GENDER DIFFERENCES IN READING COMPREHENSION FOR
CHINESE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The paper contains a report on the investigation of the relationship between gender differences and reading comprehension at secondary level in China. Another objective was to discover the effective reading strategies for Chinese secondary school students and instructions for Chinese English teachers. A brief review of literature on the previous research on gender differences in second language learning will be conducted. A second review of literature relating to research the relationship between gender and reading comprehension will be conducted. Through a review of the literature, it is evident that most research conducted addresses reading strategies, motivation and FL anxiety effect on reading comprehension. A bulk of the research states that gender differences impacts reading comprehension.
GENDER DIFFERENCES IN READING COMPREHENSION FOR CHINESE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of main ways to get information, and is regarded as core of teaching in China. In contemporary China many teachers and linguists focus on the research on reading. In China, females outperform males in reading tests at secondary levels. What is the relationship between gender and reading comprehension? Previous research usually deals with the different learning strategies that male and female learners use for learning the foreign language. Furthermore, reading success depends on factors such as the levels of readers' proficiency, types of text, text difficulty, and task demands (Alderson, 2000). Chavez (2001) points out that the ultimate goals of understanding gender differences in strategy use are, for example: (a) to make us aware of how gender can affect development and achievement in L2 reading; (b) to enable L2 teachers to use this awareness to help their students of either gender to achieve gains in L2 reading comprehension; (c) to encourage further research into the role of gender in L2 reading; and (d) to accommodate individual students' needs, given that males and females deserve an equal chance of learning success. So this paper aims to investigate how gender differences influence reading comprehension and improve teachers’ instructions in reading class.

Statement of Problem

The problem presented in this paper was to identify whether or not gender differences had an effect on reading comprehension ability for secondary school
students. Stated as a question the problem is, “What is the relationship between gender and reading comprehension ability for secondary students?”.

**Delimitations of the Research**

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over a course of three months in 2008 and 2009. Primary searches was conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Wilson database as the primary sources. Subject term search topics included “gender and language”, “gender differences and reading strategy”, “gender differences and second language learning”, and “gender differences and reading comprehension”.

**Method**

A brief review of literature on the previous research on gender differences in second language learning was conducted. A second review of literature relating to research on the relationship between gender and reading comprehension was conducted. The findings are summarized and recommendations made.

**Definition of Terms**

**Gender Differences.** Gender: “the characteristics, whether biological or socially influenced, by which people define male and female.” (Myers, 2002)

**Reading Comprehension.** Reading comprehension - techniques for improving students' success in extracting useful knowledge from text (Mayer, 2002) As defined by Partnership for Reading (2005), Reading comprehension is
understanding a text that is read, or the process of "constructing meaning" from a text. Comprehension is a "construction process" because it involves all of the elements of the reading process working together as a text is read to create a representation of the text in the reader's mind.

**Reading Strategy.** Reading strategies indicate how readers conceive of a task, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they don't understand. These strategies consist of a whole range of strategies including skimming and scanning, contextual guessing, and reading for meaning, utilizing background knowledge, recognizing text structure, and so forth. (Shiu-chen Hsu, 1995)

**Motivation.** Second language acquisition theory leaves no doubt about the crucial importance of a further affective variable, motivation, which is actually a cluster of factors that ‘energize behavior and give it direction’ (Hilgard, Atkinson and Atkinson 1979:). Chomsky (1988) points out the importance of activating learners’ motivation: ‘The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material”(p81). Motivation involves the learner’s reasons for attempting to acquire the second language, but precisely what creates motivation is the crux of the matter.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Gender Differences Affect reading strategies

Text comprehension is a complex cognitive skill in which the reader should construct meaning by using all the available resources from both the text and previous knowledge. These resources assist readers in utilizing lexis and syntax, retrieving their meanings from one’s mental lexicon, making inferences, and employing schemata. The correct implementation of these resources can help readers in the successful comprehension of the text (Donin et al, 2004; Fukkink et al, 2005). Readers’ level of mastery in text comprehension can be assessed by different measures. Some reading test methods include several types of questions including multiple choice, open-ended question, cloze, true/false/not given, fill-in-the blank, written recall, sentence completion, matching activity, and checklist tests. These question-types can measure readers’ ability to identify main idea, guess meaning from context, read for specific ideas, identify referential meaning, identify the tone of the reading passage, make inferences, identify the gist of the reading, make summaries, and many more. Based on the ability measured in each question, the reader adopts a special approach—top-down, bottom-up, or both. In other words, it is the test item that demands a reader to employ certain strategies in answering reading comprehension questions. For example, Anderson et al (1991) found that test items affect examinees’ responses
and their interaction with the text. Some items required test-takers to reread parts of the passage, process deep level comprehension, or scan; while items merely required a surface level understanding of the passage. Test conditions are also essential in affecting the way readers interact with the test. Phakiti (2003) states that “in a high-stakes test situation” (p.656), learners may use strategies different from normal reading conditions. Phakiti further claims that “some strategies are specifically used in test-taking contexts” (p.656).

What is more, a bulk of research findings show that males and females use different strategies in language learning particularly in reading comprehension (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Chavez, 2001; Sheorey, 1999; Kaylani, 1996; Oxford et al, 1996; Oxford et al, 1993; Bacon, 1992). Oxford (1994), for example, states that males tend to be more analytic while females tend to be more global in their approach to language learning. Males adhere more to rules while females adhere more to cultural differences. Furthermore, males and females may use the same number of strategies in language learning but females are more skillful at applying these strategies qualitatively.

Gender Differences Affect Reading Motivation

It is generally accepted that readers who are interested in reading and are well motivated are more likely to succeed than those who are not interested or are poorly motivated (Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Gottfried, 1985). Readers who have positive attitudes to reading and healthy self-concepts usually enjoy reading and are keen to learn. They tend to make good progress and enjoy reading for pleasure. In contrast, readers with negative attitudes to reading and poor self-concepts tend
not to have much interest in reading and to dislike reading as a leisure activity. It is now widely accepted that affective factors influence readers’ motivation to master reading and their persistence with demanding reading tasks (Ghaith and Bouzeineddine, 2003). Positive self-concepts and attitudes are crucial components of intrinsic motivation and are important predictors of children’s success both in the beginning stages of reading and in the acquisition of higher-order reading skills (Verma and Bagley, 1982; Burns et al., 1999; Downing, 1982). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define an attitude as a learned predisposition to respond to given phenomena in a consistent manner, and they claim that learners’ beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behavior are interlinked. In terms of acquiring reading proficiency, the beliefs a reader holds about the pleasure given by reading and the value attached to being skilled in reading strongly shape attitudes to reading. In turn, attitudes and intentions will help determine the resolve the reader adopts when approaching reading, both for pleasure and for information. Completing the cycle, successful reading outcomes will shape behavior; and this behavior will influence future beliefs and attitudes.

The Ruddell–Speaker (1985) model is based on the components that interact during reading that highlight the distinct roles of the reading environment, knowledge utilization and control, declarative and procedural knowledge and reader outcome. If the reading environment and context are conducive, then learners feel more comfortable and are more likely to persist when applying themselves to the task. The knowledge utilization and control component refers to the affective, cognitive and metacognitive dimensions of the reader’s thinking
about the reading topic or the material being read. Declarative and procedural knowledge refers to the ability to decode the words encountered and to the language ability the reader brings to the task, whilst the reader product component refers to ways in which reading experiences influence future reading skill and knowledge about the subject matter in question.

Matthewson (1994) maintains that attitudes are key elements in the factors influencing an individual’s reading intentions. The attitudes that readers bring to the task of learning to read help determine success and, in turn, successful reading encounters influence these very attitudes (McKenna and Kear, 1995). Attitudes influence learners’ reasons for reading, their feelings about reading, their readiness for reading and beliefs about reading. McKenna (1994) conducted a large-scale descriptive survey investigating how and why readers read. Arising from the research, an integrated model of the whole reading process was developed emphasizing that reading success is a consequence of subject norms, intent and attitudes, all three of which are conditioned by such contingencies as the availability of help, the personal purposes of reading and the value attached to reading as a productive and enjoyable process. In this model, attitudinal change is brought about by factors including the beliefs the reader holds about the purposes of the activity and the reader’s desire for these outcomes to be achieved. At the same time, beliefs about the expectations of respected others influence the reader’s motivation to conform to those expectations.

Gender and FL Anxiety

FL anxiety is highly related to the inner self and the self-expression of the
learner, which are strongly interwoven (Tobias, 1979). Anxiety is a complicated system of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that are related to FL learning in the classroom where these characteristics stem from the uniqueness of the FL process (Horowitz, Horowitz, & Cope, 1986). Oral communication skills are more likely to be affected by language anxiety where the learner is afraid of spontaneous communication in the FL (Horowitz et al., 1986). Horowitz and Young (1991) argue that anxiety is perceived as state anxiety that arises in a situation or event: public speaking, exams, and class participation. FL anxiety may negatively influence motivation, level of performance, and attitude to learning a specific topic. Low level of performance in the FL is most likely a result of learners' anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Horowitz & Young, 1991). Krashen (1982) stresses the negative effect of anxiety on FL learners, asserting that anxiety 30 negatively influences the affective filter, which causes poor linguistic performance. Tobias (1979) suggested a three-stage model of FL anxiety: input, processing, and output. Anxiety may a rise at the stage of input when speech in the FL is fast for the listener, or when the written text is composed of complicated sentences above the level of the reader. The second stage, processing, demands organization, storage, and elaboration of the learning material. Anxiety at this stage may negatively affect the cognitive learning process of earlier assignments, which may lead the learner to rely on recall and unorganized material. The output stage depends on the quality of the previous two stages. Its success is measured by the organization of the output and the speed of the retrieval of concepts from memory (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).
MacIntyre and Gardner (cited in Ellis, 1994) argue that FL learners are affected by their negative experiences. Situation anxiety develops if learners develop negative expectations based on bad learning experiences. Further, poor performance and continued bad learning performance result in increased anxiety. The relationship of the gender of FL learners to anxiety is still not clearly established in the literature. Research results are ambivalent. This area of research usually deals with the different learning strategies that male and female learners use for learning the FL.

Males prefer to rely on first language and bottom-up reading approaches more than females (Bacon, 1992). Females are likely to be motivated more by easy assignments and encouragement. Males are more interested in challenge, while for females the feeling of achievement is more important (Story & Sullivan, 1986). Further, males ascribe less importance to FL than females (Clarck & Trafford, 1996).

In short, this is the available evidence on reading and gender collected for this review. The next chapter provides conclusions from the literature and suggested recommendations for practice are provided.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a review of the literature, it becomes evident that gender differences play a role in strategy use. Reading is an active process involving the three main approaches of top-down, bottom-up, and parallel processing. The present paper suggests that similar to the Anderson et al. (1991) study, items in a reading comprehension test do affect examinees’ performance and interaction with the text. Some items required that those being tested to focus mainly on a top-down approach, some on a bottom-up approach and some on both (parallel processing). Moreover, females are more global and prefer guessing meaning from context while males are more analytic and attend more to words. In other words, women utilize more top down strategies and men more bottom-up strategies when reading a text.

Females in the study were better in practising from top to bottom and from bottom to top in their interaction with the reading passages. This involves the reader in a text and his/her background knowledge at the same time.

Teachers should be aware of these differences; they can help learners of both genders in different ways. By concentrating on learners’ limitations, teachers can provide successful learning situations. Only in this way can teachers handle
the class efficiently and achieve the teaching goals.

Strategy training can be done by working with students in small groups or individually through using various reading texts and questions to check students’ processing problems through questioning and answering. Teaching learners comprehension monitoring and reading comprehension test taking strategies can help them to take a more reflective and self-directed approach to text reading. Additionally, it can assist learners in reducing anxiety in reading tests.

Second, reading motivation and confidence tend to be significantly related to reading achievement test scores. Students who have more positive reading attitudes and higher self-concepts were more likely to gain higher achievement scores. In contrast, students who had lower test scores were more likely to indicate that reading is boring and not to read as well as other students in the class.

Third, Anxiety had a strong relationship with all aspects of FL tested in this study. It indicated that students with high anxiety showed poor reading results.

Fourth, another important finding was that the first language skills were negatively and significantly correlated with FL anxiety. The contention is the higher the anxiety the lower the first language skills. Furthermore, reading comprehension is an interactive compensatory process (Stanovich, 1980) where the reader uses compensation reading strategies, top-down reading, clues in the text, and redundancy of the text, and may apply much guesswork based on prior knowledge or sentence context. But learners cannot use these strategies in spelling. There, they have to transfer phonological representations from working memory into orthographic units, and such a process needs higher cognitive skills beyond
the recognition level.

As for teachers' attitudes to learning the FL (role) as perceived by the students, the results were very interesting. These attitudes were negatively and significantly correlated with anxiety. Namely, the higher the students' evaluation of their teachers as supportive, encouraging, and understanding, the lower the students' level of anxiety in FL learning situations. Furthermore, gender differences were found in the sample in this study. Female students showed higher anxiety than male students. Accordingly, the male students' achievements were also higher than the female students' achievements. Clarck and Trafford (1996) found similar anxiety results among male and female students, and explained these differences as due to female students being more sincere and frank than male students. Females were more likely to report openly their feelings of anxiety, especially in a female environment.

The reader will recall that the emphasis of this report was on the relationship among gender differences, reading strategies, reading motivation and FL anxiety. The chief finding was that there was indeed a great relationship between gender differences and reading comprehension that could, in some cases, affect test outcomes. However, additional research is needed to find out effective ways to improve male or female students reading comprehension ability.
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