The Relationship between the Position of Topic Sentences and Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability

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Abstract: *This study aimed to focus on one of the most significant elements of the texture of a paragraph, namely topic sentence. The question this study tried to answer was whether there was a relationship between the position of topic sentences and reading comprehension ability. The research also aimed to find out whether there was a relationship between (male and female) and reading comprehension ability concerning the position of topic sentence. Having considered the limitations of studies and the gaps in the literature it was decided to conduct a study aiming at recognizing how intermediate Iranian EFL (English as a foreign language) learners perform in reading comprehension. To gather desirable population, 150 EFL learners took OPT test. 62 learners were considered as a research sample with different fields of study and different gender (48 females and 14 males). Two kinds of reading comprehension test, reading with initial and implied topic sentences were administered. Each type of reading consisted of four reading comprehension tests with four multiple choice questions. Quantitative analysis was used in order to analyze the results of the test. Based on Pearson Correlation and Independent Sample T-test, there was no relationship between the position of topic sentences and reading comprehension ability. Research also indicated that there was no relationship between male and female learners with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts.*

Key Words: *reading comprehension, opt, initial topic sentence, implied topic sentence, learners' gender*

Introduction

Among four skills dealing with language learning, it is believed that reading is considered to be the most important for most language learners in general and for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in particular. It is known as one of the most important skills in academic and professional success in general, and in second or foreign language education in particular (Carrell, 1989; Grabe, 1991). Since English language plays an important role as an international means of communication around the world, reading in English acts like a satellite and receives the published information. (Farhady & Sajadi, 1999). As Alderson (1984) rightly pointed out reading should be a pre-requisite to almost all graduate programs.

Comprehending the ideas included in reading materials is the main purpose for reading comprehension meaning that if one ignores comprehending and understanding the material, reading would be meaningless. There are a lot of cases who are capable of reading words, but cannot comprehend the text and link the meaning of the words to the mentioned text, so they have difficulty in expressing their comprehension of the main ideas (Casper, Catton, & Westfall, 1998).

According to Farhady and Sajadi (1999), comparing foreign students to their native counterparts, it is seen that most EFL learners suffer sometimes seriously from difficulties in reading. They apply different strategies to overcome their disabilities in reading comprehension.

According to Pakenham (1995) it is important for teachers to know about the theories and strategies of reading comprehension to increase reading comprehension. A quick glimpse at the literature of EFL reveals that there seems to be three theories regarding reading including the Schema Theory, Mental Models, and the Propositional Theory. Based on these theories there are four types of strategies to improve reading comprehension including Preparational, Organizational, Elaboration, and Monitoring (Casper, Catton, & Westfall, 1998).

Hence, to raise learners' awareness of their reading comprehension ability, it is of value to focus on one of the most significant elements of the texture of a paragraph, namely topic sentence, for the purpose of better comprehension. Thus, the present study was conducted to shed light on the relationship between the position of topic sentences and learners' comprehension in reading texts.

Research Questions

In conducting this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there any relationship between the position of topic sentences and reading comprehension ability?
2. Is there any relationship between male and female learners with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts?

Methodology

The Pilot Study

In order to increase the reliability of the research, the researcher chose ten Intermediate Iranian EFL learners. The proficiency level of the learners was determined by OPT (Oxford Placement Test). Learners once answered four reading comprehension tests with initial topic sentences and then they answered other four reading comprehension tests with implied topic sentences. By readability index formula, difficulty level of the paragraphs was determined. The questions of the tests were multiple choice items. No vocabulary questions were asked in these questions and the number of words increased from first paragraph to the fourth one .The time these learners spent for answering these tests was also considered. The result of the pilot study proved that there was not any relationship between the position of topic sentences and reading comprehension ability.

Participants

Sixty – two Iranian EFL learners studying English in a private language institute participated in the present study. Among them, 48 learners are females and the remaining 14 learners are the male ones. They were at the age range of 18 to 30 and their mean age was 21.8 years of age. It is important to note that the participants were from different disciplines including, Agriculture, Law, etc. The reason to choose institute is because of the fact that Iranian institutes pay more

attention to the role of reading and especially comprehension as the main skill in English. Hence, it is of value to figure out how this teaching variable is taught and whether learners are aware of the role of topic sentence to comprehend the texts better. It is notable that the mentioned participants of the study were selected from among 150 EFL learners based on the convenience sampling method (Dornyei, 2007) in which the researcher benefits from the participants who are available at the present time to arm the researcher with rich data.

Materials

In present study, OPT and reading comprehension test were utilized which a through explanation of each is as follows.

OPT (Oxford Placement Test)

In order to make sure that the participants are truly intermediate students capable of taking part in this study, first they took the OPT test version 1, which includes 60 items both vocabulary and grammar to check their English proficiency. The OPT test band descriptor indicates that the participants were at the right level to participate in the study and considered as intermediate level based on the test indicators. As to the reliability issue, it should be noted that OPT contains high value of reliability (0.80).

Reading Comprehension Test

Two kinds of reading comprehension test, reading with initial and implied topic sentences were administered among the participants. Each type of reading consisted of four reading comprehension tests with four multiple choice questions. The test was appropriate for an intermediate level since the readability was counted through readability index formula and indicated its high reliability value (0.89).

Data Analysis

As the present study employed quantitative approach regarding the data collection procedure, it benefitted from quantitative analysis to measure the gathered data. It is also worth to note that data analysis consists of examining and categorizing data and tabulating the evidence, in order to address initial propositions of a study. From the initial stage, certain procedures were followed in order to analyze the data in a holistic and logical way. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 18.0) was used to conduct the descriptive analysis of the survey data.

As the present study aimed at finding the sort of relationship between the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension ability using quantitative measurements, it is assumed that frequency analysis in line with Independent Sample T-test was also required to validate the results gathered in terms of the relationship between the two variables i.e. the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension ability.

Findings

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the position of topic sentences and intermediate Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. This study explored whether or not the position of topic sentences had any effect on reading comprehension ability among intermediate Iranian EFL learners. A secondary purpose was to find out the relationship between male and female learners with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts. As the present study applied quantitative methodology to analyze the gathered data, descriptive analysis of the data is provided to find out the relationship between the variables of the study explained above.

Analysis of First Research Question

The participants of the study were 62 Iranian EFL learners who were studying English in a private language institute at the level of intermediate with the frequency of 23% males and 77% females. According to the Table 1, the mean of the variable reading with topic sentence regarding the correct answer of the participants equals 6.35 which is more than the mean of the variable reading with implied topic sentence equals 5.97.

Table1. Statistical information

Statistics	Reading with Topic Sentence	Reading with Implied Topic Sentence
N Valid	62	62
Missing	0	0
Mean	6.35	5.97
Std. Error of Mean	.339	.225
Median	6.00	6.00
Mode	5	6
Std. Deviation	1.889	1.251
Variance	3.570	1.566
Skewness	.463	-.372
Std. Error of Skewness	.421	.421
Kurtosis	-.100	-.201
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.821	.821
Range	8	5

Minimum	3	3
Maximum	11	8
Sum	197	185

It should be noted that the standard deviation of the variable reading with topic sentence equals 1.88 which is more than the variable reading with implied topic sentence equals1.25.

Statistical analysis of T-test (see Table 2) shows that significance level of study variables equals (Sig=0.17) indicating that the equalities of variances regarding the variables of the study are assumed.

Table 2. Independent sample T-test of the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension

	Levene's test for Equality of variances							95% confidence interval of the difference	
	F	sig	T	df	sig	Mean difference	Std error Difference	lower	upper
Equal variances assumed			-1.35	122	0.17	0.38	0.28	0.95	0.17
Equal variances not assumed	13.31	0	-1.35	105	0.17	0.38	0.28	0.95	0.17

The results of Independent Sample T-test indicated that significance level of means of the two variables of the study equals (Sig=0.17) indicating that the relationship between the two variables i.e. topic sentence and reading comprehension was not statistically significant (t=1.35). Table 3 shows the correlation between reading with implied topic sentence and reading with topic sentence.

Table 3. Correlations between reading with implied topic sentence and reading with topic sentence

		Reading with Implied Topic Sentence	Reading with Topic Sentence
Reading with Implied Topic Sentence	Pearson Correlation	1	-.249
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.177
	N	62	62
Reading with Topic Sentence	Pearson Correlation	-.249	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.177	
	N	62	62

As it can be seen in Table 3, there is no significant relationship between the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension ability. According to the table, Pearson correlation between two variables, i.e. reading with topic sentence and reading with implied topic sentence, equals -0.24, which doesn't show a significant difference statistically.(sig=0.17).

Analysis of Second Research Question

As to the relationship between male and female learners with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts, it is of value to measure the correlations between reading with implied topic sentence in one hand and reading with topic sentence on the other. Table 4 indicates the correlation between male and female learners and reading with implied topic sentence.

Table 4. Correlations between gender and reading with implied topic sentence

		Male	Female
Male	Pearson Correlation	1	.696
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.082
	N	14	48
Female	Pearson Correlation	.696	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.082	
	N	14	48

According to Table 4, considering reading with implied topic sentence correlation between males and females equals 0.69 which statistically doesn't show any significant difference. (sig=0.082).

So there is no relationship between male and female learners with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts. The relationship between gender and reading with topic sentence is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlations between gender and reading with topic sentence

		Male	**Female**
Male	Pearson Correlation	1	.589
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.164
	N	14	48
Female	Pearson Correlation	.589	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.164	
	N	14	48

As the Table shows, correlation between males and females was 0.58 which doesn't indicate any significant meaning statistically (sig=0.16). Therefore, this variable, reading with topic sentence, doesn't show any important difference.

To sun up, there is no relationship between the position of topic sentences, and reading comprehension ability. Research also indicated that there is no relationship between male and female learners with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts. Thus among intermediate learners, gender doesn't have any significant role in comprehending texts regarding the position of topic sentence.

Discussion

The main objective of the present research was to study the relationship between the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension ability. The study further tries to identify whether there is any relationship between the gender and reading comprehension ability. As it was already mentioned, this study statistically showed that there is no significant relationship between the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension ability. The result of this study partly rejects and partly confirms the result of Farhady and Sajadi's research (1999) in terms of the existence of possible relationship between topic sentence and reading ability. Moreover, taking the main trend of the second hypothesis in to mind, one can clearly see that this study unlike other studies (e.g. Amiri, Zainal, & Abdul Samad, 2012) proved that there seems to be no significant difference between the two sexes with respect to the position of topic sentence and their ability in comprehending texts.

The question which might come to mind is that why there is such a sharp discrepancy between the result of this study and other studies. To shed light on the answer of this question we should say that to the best of our knowledge, to date, there have been a very limited number of studies conducted similar to this study. In lay terms, retrospection of other studies and comparing them with this research reveals that it is true they share many features in common; however, they

diverge, sometimes significantly, on many fronts. As an example, the level of the participants, the way they were instructed, their culture, family background, personality and etc, differs from study to study. It might, nonetheless, be safe enough to claim that the above mentioned factors might influence the result of a study. Needless to say, it does take a certain amount of faith with a dash of armchair stipulation to assume the veracity of this argument.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest that curriculum designer along with material writers do not need to be worry about the position of topic sentence in a text. Also, instructors should keep in mind that in case a miscomprehension takes place it might not have to do with the position of topic sentence.

It is pivotal to note that the result of this study has same testing implications as well. For example, it helps large scale test developers such as IELTS or TOEFL to have a more valid test.

It is also beneficial for teachers to be aware of the position of topic sentence while teaching reading for the purpose of comprehension and arm the students with the recognition of topic sentence in a text and what different positions it may took.

Learners can also benefit from knowing the role of topic sentence. If they understand what topic sentence is and how it appears in the text, it will make the process of comprehension easier and assist teachers in their teaching reading.

This study is one of the pioneering exploratory steps for the investigation of the reading comprehension considering the position of topic sentence. To better generalize and comprehend the result of this study, the following further studies are recommended.

First, it would be interesting to know the result of this study with the same level of participants. Moreover, some study can be conducted but instead of employing TOEFL test IELTS reading comprehension test can be used. By changing the number and nature of participants a new research can also be conducted.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to find out the relationship between the position of the topic sentences and its possible relationship with reading comprehension ability of intermediate Iranian EFL learners and how gender can reflect this relationship. Findings indicated that the relationship was not statistically significant i.e. there was no relationship between the position of topic sentence and reading comprehension in one hand, and no relationship was seen in terms of gender reflection regarding the study variables.

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