

*The Effect of Gender on Iraqi EFL  
Learners' Beliefs about Reading  
Comprehension at the University Level*

lecturer

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**Abstract**

With the hope that research into learners' beliefs will deepen teachers' understanding of how learners approach reading in English, this study aims at investigating the effect of gender on learners' beliefs about reading comprehension in EFL (English as a foreign language). To achieve this aim, the researcher used a questionnaire of 21 multiple choice items. An independent sample t-test was used to analyze the items of the questionnaire as reported by the participants. Results of the t-test showed no significant differences between male and female participants' beliefs about reading comprehension except in four items. The results of this study can help teachers to build a supporting learning environment, to initiate students interest, and to enhance their reading skills.

# تأثير الفرق بين الذكور والاناث على معتقداتهم حول استيعاب المقروء باللغة الانجليزية على المستوى الجامعي

**المدرس**

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**المخلص**

بحثت الدراسة تأثير الفرق بين الذكور والاناث على معتقداتهم كمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في استيعابه. -علااب المقروء. وقد اعتمدت الباحثة على اجراء استبيان يتكون من ٢١ فقرة لعينة من طلبة المرحلة الثانية في قسم اللغة الانجليزية\ كلية الاداب. كشفت النتائج التي تم تحليلها باستخدام اختبار (t-test) الاحصائي عدم وجود اي فروق معنوية في معتقدات الذكور والاناث حول استيعاب المقروء ماعدا في اربع فقرات. هذه النتائج تمكن التدريسيين من انشاء بيئة تعليمية ناجحة من خلال اثارة اهتمام المتعلمين وتعزيز مهارات القراءة في اللغة الانجليزية.

## 1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed a shift from teacher – centered studies to student- centered in foreign language learning\teaching. The focus of language learning and teaching has been centered on the learner as an individual who is worthy of special emphasis. Learning individuality ought to have priority as Benson (2005:5) affirms "*learners are individuals and that their individuality may have significant consequences for their learning...*". Thus, the role of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning has been attracting a great deal of interest in applied linguistics since the 1980's. As an instance, the study of Elaine Horwitz (1987) is considered as the pioneering one in the field of language learners' beliefs. Following Horwitz, a great number of studies have been conducted to apply her approach. Among those studies are: Riley (1997), Gaies (1998), Mori (1999), Ferreira (2003), Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) , Bernat (2006), Bernat and Liloyd (2007), Nikitina and Furuoka (2007), Ellis(2008), Ferriira and Kalaja (2001), Mohammed and Shokrpour (2012), Yoshida (2013), and others.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Gender in EFL

Empirical investigation on foreign language reading has been intensified to explore whether gender interacts with other variables to account for differences in reading comprehension performance with learners at different levels of language acquisition. Tischler (1996), as cited by Doran (2006), states that "*gender pertains to the socially learned patterns of behaviour and the psychological or emotional expressions or attitudes that distinguish males from females.*" Gender is what distinguishes human beings as masculine or feminine within social structures. It "*marks a sociocultural*

*distinction between men and women on the basis of traits and behavior that are conventionally regarded as characteristics of and appropriate to the two groups of people"* (Keshavarz and Ashtarian, 2008: 1). In other words, it is clear that gender responds to a social construction which shapes people's self images and identities.

The present study supports the fact that language learning is a social interaction and attributes so much emphasis on students' prior experiences as learners and individuals. It cannot deny that gender is an integral part of one's identity, and that gender awareness is reflected by past and present experiences. Based on this fact, the present study aims to find out whether female and male students' beliefs about reading comprehension differ. If it is so, it aims to figure out in which areas those beliefs are most similar and/or diverse and what implications this might have on reading comprehension in English.

## **2.2 Learner Beliefs**

There is no doubt that beliefs play a critical role in people's life and the way they think and act. "*Beliefs*", as Barcelos (2000: 2) states , "*cannot be separated from our identities, actions and social experiences.*" The situation of foreign language learning is definitely not far off this notion since language learning is a social experience that draws on students' previous knowledge as learners and individuals. Generally speaking, beliefs about language learning fit in the domain of affective variables such as attitudes, motivations, anxiety, etc. Evidence shows that learners' beliefs have decisive effects on their success, failure, and experiences (Cotteral, 1999: 494). This indicates that students who look upon their studies as important and beneficial are likely to show higher degrees of perseverance in their work. That is why knowledge of learners' beliefs about language learning may enable educators to reconsider learners' "*expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes*"(Horwitz, 1988: 283). As a

result, teachers can have a broader view about teaching choices and be able to adopt a more organized approach to learning (Cotteral, 1999: 494). Accordingly, teachers need to discover what learners expect from language classes and believe about their learning so as to account for how they actually approach foreign language learning.

The focus of learner beliefs as a vital means for academic motivation is based on the assumption that these beliefs are key forces for success or failure (Pintrich and Schunk,1996). Above all, researchers interested in academic learning and motivation emphasize the role of students' thoughts and beliefs in learning (Schunk, 2003:160).

Beliefs can be defined as "*notions about language learning (the personalization of impressions)*" (Kuntz, 1997: 5). In a similar context, Victori and Lockhart (1995: 224) define beliefs as "*general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching.*" They differentiate between "insightful beliefs" which successful learners have, and "negative or poor beliefs" which poor learners hold. They assert that:

*....if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, if they attribute undue importance to factors that are external to their own action...they are not likely to adopt a reasonable and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous (ibid: 225).*

Foreign language learners certainly have different beliefs about foreign language learning (Horwitz,1987), and these beliefs enhance their experience and attitudes towards learning. Commonly, learners have different beliefs about how a foreign

language should be learnt and taught in the classroom, some of these beliefs are positive and others are negative as they are affected by various backgrounds, whether personal, cultural, or otherwise (Arnold and Brown, 1999:15). On the whole, learners' beliefs are looked upon as a significant individual difference variable in foreign language, which form "*the basis for our personal decisions as to how to proceed*" (McDonough, 1995:9).

In cognitive psychology, students' beliefs about knowledge and learning or epistemological beliefs have been studied as part of metacognition (Flavell, 1987:4). Learners' beliefs contain all that learners understand about themselves as learners and thinkers. Consequently, learners' metacognition knowledge and beliefs can help in learning progress and achievement; they influence both the process and product of language learning (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005:1).

So far, different researches interested in learners beliefs have examined the various factors that affect beliefs such as strategy use (Yang, 1999), impact of culture on beliefs (Horwitz, 1999), motivation (Banya and Cheng, 1997), attitude (Riley, 1997; Banya and Cheng, 1997), gender (Siebert, 2003) and language proficiency ( Tanaka and Ellis,2003). Also, learners' beliefs are assumed to be entwined with other factors such as self-concept, self-efficacy, personality traits, and other individual differences (Siebart, 2003; Bernat, 2006).

The literature on the role of gender in learners' beliefs, to name just a few, reveal contradictory findings. For example, for Bacon and Finnemann (1992:475), learner beliefs can be foreseen by gender. They performed a study by which they examined gender

differences in self-reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input. The researchers did not depend on BALLI (beliefs about language learning inventory) questionnaire but developed a 109-item questionnaire by their own. Students had to state their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, and strategies with Spanish as a foreign language. Bacon and Finnemann found that female students reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use, greater use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input, and a higher level of social interaction with Spanish than males.

Another study was conducted by Siebert (2003) on students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning using Horwitz's BALLI questionnaire (1987). Siebert found that male participants were more likely than female participants to rate their language learning abilities highly. For instance, males were twice as likely to agree that people from their country were good at learning foreign languages. Likewise, about 25% of males were more likely to respond that they have a special ability for learning languages, but only (10%) of females agreed, and no females strongly agreed. These and other findings reveal that males and females hold different beliefs as related to ability.

On the other hand, Tercanlioglu (2005) analyzed her results using an ANOVA table to arrive at the fact that no significant differences were found in the participants' beliefs about language learning. About 45 male and 73 female undergraduate EFL teacher trainees at one of the Turkish universities took part in her study. She concluded that age, stage of life, and contextual differences could be important variables in learner's beliefs.

Bernat and Lloyd (2007:81) found that overall males and females held similar beliefs about language learning, and concluded only two statistically significant gender differences: women were more likely to perceive multilingualism than men were, and also

enjoyed talking to native speakers less than did their male counterparts.

Rieger (2009) conducted a study to explore the effect of gender and target language on Hungarian EFL learners' beliefs about language learning. Rieger used Horwitz's questionnaire to find out significant differences in students' beliefs about the target language. Rieger administered the questionnaire to four groups of learners, two of which were German language groups, the other were English language groups. The first two groups were more likely to find oral communication easier than written one. The other two groups believed that their language was easy and that practicing with audiovisual material is important more than German learners did. With regard to motivation, the German groups reported lower levels of motivation. Females were significantly more open to use authentic material in the target language than males were.

Since the effect of gender is context specific and because of the contradictory findings of the above mentioned studies, the effect of gender deserves to be investigated in the Iraqi context.

### **2.3 Reading Comprehension in EFL**

The relevant literature reveal an almost settled agreement that reading comprehension is one of the most critical skills in foreign language learning. Baier (2005:1) maintains that "*without adequate reading comprehension skills, students can struggle in many subject areas*" Unfortunately, Nuttal (1998, p. 2) affirms, reading has been described as the "*most studied and the least understood process in education*". Moeini (2002:25) thinks that reading was traditionally considered as a rebuilding of the author's intended meaning through recognizing the printed

letters and words. On the other hand, Pang (2008:2) considers reading as a psychological processing in which the reader is engaged in generating and testing hypotheses. Pang states that reading involves metacognition factors such as sufficient knowledge and control of language and world.

According to Swalander and Taube (1997: 207), having a good reading ability *"is the key to success in educational settings and this is why researchers try to find effective educational and psychological variables that can explain variations in reading ability and academic achievement."*

There are four important areas to be examined for possible sources of reading comprehension problems. They are (a) text variables such as genre, coherence, text length and information density, (b) reader variables as background knowledge, linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge, metacognition, attitude, interest and beliefs, (c) task variables such as complexity of the task and cognitive demand, and (d) context variables such as social and physical setting (Snow, 2002: 156). Each aspect of the four variables has its own impact on reading comprehension

Within the second group, namely, reader variables, is the effect of learners' beliefs on L2 reading comprehension. It has been thought that learners' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning are part of learner's metacognition. These beliefs are said to be linked with reading comprehension (Kardash and Scholes, 1996: 263). Pang (2008, p. 8) refers to Carrel (1989) who states that *"in reading, the two key metacognitive factors, knowledge and control, are concerned with readers."* Rueda et al. (1998: 236) hold that socio-affective factors, also called motivational factors, are amongst the essential characteristics of reading. They believe that an engaged

reader is one who is motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially interactive in the reading process.

### **3. Objective and Methodology**

#### **3.1. objective of the study**

As has been previously mentioned, this study is limited to investigate the effect of gender on learners' beliefs about reading comprehension in English. Its main objective is addressed in the following questions:

1. What beliefs do Iraqi learners hold about reading comprehension in English?
2. Are there gender differences between male and female's beliefs about reading comprehension?

#### **3.2 Methodology**

##### **3.2.1 Participants**

One hundred and six Iraqi learners of English participated in this study, (59) females and (47) males. All participants were undergraduate students at the second year, Dept. of English, College of Arts, University of Basra. Their age ranged between (19-22) years old.

##### **3.2.2 Data Collection**

The data for the present study was collected in January 2015 by conducting one test. The test was a modified version of an epistemological questionnaire to explore learners' beliefs about reading comprehension in English. In order to investigate learners' beliefs, most studies employ some sort of self-report as data collection such as questionnaires by which learners report their own beliefs. In the current study, the researcher employed a closed 21 Likert- scale questionnaire, , with 5 choices for each item to which

participants indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The choice of using a questionnaire was mainly due to its high reliability and practicality. To ensure the best possible validity, the items of the questionnaire were gathered from Mikulecky and Jeffries (1996), Pupo (1996), and Lin (2002), with some modifications to enable participants better understand the items. Authorization to use some items of the questionnaires of the previous studies was sent to the researcher by e-mail.

As Horwitz original version of learners' beliefs about learning is classified into five categories, the researcher in the present study divided the 21 items of the questionnaire into four major categories: category (1) beliefs about reading in English (items: 1,2, 11, 12, 13), (2) beliefs about the text, meaning and interpretation (3, 4, 5, 7, 15, 18), (3) beliefs about reading strategies (6, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17) , and finally (4) beliefs about difficulties of reading in English (14, 19, 20, 21).

### **3.2.3 Procedures**

Before distributing the test sheets, instructions were very much necessary to enable participants answering the questionnaire items. Thirty minutes, during class time, were given to participants to report their beliefs. The researcher did not ask for any information that could be used to identify individual students, except writing either (male) or (female) at the top of the test sheet. Students were informed that participating in this test was voluntary and had no effect on their grade. The whole task of this practical part lasted for 50 minutes.

### **3.2.4 Data Analysis**

Data gathered during this study were analyzed using independent sample t-test to analyze the questionnaire items.

#### 4. Analysis of the Results of the Questionnaire

The answers to questions 2 and 3 that are addressed by the current study (section 3.1 above) will be approached through the analysis of the results of the data collected by the questionnaire. The means and standard deviations were computed on the students' responses to the statements and presented in tables.

The results of the 21-item questionnaire were analyzed according to the four groups classified by the researcher (see section 3.2.2). Table (1) reports the results of the data analysis of the beliefs about reading in English. The letter (F) in the gender column stands for females and (M) for males. The statement that one needs to practice reading constantly in order to be an efficient reader generated the highest mean value by male students. Therefore a significant difference was found between female and male students as far as the first item of the questionnaire was concerned as the t-value was (\*\*-2.16 at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Likewise, male students gave higher support than their counterparts to the second statement that good reading means understanding the author's message (meaning). Yet, no significant difference was detected. Item (11) which referred to the statement (Good reading must be detailed and slow) reported a higher mean value on the part of female students (3.93) than male students (3.59) with no significant difference. Items (12) and (13) generated a higher support from the male students, i.e., item 12 (t-value=\*\*-2.702) and item 13(t-value=-1.98). This indicates that statement 12 reported a significant difference between males and females when compared to statement 13; the male students highly endorsed that reading can help improving their writing, and that they were more likely to believe that teaching reading skills was more effective in teaching reading in EFL. On the whole, only two items (1) and (12) showed significant differences within the first group (beliefs about reading in English) as table (1) illustrates.

**Table (1): Beliefs about Reading in English**

Statement	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
1. I need to practice reading constantly in order to be an efficient reader.	F	59	3.5254	1.20853	**-2.16
	M	47	4.0851	.92853	
2. Good reading means understanding the author's message (meaning).	F	59	3.9153	1.03870	-.656
	M	47	4.0426	.93151	
11. Good reading must be detailed and slow.	F	59	3.9322	1.17245	1.37
	M	47	3.5957	1.34584	
12. Good reading can help me improve my writing.	F	59	3.3559	1.29672	**-2.702
	M	47	3.9787	1.01058	
13. Teaching of reading in English should be carried out more through the teaching of reading skills than through the teaching of the language.	F	59	3.4068	1.08467	-1.98
	M	47	3.8085	.96995	

In table (2), results of the data analysis regarding the beliefs about text, meaning and interpretation are presented. The results showed that female and male students highly shared the belief about understanding the meaning of a text in English was limited to one interpretation. (statement 18; t-value=-0.062), and that the purpose of reading determined how a student approached a text (statement 5; t-value=-.309). Other statements (3, 4, 7, 15) showed nearly shared beliefs by male and female students; they both tried to relate a text to their prior knowledge and experiences, highly thought that improving reading skills also improved other language skills, how they approached a text in English was determined by the purpose of

reading, both genders checked the dictionary if they did not know the meanings of words, and both of them considered narrative texts as more interesting to read than scientific texts. The second group of beliefs has not reported any significant difference.

**Table (2): Beliefs about Text, Meaning, and Interpretation**

Statement	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
3. When I read in English, I try to relate my prior knowledge to any textual cues.	F	59	3.2542	1.06014	-.684
	M	47	3.3830	.82233	
4. Improving reading skills also contributes to improve other language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing.	F	59	3.0169	.97364	-.826
	M	47	3.1702	.91649	
5. The purpose of reading (reading for information, reading for pleasure, etc.) determines how I approach a text in English.	F	59	3.8136	.95547	-.309
	M	47	3.8723	.99164	
7. If I don't know the meaning of a word in English, I always look it up in the dictionary.	F	59	3.3220	1.37013	-.986
	M	47	3.5745	1.22908	
15. Narrative texts are more interesting to read than scientific texts.	F	59	3.0000	1.14470	.092
	M	47	2.9787	1.24218	
18. Understanding the meaning of a text in English is limited to one interpretation.	F	59	3.0508	1.15107	-.062
	M	47	3.0638	.94188	

Table (3) illustrates results of the analysis of the learners' beliefs about reading strategies. The highest disparity in the beliefs between male and female students was generated by the statement (6) about translating every word while reading an English text. The females reported lower mean (2.93) than males (3.48). It seems that male students used the translation strategy more than their female classmates, although statistically not significant.

Within the same group of beliefs, female students gave a greater support to the statement (10) that was related to the relationship between reading well and pronunciation; in the sense that females highly believed that in order to read well, they must be able to pronounce every word to understand it. Statements (8, 9, 17) generated different beliefs by males and females regarding reading well and learning as much vocabulary and grammar as well as reading aloud respectively. In (9) and (17) the males gave less support, while in (8) the females did so. The only significant difference (t-value= .035) between both genders was found in their beliefs about using the same reading methods for all kinds of texts.

**Table (3): Beliefs about Reading Comprehension Strategies**

statement	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
6. When I am reading material in English, I need to translate every word in order to understand it.	F	59	2.9322	1.47232	-1.988
	M	47	3.4894	1.36529	
8. The best way to improve my reading in English is by learning as much vocabulary as possible.	F	59	3.2712	1.08008	-1.77
	M	47	3.6596	1.16613	
9. It is necessary to know a lot of grammar to understand a text in English.	F	59	3.9322	1.08062	0.184
	M	47	3.8936	1.06799	
10. To read well in English, I must be able to pronounce every word in order to understand it.	F	59	4.0000	1.11417	1.799
	M	47	3.5957	1.19163	
16. I use the same reading methods for all kind of texts (books, newspapers, etc.).	F	59	2.8814	1.34016	.035**
	M	47	2.8723	1.29576	
17. Reading aloud helps me improve my reading.	F	59	3.0339	1.04989	.427
	M	47	2.9362	1.30890	

Finally, students' beliefs about the difficulties they face in reading comprehension in English were examined (table 4). The students of both genders held almost similar beliefs regarding three statements: (14, 19, 21); that is the causes of difficulties of reading comprehension whether lack of language knowledge, existence of new words, or unfamiliar socio-cultural background.

The only statement in this group to which the male students gave a higher endorsement than females concerned the belief about two difficulties of reading comprehension in English, namely, unfamiliar content and shortage of time. The male students were somewhat more supporters of admitting the existence of these two difficulties. As a result, a significant difference was found between both genders (t-value= -2.724).

**Table (4): Beliefs about Difficulties of Reading Comprehension**

Statement	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
14. Poor ability in reading is basically caused by lack of language knowledge.	F	59	3.2542	1.30771	-.452
	M	47	3.3617	1.09198	
19. I can't understand a paragraph if it has several new words in it.	F	59	2.9322	1.24380	0.073
	M	47	2.9149	1.15777	
20. Among the major difficulties in reading comprehension are a- unfamiliar content b .shortage of time .	F	59	2.7966	1.22868	-2.724**
	M	47	3.4255	1.11793	
21. If you find it easy to understand an English text, it is mainly because of a- familiar socio-cultural background b. absence of unknown vocabulary.	F	59	3.8983	1.18460	1.375
	M	47	3.5745	1.22908	

## **5. Conclusion**

Two research questions were addressed in this study, and the principal findings lend support to those previous studies where the gender related differences in the learners' beliefs about reading comprehension had not been prominent (Tercanlioglu , 2005; Bernat and Lloyd ,2007). The only statistical significant differences in both genders' beliefs detected in this inquiry concerned the need of a lot of practice in order to be efficient readers, the contribution of good reading to improve writing skills, the use of the same reading methods for all kinds of texts, and facing the difficulties of the existence of unfamiliar content and shortage of time in reading comprehension in English.

Female and male students highly shared the beliefs about the meaning of a text is limited to one interpretation ( statement 18 in table 2). The other shared belief is related to statement (16) about using the same reading methods for all types of texts. Here, teachers of reading comprehension need to train students to be aware of the strategies used in reading which differ from one purpose of reading into another.

Overall, the majority of the questionnaire statements (13 out of 21) received a higher support from the male students. The female students' higher support was given to eight statements only.

Since the majority beliefs did not reflect significant differences among male and female students, it is possible to conclude that learners' beliefs about reading comprehension do not vary by gender. Other factors could possibly be important sources of gender variation in reading comprehension in EFL, such as age , learning context, and learning level.

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### Appendix (1)

The following questionnaire is a part of a research study into beliefs about reading comprehension in English. Please read the directions carefully and do as required. Your response will be treated as confidential.

#### Questionnaire

Directions: For each statement, please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=no opinion, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. On the top of the test sheet, write if you are male or female.

Statement		Choices				
1	I need to practice reading constantly in order to be an efficient reader.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Good reading means understanding the author's message (meaning).	1	2	3	4	5
3	When I read in English, I try to relate my prior knowledge to any textual cues.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Improving reading skills also contributes to improve other language skills such as listening, speaking, and writing.	1	2	3	4	5
5	The purpose of reading (reading for information, reading for pleasure, etc.) determines how I approach a text in English	1	2	3	4	5
6	When I am reading material in English, I need to translate every word in order to understand it.	1	2	3	4	5
7	If I don't know the meaning of a word in English, I always look it up in the dictionary.	1	2	3	4	5
8	The best way to improve my reading in English is by learning as much vocabulary as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
9	It is necessary to know a lot of grammar to understand a text in English.	1	2	3	4	5

10	To read well in English, I must be able to pronounce every word in order to understand it.	1	2	3	4	5
11	Good reading must be detailed and slow.	1	2	3	4	5
12	Good reading can help me improve my writing	1	2	3	4	5
13	Teaching of reading in English should be carried out more through the teaching of reading skills than through the teaching of the language.	1	2	3	4	5
14	Poor ability in reading is basically caused by lack of language knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
15	Narrative texts are more interesting to read than scientific texts.	1	2	3	4	5
16	I use the same reading methods for all kind of texts (books, newspapers, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5
17	Reading aloud helps me improve my reading.	1	2	3	4	5
18	Understanding the meaning of a text in English is limited to one interpretation.	1	2	3	4	5
19	I can't understand a paragraph if it has several new words in it.	1	2	3	4	5
20	Among the major difficulties in reading comprehension are b- unfamiliar content c- shortage of time.	1	2	3	4	5
21	If you find it easy to understand an English text, it is mainly because of b- familiar socio-cultural background c- absence of unknown vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5