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Gender Differences in the Reading Comprehension of Grade Three Rural Learners in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study sought to explore the gender differences in a reading comprehension of Grade three rural learners in South Africa. A convenience sample of 95 learners (49 boys and 46 girls) based in one school participated in the study. An English language reading comprehension test and IsiXhosa reading comprehension test were administered to the learners. A quantitative design was employed in this study. A t-test was used to determine whether the reading comprehension mean scores of boys and girls differed reliably from each other in both languages. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in IsiXhosa reading comprehension test between boys and girls although the girls outperformed the boys. The results also indicated that there was a significant difference in English reading comprehension test between boys and girls. The results further revealed that the magnitude of the reading comprehension gap between boys and girls was wide in the English reading comprehension test than in IsiXhosa. Recommendations to close the gap in English reading comprehension between boys and girls were made.

INTRODUCTION

In order to improve the reading comprehension of both girls and boys, it is important to understand how they read and the source of any gender inequality. Moreover, understanding the reasons for differences in learner performance might be considered the first step for designing effective instructional interventions to address quality and equality concerns (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization 2011 (UNESCO). Gender differences in reading achievement are constantly found in national and international assessments (Logan and Johnson, 2010). Many studies indicate that girls outperform boys and that this discrepancy appears regardless of the type of reading instruction children have received (Ming Chui and McBride-Chang 2006). Therefore, as gender is an issue with important theoretical and pedagogical implications in second language learning, it has received attention in language learning strategy research (Tercanlioglu 2004). Subsequently, over the last several decades an alarming trend has developed regarding the discrepancy between boys' and girls' reading scores. Several researchers have attempted to understand why this trend is occurring while others have worked to devise strategies for combating this gender gap (Poole 2005). Poole further points out that while we know of the importance of second language reading strategies that improve the reading comprehension of learners, there is still a gap in our knowledge about how to cater for the differences between males' and females' reading comprehension. The literature on the discrepancy between boys' and girls' reading comprehension shows that during reading many interactive processes occur. Brantmeier (2004) points out that readers' knowledge and experiences influence the realization of meaning, and if relevant schemata are activated during the reading process, then the reader may better comprehend the text. In addition, Alderson (2000) states that readers may differ in their knowledge and experiences and therefore the products of reading will differ. He further mentions that gender of the reader is an important variable that determines the reading comprehension of the reader and therefore test designers need to be cautious not to bias assessment tasks toward one gender. Moreover, Brantmeier (2004) argues that the discrepancy in reading comprehension between boys and girls is noticeable at the early stages of language instruction. According to Seng and Hashim (2005), whether reading is conducted in a first or second language context it involves the reader, the text, and the interaction between the reader and text. However, Hammed (2008) points out that although reading in the mother tongue shares numerous important basic elements with reading in a second or foreign language, the process differs greatly. Therefore, the focus of the current

study is on exploration of gender differences in reading comprehension in the mother tongue and the second language between Grade three boys and girls.

The examination of the gender differences in reading comprehension should be seen against the background of wider debate on the poor reading performance of learners internationally and nationally. Many studies have indicated that most problems manifesting themselves at the later stage of schooling have their roots in primary education practices (Fakeye 2011) and such problems are associated with the lack of the reading skills (UNESCO 2007). Subsequently, the current study seeks to compare the reading comprehension of the Grade three learners in order to identify if there is any discrepancy between boys' and girls' reading comprehension. Having such information may assist classroom teachers to address aspects of instruction, assessment format and text selection. The literature has shown that girls and boys respond differently to different texts. For example, Bugel and Buunk (1996) quoted by Brantmeier (2004) conducted a study that aimed at examining gender differences in Second Language (L2) reading comprehension on a national foreign language examination in the Netherlands. The results indicated that males scored significantly better on the multiple choice comprehension items for essays about laser thermometers, volcanoes, cars and football players. On the other hand, females achieved significantly higher scores on the comprehension tests for essays on text topics such as midwives, a sad story and housewife's dilemma. Despite the fact that the above mentioned studies highlight the influence of gender on the reading comprehension of L2 learners, only a small number of L2 reading studies have been conducted where gender is examined (Brantmeier 2004). According to Dee (2006), some studies argue for the importance of gender gaps in academic achievement but others argue that the achievement gap between girls and boys has been greatly exaggerated. Based on the above mentioned studies, it is clear that many studies that examine gender differences in reading comprehension have focused on the performance of learners on the reading comprehension tests in the second language. Therefore, there is a need for studies that focus on gender differences in reading comprehension in both L2 and L1 contexts, like the current study.

Reading comprehension has always been viewed as critical to academic success (Grabe and Stoller 2002). In addition, Al-Shumaimeri (2005) points out that research on reading has

attempted to look for components that affect reading performance as well as reading behaviours that distinguish proficient from less-proficient readers. Such studies have identified gender as one of the major factors that influence reading comprehension. Subsequently, numerous studies conducted on the reading comprehension between boys and girls reveal that girls outperform boys in reading comprehension (Topping, Valtin, Roller, Brozo and Dionisio 2003; Gambell and Hunter 2010; White 2007; Lynn and Mikk 2009). These authors further point out that this gender gap in reading achievement between boys and girls is a cause for concern and special intervention targeted to male learners is needed. According to White (2007), a number of suggested strategies to mediate the gender gap have been advanced, including the use of boy-friendly reading materials, the introduction of more male role models and teachers, adoption of technology-based programmes, and experimentation with single-gender- gender schooling.

The current study is significant as it sets out to examine the gender differences in reading comprehension in both mother tongue (IsiXhosa) and second language (English). As already mentioned above, an understanding of the gender differences in reading comprehension is important to various stakeholders and for various reasons. For example, Klinger, Shulha and Wade-Woolley (2009) point out that while gender differences in literacy are consistently reported the reasons for these differences and the interventions and strategies to address these differences are largely unknown. Surely there is a need to systematically examine ongoing attempts occurring in classrooms or schools to reduce this gap. Closing the gender difference in reading comprehension is likely to give both boys and girls better opportunity to achieve academically, especially in reading comprehension activities. Further, by examining gender differences in reading comprehension in both mother tongue and second language is likely to help us better understand the way in which these mechanisms (gender and comprehension) affect one another in the mother tongue and in the second language. In other words, the study is likely to provide valuable information on whether gender gap in reading comprehension is likely to manifest itself more or less in one of the languages. The current study, therefore, provides valuable information for policy makers, curriculum designers and teachers.

The literature has shown that gender difference in reading comprehension manifest itself mostly in the early years of the reading process. Below, Skinner, Fearington, and Sorrell (2010)

conducted a study among kindergarten through fifth-grade learners. The results indicated that the girls scored significantly higher on all four kindergarten literacy skills. A similar study was conducted by Chatterji (2006) among kindergarten and fifth-grade learners. The results indicated that males performed below females on tests of print familiarity, letter recognition, beginning and ending sounds, rhyming sounds, word recognition, receptive vocabulary, listening comprehension and comprehension of words in context. Both studies come to a consensus that gender difference manifests itself when children enter school and become greater by the first grade.

According to Thompson (in Logan and Johnson 2010), there is some evidence to suggest that boys and girls have naturally different reading strategies. In addition, Logan and Johnson (2009) point out that gender differences are consistently found in reading attitudes and motivation and both variables are associated with reading achievement. Johnson and Watson (2005) argue that the type of reading instruction and learning environment can determine the discrepancy between boys and girls with regard to their reading achievement. They found that a systematic synthetic phonics method produced a gender difference in reading which favoured boys. In another group where the same authors used the analytic-phonics method, girls had better reading comprehension, better spelling and equivalent word reading scores to boys. Some studies (for example, Logan and Johnson 2010) consistently highlight gender differences in attitudes to reading and reading motivation. Thus, children's attitudes to reading, motivation and reading frequency may also potentially provide explanations for the consistent gender differences observed in reading. Other factors that have been highlighted as potentially providing explanation for the gender discrepancy are differences in attention, interest and preference for different types of classroom activities, amounts of time engaged in literary activities, test bias, and choice of reading material (Logan and Johnson 2010).

Purpose of the study

The literature has revealed that within the classroom environment, whilst all children receive the same literacy instruction, differences in attention, interest and preference for different types of classroom activities may mean that boys and girls spend different amounts of time engaged in

literacy activities (Logan and Johnson 2010). In other words, female and male learners retain and retrieve information differently. Subsequently, teachers' understanding of gender differences in reading comprehension is important for organizing classroom activities, classroom interaction, material selection and assessment design that is likely to cater for the interests of both males and females. Moreover, by examining gender differences in reading comprehension, this study aims to provide more insight into strategies for closing the academic achievement gap between boys and girls, especially in reading comprehension in the mother tongue and in the second language. Therefore, the current study seeks to compare the reading comprehension of Grade three boys and girls in order to determine if there is any gender discrepancy in their reading comprehension in two languages (IsiXhosa and English). Having such information is likely to assist the teachers so that they are able to cater for gender differences in their classrooms. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. Do girls score significantly higher in a reading comprehension test in English (L2) than boys?
2. Do girls score significantly higher in a reading comprehension test in IsiXhosa (L1) than boys?
3. Does the magnitude of the reading comprehension gap between boys and girls differ between L1 and L2 contexts?

METHODOLOGY DESIGN

The study followed a quantitative approach of data collection. Aliaga and Gunderson (2002) define quantitative methods as explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics). The quantitative research approach was suitable for this study as its design was quasi-experimental, it analysed data through statistics and compared the reading scores of two groups. The use of the quasi-experimental design in this study made it possible for the researcher to compare the reading comprehension test scores for the boys and girls.

Subjects and sampling

The subjects of this study are 49 boys and 46 girls registered for Grade 3 in 2011 in a rural school in Dutywa district of the Eastern Cape (South Africa). All the learners were IsiXhosa speakers as their mother tongue and English as a second language. They all had a rural background and all were day scholars. The school was selected by means of convenience sampling. In convenience sampling, the selection of subjects from the population is based on easy availability or accessibility. All the subjects had been exposed to English as a subject and IsiXhosa as medium of instruction from Grade 1. A reading comprehension test in IsiXhosa and English was administered to a total number of 95 learners. The subjects were in two intact classes in order to prevent disruption to the normal teaching routine at the school. The mean age of the learners was nine years for both girls and boys.

Instrumentation

The reading comprehension test that was used in this study is the one that was administered by the National Government for Systemic Evaluation Foundation Phase Grade 3 in 2004. To give a brief background to this test is important. One of the South African government responsibilities is to get involved in the national effort to combat illiteracy. Therefore, in 2001 and 2004, the Department of Education in South Africa conducted two national systemic evaluations to establish literacy and numeracy levels in primary schools. These surveys showed shocking low levels of reading ability across the country (National Reading Strategy 2008). The reading comprehension tests used in the survey appeared in all eleven official languages of South Africa. For the purpose of this study IsiXhosa and English versions were used. The reading comprehension test consisted of multiple choice questions, fill-in blanks and short questions. Parents and learners were informed about the aim of the study and that participation was voluntary.

Data collection procedure

The IsiXhosa version of the reading comprehension test was administered to both classes in one day during their classroom periods. Learners took about one hour to complete the reading comprehension test. The English version of the reading comprehension test was administered after three months. Dreyer (1998:23) points out that the three- month interval between

administrations is deemed long enough to control any short-term memory effects. This was done due to the fact that the IsiXhosa reading comprehension test is a direct translation of the English reading comprehension test. A total of 95 learners were tested in both languages (IsiXhosa and English).

Data analysis

A *t*-test was used in this study. The *t*-test is one type of inferential statistics. It is used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of two groups. In this study the *t*-test was used to determine whether the mean scores of the boys and girls differed reliably from each other (Table 1 and 2). Cohen's effect size uses the following *d*-values:

Small effect	$d = 0.2$
Medium effect	$d = 0.5$
Large effect	$d = 0.8$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Insert Table 1 here

IsiXhosa reading comprehension test results

The first research question seeks to determine if girls would score significantly higher in a reading comprehension test in English (L2) than boys. The learners were tested in both second language and the mother tongue. The idea was to establish if there was any gap between gender differences and reading comprehension and also to establish in which language this gender gap in reading comprehension, if there was any. The results for the reading comprehension test in the mother tongue are presented first. Table 1 shows that the results for IsiXhosa reading comprehension test favoured the girls. However, the difference was not practically significant. The difference between the scores was 37.81 for girls and 33.18 for boys. Table 1 further show that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Barnet (1989) points out that reading comprehension encompasses a variety of factors, such as comprehension of the printed characters, background knowledge, interest or lack of in the passage being read, the

mastering of reading strategies and linguistic ability. Based on the above mentioned factors, the small gap in favour of girls in reading comprehension between the boys and girls could be attributed to the fact that in the mother tongue the linguistic gap was not wide between boys and girls. They all had a common mother tongue and the results could be influenced by the fact that the linguistic ability of boys and girls was almost the same in the mother tongue. However, in the studies conducted in the second language context, the gap reported in reading comprehension ability between boys and girls is wide (Al-shumaimeri 2005 ; Brantmeier 2004; Lafontaine and Monseur 2009; Pae 2004; Hossein Keshavarz and Ashtarian 2008; Klinger, Shulha and Wade-Woolley 2009; White 2007). The literature reveals that girls are always close to their mothers and they always engage themselves in the reading process, most of the time just for pleasure (Gumbell and Hunter 2010). Another contributing factor could be that boys and girls use almost the same reading strategies in reading in the mother tongue. However, it is also important to note that not all the girls performed well in the reading comprehension test in the mother tongue (Table 1).

English reading comprehension test results

Insert Table 2 here

The focus of the second research question was on whether would score significantly higher in a reading comprehension test in IsiXhosa (L1) than boys. Table 2 shows that the results of the reading comprehension test favoured the girls. The mean score for boys was 29.82 and the mean score for girls was 36.35. Table 2 further shows that there was a statistically significant difference between the reading comprehension scores obtained by boys and girls in favour of the girls. This finding is supported by many studies conducted in gender differences in the second language (Al-Shumani 2005; Brantmeier 2004; Lafontaine and Monseur 2009; Pae 2004; Hossein Keshavarz and Ashtarian 2008; White 2007). In addition, Gambell and Hunter (2000) point out that whether one looks at urban or rural reading comprehension marks, female learners have outperformed their male counterparts. There could be many factors contributing to this wide gap in terms of reading comprehension performance between boys and girls in the current study.

Halpen (2006) points out that since

girls generally develop earlier than boys; researchers often attribute their superior early reading skills in part to this biological factor. Halpern further points out that the ability to learn and use language contains a female advantage from as early as during the first years of schooling. This could be one of the reasons for the better performance of girls than boys in the current study. According to Brantmeier (2004), gender gap in reading comprehension is facilitated by question format and text characteristic. In the current study the majority of questions were multiple-choice, open-ended and short answer items. According to Routitsky and Turner (2003), open ended questions may favour girls and short answer items may favour boys. However, Turner points out that as the item difficulty increases, the likelihood to favour boys for both open-ended and short answer items increases. This finding is not confirmed in the current study as the gender gap widened in favour of girls once reading became more complex in the second language. Brantmeier (2004) states that familiarity with the subject matter has a facilitating gender effect on L2 reading comprehension. In addition, Griva, Aleviadou and Semoglou (2010) point out that concerning text genres, it has been revealed that boys preferred adventure, science fiction and sports stories, while girls enjoyed animal stories and stories about teenage problems, as well as romance, friendship and historical fiction. In the current study, two short reading passages in the reading comprehension test were based on animal stories, for example, the tortoise and the hare, the story about elephants and only one story was based on sports stories, for example, fundraising through sports. Based on the fact that boys and girls have different genre preferences, the wide gap in reading comprehension in favour of girls in the current study could also be attributed to the fact that the reading comprehension test structure favoured the girls. In other words, the girls were more familiar with the text structure than the boys.

The magnitude of the reading comprehension gap between girls and boys in L1 and L2 contexts

The focus of the third research question was on the magnitude of the reading comprehension gap between boys and girls in L1 and L2 contexts. The results of the study indicate a wide gap between the performance of boys and girls in the L1 and L2 context. As already mentioned above, the performance gap between girls and boys in the L1 context was not statistically significant but in L2 context the performance between girls and boys was statistically significant in favour of girls. Accounting for the wide gap in reading comprehension in the L2 context between

boys and girls in favour of girls has been supported by various studies mentioned above. To the knowledge of the researcher, no studies have been conducted in L1 contexts that deal with the gender differences in reading comprehension, especially among the rural learners whose mother tongue is IsiXhosa. Therefore, the results of the current study are important as they show that the reading comprehension gap is wide between boys and girls in reading comprehension in L2 than in L1. However, this is a cause for concern as the teachers' interest is to close whatever gap exists irrespective of the size.

Implications for teaching reading in Grade 3

The results of the current study have implications for teaching reading in the Grade 3 classroom. Based on the results of the study it is important for the teachers to be aware of the fact that gender differences in the reading comprehension performance exist. It is also important that teachers are capable of catering for the differences between boys and girls. Specifically, teachers should offer interesting reading material for both girls and boys. Since the study has indicated that girls and boys respond differently to different materials, therefore teachers should be able to provide a variety of text types that appeal to both girls and boys. The literature has shown that reading material / activities can promote a more positive attitude towards reading when adjusted to learners' gender preferences (Griva, Alevriadou and Semoglou 2010). In other words, a lack of the appropriate schema may lead to poor reading comprehension. The results also indicated that there is a wide gap in reading comprehension between boys and girls in favour of the girls. This calls for the teachers to consider the gender differences as they design their classroom activities and tests. For example, the results of the current study indicated that in reading comprehension tests the girls outperformed the boys and one of the reasons could be that the reading comprehension test structure was in favour of the girls. This calls for the teachers to consider having a balance in their tests. In other words, they should design their tests in such a way that they appeal equally to both girls and boys so that both genders have equal opportunities.

The wide gap between girls and boys in reading comprehension in L2 context could be avoided by encouraging the boys to the reading material that is often enjoyed by girls, for example, animal stories, friendship and historical fiction. Since, literature shows that girls read a wide

range of genre as compared to boys (Gambel and Hunter 2010) exposing boys to a wide range of reading material is likely to develop their interest to read. If their interest to read is developed, they are likely to improve their linguistic competence. The implication of the results as far as the linguistic competence is concerned show that the boys' linguistic competence in L2 was poor as compared to the girls. This manifests itself in the fact that when it comes to the L2 results, the reading comprehension gap widens in favour of the girls. Teachers should use simple language as they design their classroom tests and activities so as to cater for the boys.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to explore gender differences in reading comprehension among the Grade 3 rural learners. The results of the study revealed a statistically significant gap in reading comprehension test in L2 context between the boys and the girls in favour of the girls. This shows that the boys had a poor L2 linguistic competence as compared to the girls. This calls for the teachers to make means to develop the boys' linguistic competence. The difference in reading comprehension performance between girls and boys was not statistically significance in reading comprehension in the L1 context although the girls were still ahead of the boys. This calls for teachers to encourage the boys to read a wide range of material, even reading the material that is traditionally known to be girls' material.

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Table 1: IsiXhosa reading comprehension scores by gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std Dev	Std Err	Min	Max	P-value	Effect size
Male	49	33.18	18.36	2.62	3.44	72.41	0.28	0.25
Female	46	37.81	15.65	2.30	10.34	74.13		

Table 2: English reading comprehension scores by gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std Dev	Std Err	Min	Max	P-value	Effect size
Male	49	29.82	11.09	1.58	9.25	64.81	0.01	0.41
Female	46	36.35	15.97	2.35	11.11	74.07		