



The Impact of Topic Interest and L2 Proficiency on EFL Incidental Vocabulary Learning Across Genders

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ABSTRACT

The present quasi-experimental study investigated the effect of topic interest and L2 proficiency on the incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian male and female EFL learners. To this end, 107 (F = 56, M = 51) EFL learners of English at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of language proficiency were selected through convenience sampling. Then, the participants were divided into four experimental groups based on their proficiency level and gender; that is, Male Intermediate High-Interest Topics (MIHIT), Male Pre-Intermediate Low-Interest Topics (MPILIT), Female Intermediate High-Interest Topics (FIHIT), and Female Pre-Intermediate Low-Interest Topics (FPILIT) groups. The adapted version of the Topic interest survey by Ebbers (2011) was used to determine the participants' interests. Also, reading passages were taken from British Council's texts, and two vocabulary tests were given as a pretest and a posttest. The independent samples t-tests and paired samples t-tests run on the four groups revealed a statistically significant difference. Results suggested that topic interest had a statistically significant effect on the incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL male and female learners. Besides, unlike the male group, there was a statistically significant difference in female posttest scores, indicating that L2 proficiency had an effect on their EFL incidental vocabulary learning. Implications and suggestions for future research are also provided at the end.

KEYWORDS: Gender; Incidental Vocabulary Learning; L2 Proficiency; Topic Interest

INTRODUCTION

EFL learners have various pedagogical needs that necessitate the use of a specific teaching method. Unfortunately, Iranian EFL contexts combine the grammar-translation method (GTM) with an audio-lingual approach that ignores learners' interests (Fahim & Samadian, 2011; Gu, 2003; Mellati & Khademi, 2015). Fortunately, current developments in language instruction, such as task-based language teaching (TBLT), have revived the role of interest in language learning. Along this line, Lambert (2019) emphasized the benefits of language tasks, claiming that task-based language learning is an unplanned process that addresses learners' needs and interests when intended to achieve communicative results.

Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) asserted that when language learners are stimulated by tasks, they exhibit a mix of cognitive and motivational levels of participation, which can predict the eventual recall of words incorporated during such practices as reading tasks. When intrinsic interest in a text's topic is significant, this can lead to a greater degree of participation while decoding a text. Thus, learner interest can certainly impact participation in reading activities, which has the possibility of affecting incidental vocabulary learning. To explain, the Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH), proposed by Laufer and Hulstijn (2001), suggested that the



higher the involvement load when reading a text, the more likely it is to be incidentally learned and later recalled.

Several other studies (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; Zimmerman, 1997) have shown that L2 intermediate and advanced learners significantly increase their vocabulary knowledge through incidental learning during reading tasks, which occurs only in trace amounts. Besides, Tobias (1994) found that high-proficiency EFL learners maintain their interest and teachers can use intriguing educational materials and practices for them effectively (Schiefele, 1991). Therefore, it stands to reason that topic interest and language proficiency are two prominent variables influencing incidental vocabulary learning among language learners.

To recapitulate, understanding and being understood in English necessitates a strong command of the language. After years of neglect, vocabulary is now recognized as critical to any language-learning process. Therefore, to use an L2 successfully, learners must have an extensive vocabulary and high motivation to achieve the learning objectives (Schmitt, 2008). However, due to time constraints in class, it is impossible to teach many vocabulary items (Cunningham, 2005). According to Schmitt (2000), learners must regard incidental and intentional vocabulary learning as complementary. Numerous studies on incidental vocabulary learning in L2 learning have been conducted in light of these findings. According to these studies, learners could best learn new words incidentally while reading a text since improved vocabulary learning can help improve vocabulary retention. However, EFL learners in Iranian contexts, such as educational institutes, typically learn vocabulary individually since they are always given a lengthy list of vocabulary items to memorize.

To date, no study has investigated the effect of topic interest and L2 proficiency on the EFL incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian male and female EFL learners during task-based vocabulary teaching. Thus, the present paper is a preliminary attempt to fill this pronounced gap. In this regard, the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of topic interest and L2 proficiency on incidental vocabulary learning in a task-based reading course.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Vocabulary has initially been the focus of foreign language teaching (Carter & McCarthy, 1988; Nation, 2001). Nation (2001) believed that vocabulary learning is not a main objective in and of itself and is done to assist learners in listening, speaking, reading, or writing more effectively. In particular, previous research has discovered that vocabulary knowledge is a necessary requirement for language learners' reading abilities (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). According to Schmitt (2008), in order to grasp a text, language learners must understand well almost all of its words. This means that language learners must learn many word families in a short period. In this regard, Cameron (2001) maintained that knowing a word entails understanding its form (i.e., spelling, pronunciation), meaning, and application.

However, gaining a large number of words is not accidental. As a result, teachers need to supplement incidental learning with second or foreign-language vocabulary. In fact, when the mind is focused on using a language or understanding a text to convey one's ideas, incidental vocabulary learning occurs. The problem with incidental learning is that language learners must learn the lexical items by chance through multiple exposures to vocabulary in various contexts. Notwithstanding, no consensus has been made on how frequently learners should be exposed to the target words and what type of exposure is required for effective learning.

Along this line, Nation (2001) claimed that incidental vocabulary-learning tasks, such as certain oral retelling activities and practical exercises, are highly effective vocabulary-learning methods. Using activities and exercises to focus on vocabulary learning is critical. Exercising has a significant impact on vocabulary learning. Thus, it is critical to recognize new experiences with tasks and exercises to engage with core competence. Hulstijn et al. (1996) concluded that exercises direct, assist, and encourage learners to understand the meaning of specific vocabulary items through various activities and tasks.

In addition, Namaziandost et al. (2019) investigated the effectiveness of two types of vocabulary instruction methods, namely context-based (CBLT) and task-based (TBLT), on 40 Iranian pre-intermediate



EFL learners' reading skills. Results of the paired samples and independent samples *t*-test revealed that both groups progressed in terms of their reading skill performance. However, the TBLT group outperformed their CBLT counterparts. Besides, Lin et al. (2022) conducted a study on task-based vocabulary learning through multimodal cues and used an educational robot and an IoT-enhanced three-dimensional book aimed at enhancing EFL children's capacity to learn vocabulary items. The participants were given pre- and post-vocabulary recognition tests. Results were indicative of a significant improvement in their vocabulary recognition and learning.

Research also suggests that topic interest is critical, especially in second or foreign language learning. It is defined as heightened awareness and level of engagement that happens when a language learner interacts positively with a subject area or task (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Some specialists in education research (Renninger, 2000; Schraw & Lehman, 2001) distinguish between two types of interest: situational and individual. Situational interest is defined as focused attention and psychological response that may or may not be sustained over time due to environmental stimulation (Hidi, 1990). Such an interest is regarded as having short-term and context-specific values. Individual interest, on the other hand, pertains to a learner's tendency to return to specific topics over time (Renninger, 2000). The level of interest in the subject, in particular, has been acknowledged to have lengthy intrinsic value. This is linked to the knowledge and experience of a learner. Subject interest is described as the level of learner interest when conducting research on a specific topic (Ainley et al., 2002). Schiefel (1991) defined it as a type of personal interest distinct from situational or textual interest.

Furthermore, many studies found that topic interest in reading texts was highest in foreign language learning contexts. Although one of the significant issues that depend on each learner's personality to yield many findings in various situations and contexts is interest, the significance of how interest generators in language teaching contexts can develop late is growing (Ainley et al., 2002; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Hoffmann, 2002; Renninger & Hidi, 2002; Schraw & Lehman, 2001). In other words, interest can be dramatically increased in language-teaching contexts.

Eidswick (2010) investigated the role of interest and background knowledge in reading comprehension. The study's findings revealed that there was significantly more interest and knowledge content. Magliano et al. (2011) discovered that the topic of interest in a standardized text influences learners' achievement. As a result, constructive participation and interest in the text facilitated comprehension processes, resulting in a better understanding. Finally, Lee and Pulido (2016) investigated the effect of topic of interest, L2 skill, and gender on vocabulary learning through reading texts. Their findings revealed statistically significant effects of interest and L2 skills for learners, as well as a significant gender-interest relationship.

Sadeghpour (2013) found that the subject's emphasis had no impact on Iranian EFL advanced-level learners' instant and delayed readings. Gender engagement and interest in the reader's instant reminder were also discovered; female participants recognized the more essential texts. Besides, Ebrahimi and Javanbakht (2015) investigated the effect of topical interest on the reading of Iranian EFL learners. The experimental method and *t*-test analysis results revealed that the difference in their performance on reading texts between the two groups was statistically significant.

Asgari et al. (2019) examined the effect of interest-based language teaching on enhancing EFL learners' interest and achievement in L2 reading. In doing so, they employed 60 first-year students and used questionnaires and tests for the sake of data collection. Results of the independent samples *t*-test revealed that personalizing the reading material significantly contributed to the improvement in the participants' interest level and consequently L2 reading comprehension. Interestingly, no significant differences were found with regard to the participants' different levels of reading proficiency.

Shakourzadeh and Izadpanah (2020) probed into 200 Iranian male EFL learners' perceptions of textbook-assigned and self-selected topics and examined their impact on their foreign language learning process. Results suggested that the participants mostly preferred the topics to be more interesting and familiar in terms of both textbook-assigned and self-selected topics. It was also found that the participants' personalized



selection of the topics improved their willingness to take charge of their own language learning process and thus, they took responsibility for their own learning process.

Also found was that proficiency level could affect EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning such that low-proficiency learners struggle to learn vocabulary incidentally through reading (Huckin & Coady, 1999). In this regard, Teng (2022) examined the role of individual differences (e.g., proficiency level and working memory) on vocabulary learning outcomes through three word-focused exercise conditions designed based on the involvement load hypothesis. 180 Chinese EFL language learners were assigned to each of these three exercise conditions. To measure the pre- and post-test vocabulary gains, a vocabulary knowledge scale was used and the results indicated that the sentence-writing group displayed the best performance in terms of vocabulary learning, which was followed by the gap-fill group and reading-comprehension group, respectively.

In this regard, word exposure is a critical component of incidental learning. Language learners are frequently concerned about a lack of exposure. Making them read, also known as the book flood method, which involves extensive reading over a set period of time, is an important tool for addressing this problem (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988). Learning book flood vocabulary can help language learners of all levels of language proficiency. The reading material is available at different levels of readership. Simplified reading books can assist learners with gradually improving their lexical knowledge. Graded readers can be used by learners with low proficiency levels to display a large amount of high-frequency input (Coady & Huckin, 1997).

Because subject-specific vocabulary is repeated throughout such texts, intermediate learners are advised to read a large number of authentic texts on the same subject. Learners at the higher-proficiency levels, on the other hand, should be exposed to a diverse range of authentic texts because the face of a word improves what is known about it in various contexts (Schmitt, 2000). Reading text is probably incidental, and numerous studies have shown that reading exercises improve vocabulary growth (Hulstijn et al., 1996; Zimmerman, 1997).

All in all, there is some disagreement in the literature on the possible impact of topic interest during task-based vocabulary learning (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2010; Al-Nafisah & Abdulgader Al-Shorman, 2011). More investigation is needed in this field. Besides, while prior L1 research has found a convincing interest in reading comprehension by younger children, which has been described by other variants, such as language proficiency and gender, more research on the impacts of interest on L2 learning is needed in a variety of fields. In this regard, few research findings in L2 research have looked into the relationship between gender and interest (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2010). According to a review of the literature, no study to date has investigated the impact of topic interest and L2 proficiency on the EFL incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL male and female students. Thus, the following two research questions and hypotheses were formulated to fill this gap:

RQ1: Does topic interest significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning in terms of their gender?

RQ2: Does L2 proficiency significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning in terms of their gender?



METHODOLOGY

The present study used a quasi-experimental design which is described as a nonrandomized, pretest-posttest treatment study. The reason for lack of randomization was that it was not logistically feasible to conduct a randomized controlled trial (Ary et al., 2018). The study is quantitative in nature and uses nonequivalent treatment groups.

PARTICIPANTS

The main participants of the current study were 107 (F = 56, M = 51) EFL learners of English (aged between 23 and 31) studying English in the English department of Safir Institute. The subjects were at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of proficiency. Out of 121 participants who took part in the OPT as the test of homogeneity, 107 of them whose scores were between 40 and 50 were selected as the pre-intermediate learners, and those whose scores were between 51 and 59 were chosen as the intermediate learners based on OPT's rubric. Based on the proficiency level and gender, the participants in the research were assigned to four experimental groups: Male Intermediate High-Interest Topics (MIHIT), Male Pre-Intermediate Low-Interest Topics (MPILIT), Female Intermediate High-Interest Topics (FIHIT), Female Pre-Intermediate Low-Interest Topics (FPILIT). There were two male and two female groups.

MATERIALS AND INSTRUMENTS

To answer the two research questions, four instruments, namely OPT, topic interest survey, reading passages, and vocabulary tests, were used in the present study, which are unpacked below.

3.3.1 Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The first instrument was the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) (See appendix A), which assesses the learners' English language proficiency. OPT (Allan, 2004) was used as a test of ensuring homogeneity of the participants in each group. It is worth mentioning that Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.89, which is indicative of a high internal consistency of the test items.

TOPIC INTEREST SURVEY

The second instrument was the topic interest survey (See Appendix B), which assesses the level of interest among the participants. Ebbers (2011) modified the topic interest survey to assess how willing to participate in the topics the learners of his study were. It contained topics and a five-point Likert scale ranging from low to high. The low was assigned a 1 and the high was given a 5. To ensure the validity of the survey, we have pre-tested its items by specialized academics with the aim of minimizing the bias and maximizing the response rate. We also ran a confirmatory factor analysis and found significant factor loadings for all items (> 0.50). Cronbach's alpha was also acceptable (0.76) which was above the threshold value (> 0.70).

READING PASSAGE

The third instrument was the reading passages (See Appendix C) taken from the British Council's texts appropriate for the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of proficiency. The texts were graded and designed for all proficiency levels (i.e., Beginner (A1-A2), Intermediate (B1-B2), and Advanced (C1-C2)). We selected our reading texts from the B1 and B2 reading texts sections of the British Council's website because we wanted texts that were suitable for our participants' level of language proficiency. The participants categorized the topics as high and low-interest topics. We checked the readability of the selected texts using criteria such as the Flesch Reading Ease Formula and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and arrived at a readability index of 76 which is suitable for these proficiency levels.

VOCABULARY TEST

Finally, there was a vocabulary test (pretest and posttest) (See Appendix D) in a fill-in-the-blanks format. The test was taken from the British Council's website quizzes. Each reading has a quiz. The target words were chosen from the passages, and the vocabulary tests took the target word tests at the end of each passage. The



reliability of the vocabulary test was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha and estimated to be 0.89, which estimated an excellent indicator of internal consistency. Besides, the validity of the vocabulary tests was ensured by the expert judgments. Two experts checked the suitability of the words in the tests.

PROCEDURE

The first step of the study was to conduct the OPT's homogeneity test to determine the learners' level of proficiency and then divide them into four separate groups. Before starting the treatment, the researcher requested twenty learners to identify their interest in reading by the topic interest survey. They were provided with eight reading texts, which they studied before giving their opinions via an interest survey. Before beginning the treatment, each group received a pretest on the target vocabulary items. The intermediate high-interest groups (MIHIT and FIHIT) received four most popular reading texts, while the pre-intermediate low-interest groups (MPILIT and FPILIT) received four least popular ones. Reading passages were selected from texts suitable for pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of proficiency from the British Council. The reading texts were taught in four sessions during which target words were taught incidentally to intermediate high-interest groups (MIHIT and FIHIT) by the teacher who used different task-based activities. On the other hand, the target words in the pre-intermediate low-interest groups (MPILIT and FPILIT) were taught traditionally by giving definitions, synonyms, and antonyms. At the end of the treatment, they were all given the posttests.

DATA ANALYSIS

SPSS software Package (Ver. 24) was used to analyze the data in order to answer the two research questions. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was initially performed to ensure the normal distribution of the data. Second, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were computed. Third, separate independent *t*-tests and paired-samples *t*-tests were performed for male and female students to investigate the research questions.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of topic interest and L2 proficiency on incidental vocabulary learning in a task-based reading course. The section that follows presents the statistical analyses that were performed in the present study.

At first, a one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run to determine whether the data related to OPT, pretests, and posttests were distributed normally. The related test statistic for the OPT was equal to .07 and the *p*-value was .05.09, indicating that the data was normal.

Table 1: One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test concerning the male groups

		MIHIT's Pretest	MIHIT's Posttest	MPILIT's Pretest	MPILIT's Posttest
N		51	51	51	51
Normal Parameters ^b	Mean	11.56	12.76	10.35	11.68
	Std. Deviation	2.19	2.03	1.85	2.16
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.11	.12	.12	.11
	Positive	.11	.10	.12	.11
	Negative	-.09	-.12	-.10	-.09
Test Statistic		.11	.12	.12	.11
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.15 ^c	.06 ^c	.06 ^c	.08 ^c

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.



Table 1 shows that the male groups' pretest and posttest scores were normally distributed, indicating that the Asymp significance level was less than the observed value (.15, .06, .06, .08 > .05). Table 2 displays the normality statistics for the female groups' pretest and posttest.

Table 2: One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test concerning the female groups

		FIHIT's Pretest	FIHIT's Posttest	FPILIT's Pretest	FPILIT's Posttest
N		56	56	56	56
Normal Parameters ^b	Mean	11.92	13.50	11.25	13.23
	Std. Deviation	1.77	1.71	1.72	1.80
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.11	.11	.11	.11
	Positive	.11	.11	.11	.10
	Negative	-.10	-.11	-.11	-.11
Test Statistic		.11	.11	.11	.11
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.08 ^c	.06 ^c	.06 ^c	.08 ^c

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

c. Lilliefors Significance Correction.

Table 2 shows that the female groups' pretest and posttest scores were normally distributed; that is, the Asymp significance level was greater than the observed value (.08, .06, .06, .08 > .05). As a result, the criteria for performing parametric statistics such as *t*-tests were met.

To answer the first null hypothesis in the study, that is, whether interest in the topic has a major impact on Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning, two separate independent samples *t*-tests were run. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the male group.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics concerning the male groups

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male Groups	Posttest				
	MIHIT	51	12.76	2.03	.28
	MPILIT	51	11.68	2.16	.30

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics –related to the male groups. Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, and post-test results for male students in the MIHIT Group ($M = 12.76$, $SD = 2.03$, $N = 51$) and MPILIT Group ($M = 11.68$, $SD = 2.16$, $N = 51$).

Table 4: Results of the independent samples *t*-test concerning the male groups

Levene's Test for Variances			<i>t</i> -test for Means			
Factor	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Equal variances assumed	.20	.65	2.59	100	.01	1.07
Equal variances not assumed			2.59	99.60	.01	1.07

Table 4 shows that Levene's level (0.65) was higher than the selected level (.05). Further, the independent samples *t*-test revealed that the MIHIT group ($M = 12.76$) and MPILIT group ($M = 11.68$) had a statistically significant difference in terms of the EFL incidental vocabulary learning ($p = .01$; $t = 2.59$). The null hypothesis concerning the male learners ($H_0 1$) was hence rejected. It can, therefore, be argued that the



topic interest affected male learners' EFL incidental vocabulary learning in the Iranian EFL context, which is statistically significant. The same statistical procedures were run for the female groups.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics concerning the female groups

	Posttest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Female Groups	FIHIT	56	13.50	1.71	.22
	FPILIT	56	13.23	1.80	.24

Table 5 depicts the mean, standard deviation, and the number of learners in the FIHIT group ($M = 13.50$, $N = 56$) and the FPILIT group ($M = 13.23$, $N = 56$).

Table 6: Results of the independent samples *t*-test concerning the female groups

Levene's Test for Variances		<i>t</i> -test for Means				
Factor	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Equal variances assumed	.05	.80	.80	110	.42	.33
Equal variances not assumed			.80	109.69	.42	.33

Table 6 shows that there was no statistically significant difference in female posttest scores between the FIHIT and FPILIT groups ($p = .42$; $t = .80$). This is because the p -value (.42) was greater than the specified significance level ($p > .05$). Female FIHIT learners did not improve significantly after the experiment. As a result, the null hypothesis concerning the female learners ($H_0 1$) was accepted.

The second hypothesis examined whether L2 proficiency significantly affected the EFL incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners in terms of gender. In order to compare the performances of the male and female groups, two separate *t*-tests were used.

Table 7: Results of the paired samples *t*-test concerning the male groups

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	MIHIT's Pretest	11.56	51	2.19	.30
	MIHIT's Posttest	12.76	51	2.03	.28
Pair 2	MPILIT's Pretest	10.35	51	1.85	.25
	MPILIT's Posttest	11.68	51	2.16	.30

Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics for the male group's pretest and posttest scores. Results indicated a difference between the MIHIT group's pretest (11.56) and posttest (12.76) means. In addition, the MPILIT group improved on the posttest especially in comparison to the pretest.

Table 8: Results of the paired samples *t*-test concerning the male groups

		Paired Differences					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Mean	Lower				
Pair 1	MIHIT's Pretest / MIHIT's Posttest	-1.19	2.82	.39		-1.98	-.40	-3.02	50	.00
Pair 2	MPILIT's Pretest / MPILIT's Posttest	-1.33	2.65	.37		-2.07	-.58	-3.59	50	.00

Table 8 shows the effect of L2 proficiency on the EFL incidental vocabulary learning of the male participants. Looking at the figures, we can observe that the *p*-value is 0.00, which is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). As a result, the null hypothesis (H_0 2) is rejected; hence, L2 proficiency had a statistically significant effect on the male learners' EFL incidental vocabulary learning.

Table 9: Results of the paired samples *t*-test concerning the female groups

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	FIHIT's Pretest	11.92	56	1.77	.23
	FIHIT's Posttest	13.50	56	1.71	.22
Pair 2	FPILIT's Pretest	11.25	56	1.72	.23
	FPILIT's Posttest	13.23	56	1.80	.24

Table 9 shows that the FIHIT group's pretest and posttest means were 11.92 and 13.50, respectively. Besides, the FPILIT group's posttest mean (13.23) was higher than their pretest mean (11.25).

Table 10: Results of the paired samples *t*-test concerning the female groups

		Paired Differences					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Mean	Lower				
Pair 1	FIHIT's Pretest – FIHIT's Posttest	-1.57	2.44	.32		-2.22	-.91	-4.81	55	.00
Pair 2	FPILIT's Pretest – FPILIT's Posttest	-1.98	2.67	.35		-2.69	-1.26	-5.54	55	.00

According to Table 10, the test probability (sig) for both FIHIT and FPILIT's groups is equal to 0.00, which is lower than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). As a result, the null hypothesis (H_0 2) is rejected. Therefore, female learners' L2 proficiency level had a statistically significant effect on their EFL incidental vocabulary learning.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the effect of topic interest and L2 proficiency on EFL incidental vocabulary learning of 107 female and male EFL learners of English and strove to answer two research questions. The first research question examined whether *topic interest* significantly affected Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning in terms of their gender. The answer to this research question is affirmative and negative,



respectively. Results revealed that topic interest affected the male learners' EFL incidental vocabulary learning significantly, but not the female learners.

The findings of the present study with respect to male learners (i.e., a statistically significant difference between the male groups) comply with the most recent findings emphasizing the significance of the subject interest in learning vocabulary incidentally (Eidswick, 2010; Magliano et al., 2011; Lee & Pulido, 2016; Ebrahimi & Javanbakht, 2015; Shakourzadeh & Izadpanah, 2020). For example, they are coherent with Endo's (2010) L1 study, which found that topic interest influences L2 vocabulary gain significantly. As a result, more investigation is undeniably being carried out in order to obtain more precise results on the relationship between student interest, L2 reading skills, and learners' performance in different facets of L2 training.

However, this is inconsistent with previous research findings that do not provide teaching methods tailored to the learners' needs and give them fewer opportunities to expand their vocabulary, whereas more exciting subjects must be expanded to help EFL learners improve their vocabulary. Nevertheless, previous research (Lee & Pulido, 2017; Stevens, 1980) that focuses on L1 and L2 interest and confirms an inadequacy of substantial interaction and reading skills backs up the findings (Bray & Barron, 2004; Stevens, 1980; Walker et al., 1979).

The findings of the present study with respect to female learners (i.e., no statistically significant difference between the female groups) were consistent with those of Asgari et al. (2019), which revealed no evidence of a positive change in L2 learners when the teachings became more interesting. In other words, no direct relationship between interest and L2 reading skills was discovered. This could imply that IBLT maintains consistent L2 reading among students with high and low L2 reading skills. However, findings in terms of female participants run counter to those of Sadeghpour (2013) who found significant results. To account for the dissonance, as Lee and Pulido (2017) also maintained, empirical L2 research has not been conducted, so the conclusions are much less likely. The findings show that students with low and high L2 reading skills perform well in interest-based learning.

The second research question examined whether *L2 proficiency* significantly affected Iranian EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning in terms of their gender. The answer to this research question is affirmative. Results suggested that L2 proficiency had a statistically significant effect on both male and female learners' EFL incidental vocabulary learning from the pretest to the posttest.

Findings of the present study are consistent with those of previous research (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Teng, 2022). This study discovered that L2 proficiency had a significant impact on vocabulary learning of both male and female groups, which is consistent with the findings of Lee and Pulido (2016) that discovered L2 proficiency had an essential effect on productive skills. Furthermore, the findings of this study are consistent with previous qualitative and quantitative research indicating that providing academic options to high- and low- performance male and female EFL learners would assist them with their EFL reading achievement. The findings confirmed, in particular, that EFL learners would achieve pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of performance.

Meanwhile, the result differs from those shown by distinct research, which had shown that EFL learners with widely different levels of proficiency did not differ in their understanding of texts with varying levels of minor and major skills from the pretest to the posttest. The outcomes have not yet been made public.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study sought to determine the effect of topic interest and L2 proficiency on incidental vocabulary learning in Iranian EFL learners according to their gender. Topic interest had a statistically significant effect on the EFL incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL male but not female learners. By selecting learners' interests and permitting for more individualized, controlled, and desired learning, the topic of interest might also enhance the L2 learning of female learners. Also, findings suggested that L2 proficiency had a statistically significant effect on the EFL incidental vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL male and female learners with varying reading skills.



Furthermore, the findings have specific pedagogical implications for language learners who want to improve their L2 reading skills. Initially, the theme of interest's critical impact on EFL vocabulary learning continues to support the efforts of material developers and teachers to provide high-interest topics that enhance the reading performance of both male and especially female learners. In addition, the interaction between gender and subjects in L2 vocabulary learning provides an educational insight into how gender difference affects the development of lexicon and reading skills for these learners.

The findings of our study could have significant implications for the domain of L2/FL teaching. Language learners should also be recognized as an essential factor that can act as a motivator to help them succeed in their learning tasks which is strongly advised. As a result, schools, teachers, curriculum designers, and other language and educational decision-makers must investigate and implement strategies to increase language learners' interest in L2. Individual or group characteristics of language learners should be carefully considered by using more individualized and enjoyable educational material. With the proliferation of technology, selecting training materials based on students' interests is no longer difficult.

It is suggested that teachers recognize the value of their support for language learners in stimulating interest in their learning (Hidi, 2001; Renninger & Hidi, 2002; Schraw & Lehman, 2001). Given the prominent duty of increased interest in L2 learning, language teaching judgment should be used to supply learners with educational materials that can help them further their interest in L2 educational contexts. To accomplish this goal, future line of research can examine what helpful content language teachers can provide for assisting in the assignment of educational materials, especially their critical role in implementing the developed curricula. Besides, future studies can select other proficiency levels and other vocabulary teaching methods and adopt a mixed methods design to delve into the particularities of the vocabulary learning process within the EFL learning settings. Finally, since the present study was of a quasi-experimental design and the results cannot be generalized to other contexts and settings, more experimental designs are needed in the vocabulary learning domain.

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