

## The Effect of Topic Interest on Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability

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### Abstract

The present study investigated the effect of topic interest on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. In order to reach this aim, an experimental method was designed for data collection. Ten EFL students were randomly selected in order to find how much the learners are interested in reading texts. They answered an interest survey which was designed for this purpose. Based on students' responses regarding their interests in reading texts, three most interested topics were given to the control group and three least interested topics were given to the experimental group. The reading texts were taught to learners in three sessions and learners answered their comprehension questions. The students' scores were collected and submitted for data analysis. The result of t-test showed that there is a significant difference between experimental and control group in their performance on reading comprehension texts.

**Keywords:** interest, topic interest, reading comprehension, Iranian EFL learners

### INTRODUCTION

Reading is an interactive process between reader and the text which tends to automaticity (Alyousef, 2006). This interaction is an attempt to elicit meaning using a variety of knowledge such as linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing). The process of reading comprehension or understanding requires a number of cognitive and affective factors that can be assessed, and observed indirectly (Pearson & Hamm, 2005). Interest, as one of the affective factors, was proved to have strong relationship with reading comprehension in different studies of educational and cognitive psychology (Eidswick, 2010). Hidi (2001) believed that both reader's interest and the interest in the text positively influence the comprehension of reading. Topic interest is the extent to which reading material is interesting enough for reader to focus their attention and comprehend it (Lee, 2009). According to the different studies, although topic interest

was an influential factor in L1 reading comprehension, it was not a significant variable in L2 reading comprehension (Lee, 2009). Therefore, Joh (2006) concluded that topic interest may be an independent factor that exists separately from other cognitive aspects of reading.

Alexander and Jetton (2000) introduced two dimensions of interest concerning the reading process: situational and individual. Individual interest is a stable state that exists before reading a text and it actually derives the readers' priorities of certain topics (Schiefele, 1998). On the other hand, situational interest is created by specific situations, such as the text and test or some specific state of affairs that are not permanent. It is surprising then that so few studies have been conducted to investigate the influence of interest on second language (L2) learning.

Brantmeier (2006) tried to develop a model for the reading interests of second language learners. Ease of recollection, engagement, cohesion, emotiveness, and prior knowledge were identified as interesting issues in texts. Hidi and Renninger (2006) introduced another model of interest consisting of a continuum with four separate stages: triggered situational interest, maintained situational interest, emerging individual interest, and well-developed individual interest that occur consecutively.

There are a number of studies investigating specifically the effect of interest on reading performance. Schraw et al. (1995) studied the situational interest among college students while reading texts. They found that the higher a reader's interest was in a text, the more information he or she could recall. On the other hand, in another study, Schiefele (1998) found that interest in reading text did not increase the amount of information recall, but it enhanced the quality of learning, in such a way that interest helped readers to build a deeper understanding of the main ideas. Ryan et al. (1990) did a similar study and stated that interest results in deeper processing of expository texts. The findings of these studies indicate that all types of interest would facilitate reader's comprehension and recall.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Most of the studies in finding the role of interest in reading comprehension were in foreign contexts of language learning. Interest is one of the factors that is dependent on every individual's personality, so it may yield different results in different kinds of contexts and situations. The review of literature indicates that no study has been reported to investigate Iranian EFL learners' interest in reading comprehension. Therefore, the present study was designed in order to address this purpose and see whether topic interest has any effect on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS**

The following research question was proposed:

- Does topic interest have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?

The null hypothesis of the study is:

- The topic interest does not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension.

## **METHOD**

The purpose of this study was to measure the effect of topic interest on EFL learners' reading comprehension. An experimental design was selected in order to conduct this study. The description of participants, materials, and procedures of data collection are provided as follows.

### **Participants**

The participants of the present study were 34 English language students who were studying English at a language institute in Tehran. Their level of English language proficiency was intermediate. Ten students were randomly selected in order to assess their interest toward reading texts. Twenty four students were randomly classified to two groups of experimental and control to take part in the research.

### **Materials**

#### ***Reading Texts***

Six reading texts were selected for this study. They were selected from Reading and Writing textbook by Thompson (2009). The reading topics were 'making music', 'my favorite sport', 'future inventions', 'happy holidays', 'watching wildlife', and 'growing things'. The texts were adapted to the current level of learners' language proficiency. Every reading text contained 12 questions that were designed to check the students' comprehension and they were given to the students to study.

#### ***Interest Survey***

This survey was adapted from Ebbers (2011) to determine how much learners are interested in topics. It consisted of topics and a five-point Likert scale from low to high. The low was assigned 1 and high was considered 5.

### **Procedures**

The first step of the study was selecting ten students for determining their interest in reading texts. The six reading texts were given to them; they studied them and finally they gave their opinions through interest survey. The three most favored reading texts were submitted to the experimental group, and the three least favored ones were given to the learners of control group. The reading texts were presented in three sessions and at the end of every session, they were asked to answer 12 reading comprehension questions. The raw data was collected for data analysis.

## RESULTS

The results of interest survey on ten students are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The scores on interest survey

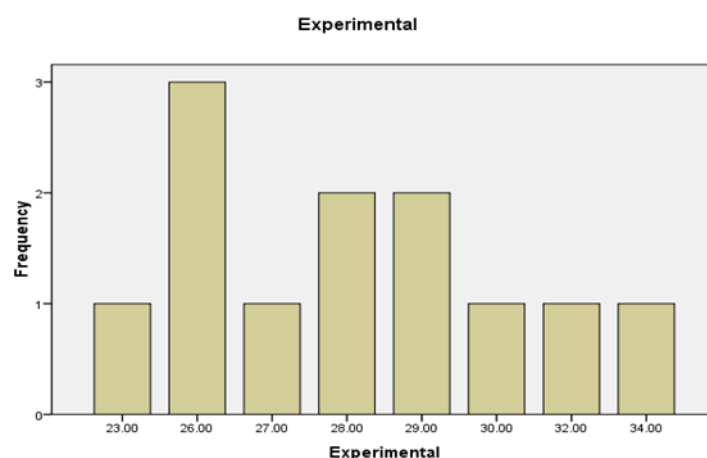
	Low	Fairly Low	Neutral	Fairly High	High	Result
1 making music				2	8	44
2 my favorite sport			4	2	4	40
3 future inventions	1	2	4		3	32
4 happy holidays		1	2	4	3	39
5 watching wildlife	6	3	1			15
6 growing things	4	4	1	1		19
N	11	10	12	9	18	

As reported in Table 1, the reading texts 1, 2, and 4 were the most favored reading texts selected by the students and the reading numbers 3, 5, and 6 were the least favored ones. The learners were assigned to two equal groups of control and experimental containing 12 students. The results of students' performance on reading texts in both groups are identified in Table 2. The obtained scores are out of 36.

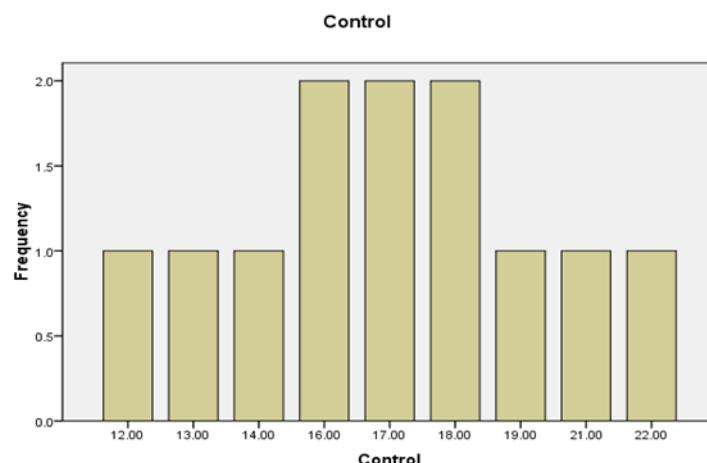
**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Groups of Study on Reading Texts

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	12	12.00	22.00	16.9167	2.99874
Experimental	12	23.00	34.00	28.1667	2.94906
Valid N (listwise)	12				

The mean of two groups show that the experimental group obtained higher scores on reading comprehension texts. The Figure 1 shows the frequency of reading scores in experimental group. The Figure 2 shows the frequency of reading scores of control group.



**Figure 1.** The frequency of obtained reading scores of experimental group



**Figure 2.** The frequency of reading scores in control group

In order to compare the performance of both groups of study and investigate the research question of study, a t-test was calculated. The results of t-test are shown in Table 3. The results of t-test show that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of control and experimental group. Thus, the null hypothesis of the study is rejected and the topic interest was significantly affected reading comprehension.

**Table 3.** One-Sample t-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.008	.928	9.266	22	.000	11.25000	1.21413	8.73204	13.76796
Equal variances not assumed			9.266	21.994	.000	11.25000	1.21413	8.73200	13.76800

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study revealed that topic interest has a significant positive effect on students' reading comprehension. In other words, the more interesting the topic is, the more comprehensible the reading text will be. This study provided empirical evidence in Iranian context for investigating the role of interest in reading comprehension. The results of this study were in line with similar studies in foreign contexts such as Lee (2009) and Schraw et al. (1995).

The outcomes of this study confirm those of Eidswick (2009) who found that interest has a significant influence on EFL learners' reading comprehension. The findings of this study support those of Sadeghpour (2013) who investigated the impact of interesting topics on reading comprehension of Iranian advanced-level learners. She found that the impact of gender and interest had significant effect on immediate recall of readers; female readers outperformed males in recalling interesting topics. It was also found that less-interesting topics can be used in classroom activities as well as interesting topics.

Findings of the present study place emphasis on the importance of interest in reading comprehension. This is in line with previous studies that claim teaching methods are not provided in accordance with the needs of students at the universities so that these methods do not open up paramount opportunity for students to enhance their reading comprehension. Therefore, it is important to develop more interesting topics for reading texts to assist learners with their comprehension.

The limitation of this study was the number of participants. This study, regarding lack of time, could not provide a large number of participants. It may influence the generalizability of the results.

The present study investigated the impact of topic interest on reading comprehension. It is suggested for further studies to investigate the effectiveness of topic interest on other language learning skills such as speaking, listening, and writing.

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