it is clear from these figures and tables, the answer to the question just raised regarding the positive or facilitative effect that gender may have on reading comprehension is negative: there is not any significant difference between the women and men in their reading comprehension performance. However, a close look at Table 8 reveals that, although slightly, females (M=6.27, SD=3.32) outperformed males (M=5.68, SD=3.38) in the recall tasks and males (M=5.62, SD=2.24) scored higher than females (M=5.38, SD=2.27) in the section dealing with the reading comprehension questions of the foreign story.

Table 9. Group Statistics for the males and females performance on comprehension tasks of the foreign story

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The recall scores of the Foreign story	Male	50	5.6875	3.38071	.84518
	Female	50	6.2750	3.32039	.52500
The reading comprehension scores of the Foreign story	Male	50	5.6250	2.24351	.56088
	Female	50	5.3812	2.27443	.35962

5. Discussion

With regard to the purpose of the study investigating whether gender has any effect on the reading comprehension performance of the participants on both the Iranian and foreign stories, the results indicated that there were no significant differences between males and females performance on the two narratives. This finding is in line with the latest voices asserting that gender differences, particularly in reading comprehension or verbal ability, are diminishing (Caplan, Crawford, Hyde, & Richardson, 1997; Yazdanpanah, 2007). It also confirms the results of the other studies conducted to examine the differences that gender may make in the students' language performance (Brantmeier, 2003, 2004; Yazdanpanah, 2007). This study, however, goes in the opposite direction with the results obtained by Keshavarz and Ashtarian (2008) indicating that girls are better in reading comprehension than boys. It also contradicts the studies done by Al-Shumaimeri (2006) and Bugel and Buunk (1996) demonstrating the boys' superiority over girls in the comprehension of the neutral texts.

The other reason why any significant difference was not found between male and female participants may be due to the type of the texts. The two stories chosen for this study represent two extremes: they were either completely familiar or completely unfamiliar to the students. It seems in such conditions, complete familiarity or its absolute absence, the performance of the participants from both gender groups may not be such different.

However, despite the fact that the results of this study showed no significant difference between males and females, a close look at their performance on the recall and reading comprehension questions reveals interesting findings. Females outperformed their male

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counterparts on the written recall tasks of the both Iranian and foreign stories. The same result was also obtained by Brantmeier (2003, 2004) where female readers recalled more idea units than males from the two passages they were assigned to read. The reason of this finding may be the females' superiority to males in the verbal abilities, precisely in the writing skills (Alderson, 2000; Oxford, 2002; Caplan, Crawford, Hyde, & Richardson, 1997). In fact, females are better equipped with the writing and comprehension skills required for the recall procedure (Brantmeier, 2003). Such a claim is verified by a meta-analysis conducted by Hyde and Linn (1988) which revealed that girls are better than boys in the essay writing skills. So, the women's supremacy in the areas relating to the verbal abilities such as the writing skill can be considered as the main factor contributing to their better scores and performance in the written recall assessment technique.

The girls also performed better in the reading comprehension questions of the Iranian story whereas the boys scored higher only in the reading comprehension questions of the foreign story. However, the differences between the male and female participants on these tasks are so small and insignificant that it is not worth dedicating further lines discussing them.

6. Implications

Although this study showed that there were no significant differences in the learners' performances with regard to their gender, the females outperformed males in certain tasks such as the written recall. So, it is helpful to teach boys the ways they can improve their writing skills and how they can bridge the existing gap between themselves and the girls. This can be accomplished through dedicating more time and effort to the male language learners in the writing courses and providing them with skills needed to comprehend a text well.

7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Before any generalization is made about the results of this study, some points should be taken into account. First, in this study, just narrative texts were used to answer the research questions posed in the chapter one. Future researchers should also make use of the expository texts to see if the same results can be achieved with such texts. Second, for the purpose of the current study,

only intermediate level adult students were hired. Any future attempt needs to include language learners across all proficiency and age levels to see if the same findings are to be repeated with the more or less proficient readers or with younger students. Finally, in the present study, no measures were taken to find out how the students interacted with the passages and how they dealt with the tasks to complete them. So, in any future research, introspective or retrospective procedures such as think aloud should be used in order to get a clear understanding of the strategies or steps taken by the students to comprehend the familiar or unfamiliar texts, to infer the meaning of the unknown words they encountered during reading the passages, and to complete the tasks designed to measure their reading comprehension.

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