Effects of Gender and Grade Level on Young Korean EFL Learners’ Reading Comprehension

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Daria Soon-Young Seog. 2016. Effects of Gender and Grade Level on Young Korean EFL Learners’ Reading Comprehension, *Studies in Modern Grammar* 88, 149–166. The present study examined the effects of gender and grade level on English reading comprehension proficiency of young Korean English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners. Through a nationwide reading comprehension assessment event, nine hundred seventy-nine young Korean EFL learners in Korean elementary school grades 1 through 6 were tested for their English reading comprehension measures. Statical analysis was conducted to investigate between and within group differences as well as possible interactional effect of gender and grade level. Results showed significant main effects of gender and grade level on reading comprehension. However, there was no interactional effect of gender and grade level on English reading comprehension of the young Korean EFL learners.

[Key words: grade, gender, reading comprehension, EFL, young Korean]

1. Introduction

Given the widely accepted importance of gender as a variable deeply influencing second language acquisition (SLA), there has been a vast array of research conducted on the effects of gender on second language (L2) reading comprehension. However, most of the existing research has looked at effects of gender for adults’ English as a second language/foreign language (ESL/EFL) reading comprehension. Additionally, mixed results have been obtained with female learners generally outperforming male learners. Obviously, gender is likely to interact with other variables in
determining L2 proficiency and thus resulting in mixed research findings. In order to fill in some of the gaps in research as well as adding to existing studies, the current study investigated the effects of gender and school grade level on English reading comprehension for young Korean learners of English in Korea.

2. Literature Review

Gender has been one of the factors which has been focused on to explain the extent of reading comprehension proficiency. The issue of gender-based differences in reading comprehension has been depicted in a number of studies. Over the past two decades, gender studies reported controversial results about gender differences with most favoring females (Abdorahimzadeh, 2014; Arellano, 2013; Rosén, 2001; Schueller, 1999), some favoring males (Ahmadi and Mansoordehghan, 2012; Bügel and Buunk, 1996), and several others indicating no significant difference between genders (Brantmeier, 2003, 2006; Pae, 2004; Peart and Barrett, 2014; Song, 2003; Young and Oxford, 1997).

Gender differences in reading comprehension has been investigated in a variety of different ways with contrasting results. Bügel and Buunk (1996) studied the relationship between gender-oriented topics and differences in EFL reading comprehension of 2980 high school students and found that male learners were significantly outperforming females on male-oriented tests and females were significantly outperforming males on female-oriented tests. Having included a gender-neutral passage in their L2 study, they also reported that males performed significantly better than the females on the gender-neutral text. The males outperforming females on the neutral passage may partially be explained with methodology for assessing comprehension since some studies indicate that males usually outperform females on multiple choice tasks (Makitalo, 1996; Murphy,