

# The Impact of Topic Interest on Second Language Reading Comprehension

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of interesting topics on reading comprehension of Iranian advanced-level learners. 56 Iranian advanced-level students answered an interest questionnaire, and depending on the answers participants were listed in 2 groups of interested and less-interested participants. Participants read a text, and after reading they answered an immediate and a delayed free recall task. Analysis of recall tasks revealed that topic interest did not affect readers' recall significantly. It was also found that the impact of gender and interest had significant effect on immediate recall of readers; female readers out performed males in recalling interesting topics. Findings suggest that less-interesting topics can also be used in classroom activities as well as interesting topics.

**Keywords:** Topic interest, L2 reading, Immediate recall, Delayed recall

## 1. Introduction

Reading in a second language has always been a major concern for both language learners and teachers. Various interrelated affective and cognitive factors influence the comprehension of texts, and make reading comprehension a complex interactive process (Alderson, 2000; Lee, 2009; Hudson, 1991; Grabe, 1991; Al-Issa, 2000).

Topic variables, which are listed within factors associated with texts (Alderson, 2000), are among the factors that may influence quality of reading comprehension. Studying these factors and their impact on reading comprehension can help learners and teachers to overcome the problems in understanding texts and facilitate comprehension process. There are several studies on the importance of reading topics in L1 (Asher, Hymel, and Wigfield, 1978; Kobayashi, 2009; Carrell, and Wise, 1998; Eidswick, 2010), but since purpose, process, and factors affecting L2 reading are more complicated than L1, more studies are needed in L2 contexts.

## 2. Topic Interest and Reading Comprehension

Interest is believed to be learners' preference in doing one task or activity rather than others, and it is characterized with increased attention and emotional engagement of learners (Schiefel, 1991). Interest, with regards to learning, can be studied into 3 types; individual, situational, and topic interest (Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff, 2002). Individual interest is described as one's continuing preference towards one specific content area or doing a task or activity rather than other contents or activities, situational interest in contrast is the feeling of enjoyment caused by the texts or the situation that the learner is engaged in (Schiefel, 1991), and finally topic interest is a learner's level of interest when a specific topic is studied (Hidi, 2001; Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff, 2002,). Schiefel (1991) defines topic interest as a form of individual interest and contrasted it with situational or text-based interest, but Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff (2002) believe that these 2 types of interest are interactive and topic interest cannot only be individual or situational interest and it has characteristics of both types. Hidi (1990) emphasizes that situational and individual interest are not distinct from each other and they overlap in many areas, so this is not necessarily situational or individual interest alone that contribute to better learning but both of them and their interaction facilitate learning; therefore, it is not always true to say that origin of the learners' interest is only individual or situational and not the other. Hidi (2001) believes that both situational and individual interest contribute to topic interest. She believes that topic interest has a key role on reading because the topic of a passage is the first thing every will face when they are going to read a text. There are various views on how and why interest may influence reading comprehension. In studies concerning learning and education, it has always been important to find out if and how interest facilitates learning processes.

Tobias (1994) emphasized the importance of studying the impact of interest on learning and retention. He states that affective factors such as interest indirectly control the cognitive process of learning; therefore, recognizing affective variables, their complexities and knowing how to optimize their effect for learning seems essential and helpful. Furthermore, because interest is an enduring characteristic of adults (Schiefle, 1991), this is helpful for

educators to adapt their teaching and materials to interested materials and methods. Tobias (1994) states that it is very difficult to find someone who is not interested in anything, so it is possible for educators to find about their learners' interest and to design learning programs that are more interesting to help learners learn better and make the process of learning more pleasant. Eidswick (2009) emphasizes the importance of interest for learning and states that topic interest is more important than individual and situational interest because it is an interactions of both form of interests and it is easier for teachers to find interesting topic for students to design interesting classroom activities, and in comparison with individual interest, designing tasks that are interesting are easier and less time-consuming for syllabus designers.

Prior studies have shown that there is a relationship between interest and learning and performances (Garner, Alexander, Gillingham, Kulikowich, and Brown, 1991; Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff, 2002; Hidi, 1990, Hidi 2001, Schiefel, and Krapp, 1996), and among them there are studies that support the positive effects of interesting materials on learning (like Hidi 1990). Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff (2002) have argued that this positive effect is because learners pay more attention to interesting tasks and learning materials and they are involved in higher cognitive processes and learning while doing interesting tasks. Hidi (1990) states that learners who are more interested in the texts pay more attention to what they are reading, so the interested learners read faster in comparison to learners who are less interested. Learners who are more interested in topic of reading, process the reading information in a deeper cognitive process, and this deeper processing helps them to understand the text better than students who are less interested in the reading topic; therefore, the reading and the recall for interesting topics are easier than other topics for readers (Tobias, 1994). It is also found that topic interest influences the quality of L1 reading comprehension, and the type of learning (Hidi, 2002). Topic interest does not only increase the amount of what a learner can recall but it also increases the depth of L1 learning (Schiefel and Krapp, 1996).

High interest in reading topic motivates and engages students more to read (Cho, Xu, Rhodes, 2010). In a study on the impact of interest on learning from texts in L1, Garner, Alexander, Gillingham, Kulikowich, Brown (1991) found that interesting texts were recalled much better than important generalizations, and participants who read generally interesting texts were able to recall more important ideas than those who read generally uninteresting texts. Asher, Hymel, and Wigfield (1978) also found that L1 readers comprehended high-interest materials better than low-interest material. Schiefel and Krapp (1996) investigated the role of topic interest on free recall of expository texts. Outcome of their study showed that topic interest significantly influenced the recall of idea unit, high-level information and new ideas unit. It was also found that highly interested participants recalled more coherent sequence of high-level information. They emphasized that topic interest does not only increase the amount of what learners recall, but it leads to a deeper comprehension of texts.

Since learning goals, needs, and factors influencing learning of L2 is different from L1, there are others studies on the impact of topic interest on reading comprehension in L2 environment. Leloupe (1993) showed that interest affected L2 reading comprehension of participants; students with high interest in the topic of reading comprehended better in comparison with those who were less interested. Leloupe (1993) suggested that interest can

be used to compensate the absence of other factors that contribute to comprehending texts, like language ability and back ground knowledge. Unlike Leloupe (1993)'s findings, Carrell and Wise (1998) did not find topic interest an influential factor on L2 learners' reading comprehension. Result of their study showed that topic interest did not significantly affected reading comprehension of learners. Lee (2009) investigated the relationship between topic interest and reading comprehension of upper-intermediate to advanced level learners in Korea. Result showed that topic interest did not have an impact on recall of high-level information, and both interested and less interested learners were able to recall main ideas and important information the same. But for low-level information, or details, interested learners were able to recall better than less interested learners. Lee (2009) suggested material developers and teachers to use interesting topics to motivate learners and help them recall information better. Eidswick (2009) showed that high interest does not significantly improve ESL/EFL language learners' reading comprehension.

It is also found that topic interest influences the quality of L1 reading comprehension and the type of learning (Hidi, 2002). Schiffler and Krapp (1996) found that interest in the topic of reading helps learners to recall more information from the text, and also helps them to recall information better.

### **3. Assessment of Reading Comprehension**

Reading is believed to be an important skill in learning a new language; therefore, there have been several studies in language testing to find out methods for measuring comprehension of readers. Since reading comprehension is a cognitive process, and the product is usually the only available source of assessment, assessing reading comprehension is not an easy task and should be multidimensional (Fletcher, 2006).

There are various methods for assessing reading comprehension. One way that is used more in research studies is free-recall task. In free-recall task, readers write down what they could recall from the text they read. Chang (2006) state that free recall tasks measures readers' comprehension more than their language ability, and he also believe that "the immediate written recall task, a widely used measure of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) reading comprehension, has been advocated over traditional test methods such as multiple choice, cloze tests and open-ended questions because it is a direct and integrative assessment task". On the other hand, free recall tasks are criticized because of the effect of memory on readers' recall. Alderson (2000) argue that when a reader cannot recall the information of the text this may be due to the readers' poor memory and not the comprehension problem.

In the present study, to measure the comprehension of L2 readers, an immediate and a delayed recall task were used.

### **4. Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1- Does topic interest influence the immediate recall of reading comprehension for Iranian

advanced-level learners?

2- Does topic interest influence delayed recall of reading comprehension for Iranian advanced-level learners?

3- How does topic interest and gender affect Iranian advanced level reading comprehension?

## **5. Method**

### *5.1 Participants*

This study was conducted with 56 participants, 32 female and 24 male students, who studied TEFL and English literature at M.A. level in Azad University in Iran. Participants were selected from 88 participants who took part in this study. 32 participants' data were excluded from analysis because 21 participants did not take part in the second session of data collection, 11 participants did not fill all the required forms. Participants were ranged from 24 to 40 in terms of age and the mean of 29.71 years ( $SD= 4.007$ ). All participants were Iranian students who studied English as their foreign language, and had studied English at university for at least 4 years.

### *5.2 Instruments*

To determine the degree of participants' interest, Schiefel and Krapp's (1996) topic interest questionnaire was used in this study. Schiefel and Krapp's argue that interest is composed of "feeling-related valences", participants feeling when they read a text, and "value-related-valences", how important the topic of reading is to readers. The interest questionnaire consisted of 2 parts, value related valences and feeling-related valences. In this questionnaire participants rated their feelings toward the topic of readings from "bored," "stimulated," "interested," "indifferent," "involved," and "engaged"; and they rated the value of topic as "meaningful," "unimportant," "useful," and "worthless" (Schiefel and Krapp, 1996). Items of the questionnaire were ranked on a four-point rating scales ranging from "completely true" to "not at all true". The feeling related values and value related valence scales were added to measure a topic interest score. Then the data of this questionnaire was reduced to a categorical variable; that is if the participants' mean score of answers were between 1 or 2 they were listed as more-interested participants, and if it was 3, or 4 they were listed as less-interested; note that the variable bored and worthless were reversely coded when scoring the interest questionnaires.

### *5.3 Procedures*

Participants read and completed the interest questionnaire. Then, they were asked to read the text about the "gender selection". After reading texts, participants were required to write down what they could recall from the 2 passages.

After reading, participants were asked to give back the text to the researcher, and write down as much information as they could remember from the text immediately after reading is finished. Participants were instructed to write down everything they could recall from texts, every detail and example, and they were asked not to summarize the content of the passages. There were no

time limitation for recall tasks, and students had enough time to think and write down what they could remember from the texts.

After a week, for assessing delayed recall of the participants, they were asked to write down whatever they could remember from the passages in a delayed recall task.

## 6. Data Analysis

There are different methods suggested for measuring reading comprehension. One method used is Johnson's (1970) method. In Johnson's (1970) method a text is divided to pausal units, a native reader reads a text with natural speed and the places that the reader pauses to breathe is marked as a pausal unit. In this study, the Johnson's (1970) scoring system was used for both immediate and delayed recall tasks. In this study, 3 native speakers of English read the texts and mark where they paused in the texts.

Then, 3 experienced ESL teachers in a session decided on the information value of the listed pausal units. Pausal units were marked as high-level and low-level informational units according to their importance in understanding the texts. Units with information that helped readers to get the meaning of the text were marked as high-level information units, and if the pausal units did not play important role in comprehension, and deletion of them did not affected understanding the text, they were labeled as low-level units. Then the units upon which all 3 raters agreed were listed. Participants' recalls were scored on the basis of the number of units recalled correctly. One score was given to each unit recalled correctly, and then the number of correctly recalled units was converted to percentage.

## 7. Results and Discussion

The first research question investigated the impact of topic interest on immediate recall of L2 reading texts for Iranian advanced-level (EFL) learners. To answer this question, group statistics are presented in the Table 4.2. As it can be seen there are four scores for immediate recall and delayed recall of high-interest and low-interest readings. According to the responses of participants to interest questionnaire, 34 readers were more interested in the topic and 22 were less interested in the topic of texts. As it can be seen in the Table 1, more interested readers recalled readings better both in immediate recall and delayed recall.

Table 1. Group Statistics for the effect of topic interest on reading recall

|                         |                |               | interest | N  | Mean    | Std.<br>Deviation | Std.<br>Mean | Error |
|-------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------|----|---------|-------------------|--------------|-------|
| Reading score<br>recall | immediate      | High-interest |          | 34 | 16.3529 | 5.93848           | 1.01844      |       |
|                         |                | Low -interest |          | 22 | 13.7273 | 4.88127           | 1.04069      |       |
| Reading score           | delayed recall | High-interest |          | 34 | 12.7941 | 4.38855           | .75263       |       |
|                         |                | Low-interest  |          | 22 | 11.5455 | 4.57454           | .97529       |       |

Table 2. Independent Sample T-test for the effect of topic interest on immediate and delayed reading recall

|                                | Levene's<br>Test for<br>Equality of<br>Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |    |                    |                    |                          |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------|------------------------------|----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
|                                | F                                                | Sig. | t                            | df | Sig.<br>(2-tailed) | Mean<br>Difference | Std. Error<br>Difference |
| Reading score-Immediate recall | .033                                             | .857 | 1.729                        | 54 | .090               | 2.62567            | 1.51894                  |
| Reading score-Delayed recall   | .302                                             | .585 | 1.023                        | 54 | .311               | 1.24866            | 1.22082                  |

An independent samples t-test was run to address the impact of topic interest on the immediate recall and delayed recall of Iranian EFL advanced learners. As shown in Table 4.3, the value of the sig. (2-tailed) for immediate recall is 0.090 which is more than 0.05; therefore, there is no significant difference between immediate recall of more interesting texts and less interesting text. The value of the sig. (2-tailed) for delayed recall is 0.311, so the difference between delayed recall of more and less interesting text for Iranian EFL advanced learners is not significantly different. So, according to the results, it can be concluded that topic interest does not significantly influence immediate recall and delayed recall of readings for Iranian EFL advanced-level learners

In the literature of topic interest effect on reading comprehension, the results are different for L1 and L2 learners. In L1 environment, nearly most of the studies agree on the positive impact of topic interest on reading comprehension of learners (Asher, Hymel, and Wigfield, 1978; Garner, Alexander, Gillingham, Kulikowich, and Brown, 1991; Schiefel and Krapp, 1996), but there are studies that emphasize the null effect of topic interest on reading comprehension of L2 learners (Carrel and Wise, 1998; Edwick, 2009; Lee, 2009). This contradiction of result might be due to the differences in learners' needs, goals, abilities, and etc. in these two environments.

The above results support Carrel and Wise's (1998) findings on neutral the impact of topic interest on reading comprehension of EFL learners. Carrel and Wise studied the impact of topic interest on immediate recall of texts for female and male language learners. They found that although males' recalls were more affected by topic interest than females, in general topic interest did not significantly affect reading recall of L2 learners. Edwick's (2009) findings on the impact of topic interest on reading are also in line with the outcome of this study. He found that topic interest did not significantly improve the comprehension of L2 readings. Lee's (2009) study on the impact of the topic interest on the immediate reading recall of L2 learners also found that topic interest did not affect the immediate recall of main ideas and important information, but only affected the recall of details and low-level

information.

On the other hand, this study's findings contradict the claim made by Leloupe (1993). She found that Spanish EFL students in secondary school with high-interest in topic of reading comprehended the text better than students who were less interested and she concluded that topic interest can facilitate comprehension of language learners.

The observed discrepancy observed between the finding of the present study and the mentioned study could be partially attributed to the learners' proficiency levels and age. As it was discussed, this study and the study that supported the null impact of topic interest on reading recall, used upper-intermediate and advanced level university students, but Leloupe (1993) used secondary school language learners who are younger and less proficient than participants in the other studies. Another potential reason of discrepancy could be due to the gender of the participants. Carrel and Wise's (1998) found that male participants' recalls were more affected by topic interest than females', but in the other studies gender was not considered as a variable; therefore, the number of male and female participants in studies of interest might produce different results.

The third research question focused on how the relationship between topic interest and reading comprehension is affected by the gender of participants. Descriptive statistics of the ANOVA test on Table 3 show that both female and male participants were more successful in immediate and delayed recall of more interesting texts.

Table 3. Interest by gender interaction on immediate and delayed recall: Mean scores and standard deviations

|                  | interest        | gender | Mean    | Std. Deviation | N  |
|------------------|-----------------|--------|---------|----------------|----|
| Immediate recall | Less interested | female | 16.0909 | 5.43055        | 11 |
|                  |                 | male   | 11.3636 | 2.87307        | 11 |
|                  | More interested | female | 16.9524 | 7.31762        | 21 |
|                  |                 | male   | 15.3846 | 2.46774        | 13 |
| Delayed recall   | Less interested | female | 12.9091 | 4.96899        | 11 |
|                  |                 | male   | 10.1818 | 3.89405        | 11 |
|                  | More interested | female | 13.0000 | 5.01996        | 21 |
|                  |                 | male   | 12.4615 | 3.28165        | 13 |

According to values presented in table 4, the impact of gender and interest on immediate recall of participants is significant, but this impact is not statistically significant for the delayed recall.

Table 4. Effects of topic interest and gender on second language reading immediate recall; analysis of variance summary table

|                  | Source            | df | Mean Square | F     | p-value |
|------------------|-------------------|----|-------------|-------|---------|
| Immediate recall | interest          | 1  | 77.811      | 2.659 | .109    |
|                  | gender            | 1  | 129.349     | 4.421 | .040    |
|                  | interest * gender | 1  | 32.584      | 1.114 | .296    |
| Delayed recall   | interest          | 1  | 18.344      | .925  | .341    |
|                  | gender            | 1  | 34.812      | 1.754 | .191    |
|                  | interest * gender | 1  | 15.638      | .788  | .379    |

Outcome of this study is patterned like Leloup's (1993). She found that female readers were significantly better in comprehension of more interesting texts. On the other hand, result of the present study is in contrast with Carrel and Wise's (1998) findings in L2 contexts and with McClintock (1985) findings in L1. McClintock (1985) found that L1 male readers outperformed females when reading more interesting texts, and Carrel and Wise's (1998) found that L2 male readers were slightly, but not significantly, more affected by more interesting topics when females were more successful in comprehension of less interesting texts.

This contrast in findings could be justified by the differences in L1 and L2 nature of language learning and differences in L1 and L2 participants, and by the proficiency level and age of readers. In this study, participants were only L2 advanced language learners, but in Carrel and Wise's (1998) study participants were EAP learners from beginner to advanced level. McClintock's (1985) participants were selected among seventh and eighth grade L1 learners while in this study participants were adult L2 learners.

## 8. Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate the impact of interesting topics on reading comprehension of Iranian advanced –level learners.

Concerning the impact of topic interest on immediate recall and delayed recall of readings, according to the results, it was found that topic interest does not significantly influence immediate recall and delayed recall of readings for Iranian EFL advanced-level learners. It was also found that the impact of gender and interest had significant effect on immediate recall of readers; female participants could recall more of the more interesting texts. Findings suggest that less-interesting topics can also be used in classroom activities as well as interesting topics.

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## Appendixs

### Appendix 1. Gender Selection

There are advantages and disadvantages to gender selection. Many people would argue that it's not up to a couple to decide the gender of their children, but others argue that gender selection is important.

Supporters of gender selection believe that couples should be allowed to choose the genders they feel they are well suited to raise. Many couples want two or three children, and most want at least one girl and one boy. With gender selection, this is possible. Once, I was waiting at the doctor's office in front of a woman who was pregnant with her sixth son. She was so disappointed because she had five boys and they tried one last time for a girl, and she ended up with another son. I admit that I felt sympathy for her. One other lady became depressed throughout her pregnancy because she knew she was having a boy. She really did not want to have a son and prior to his birth she suffered from depression over having a boy. Another lady that I know gave birth to a son that she thought would be a girl. She was so distraught over having a son that she refused to hold him until she left the hospital and had to. Knowing the gender of children in advance will prevent such problems. Gender selection is also advantageous when preparing for the new baby. It is very helpful for parents to know what their child's gender is when they want to buy clothes, toys, or other thing, for example for couples that have children close together, it could be economically advantageous to have the same sex close together; for example the new baby could have the older child's hand me downs. Supporters believe that gender selection would also give parents a sense of empowerment by having control over the number of children they have. Also for parents who chose their child's gender beforehand there is a shared decision between spouses. It makes a closer bond between parents which is finally better for family life of both parents and children. Supporters believe that, for the mentioned reasons, gender selection should be allowed by law to help both parents and society.

### Appendix 2. Pausal Units

1. There are advantages
2. and disadvantages
3. to gender selection

4. Many people would argue
6. to decide the gender of their children,
8. Supporters of gender selection believe that
12. and most want at least one girl
13. and one boy
14. With gender selection
16. Once
17. I was waiting at the doctor's office in front of a woman
18. who was pregnant with her sixth son
19. She was so disappointed
21. and they tried one last time for a girl
22. and she ended up with another son
24. One other lady
25. became depressed throughout her pregnancy
26. because she knew she was having a boy
28. and prior to his birth
30. over having a boy
31. Another lady that I know
32. gave birth to a son that she thought would be a girl
33. She was so distraught over having a son
34. until she left the hospital
35. and had to
38. when preparing for the new baby
39. It is very helpful for parents to know
40. what their child's gender is
43. or other thing
44. for example for couples that have children close together
45. it could be economically advantageous
50. that gender selection

51. would also give parents a sense of empowerment
52. by having control
53. over the number of children they have
54. Also for parents who chose their child's gender beforehand
55. there is a shared decision between spouses
56. It makes a closer bind between parents
58. Supporters believe that
59. for the mentioned reasons

### Appendix 3. Interest questionnaire

#### Measurement of (Text-Related) Topic Interest

The text you are going to read is about "Gender Selection". There are advantages and disadvantages to gender selection. Many people would argue that it's not up to a couple to decide the gender of their children, but others argue that gender selection is important.

#### 1. Feeling-related valences

While reading the text on "Gender Selection" I expect to feel

|             | Not true at all | some-what | quite | completely true |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------|-------|-----------------|
| Bored*      | 1               | 2         | 3     | 4               |
| Stimulated  | 1               | 2         | 3     | 4               |
| Interested  | 1               | 2         | 3     | 4               |
| Indifferent | 1               | 2         | 3     | 4               |
| Involved    | 1               | 2         | 3     | 4               |
| Engaged     | 1               | 2         | 3     | 4               |

#### 2. Value-related valences

To me personally, the topic "Gender Selection" is

|            | Not at all | some-what | quite | very               |
|------------|------------|-----------|-------|--------------------|
| Meaningful | 1          | 2         | 3     | 4                  |
| Useful     | 1          | 2         | 3     | 4                  |
| Worthless* | 1          | 2         | 3     | 4* Reversed coding |