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## **Gender differences in reading skills in english: a case study of 11th grade public school students in UAE**

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**Abstract.** This study aims to examine gender differences in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) of 11th Grade students in public high schools in UAE and determine to what extent they are statistically significant. The survey uses a quantitative questionnaire about reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) in English. A total of 600 students ( $n = 300$  male,  $n = 300$  female) participated in this survey. A one-way ANOVA test is employed for data analysis. The results indicate that female students obtain higher mean scores ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) for reading practices with lower-level thinking skills (literal reading) and experience inferential and critical reading practices more than male students. However, they exhibit no significant difference in reading practices with lower-level thinking skills and inferential, critical, and appreciative reading skills in English. Future studies could extend this research domain to other countries in the Middle East with large student samples.

**Keywords.** Gender; gender gap; literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative reading skills

### ***Introduction***

In general, learners display a wide range of individual differences, which can be considered predictors of achievement. One main predictor is gender, a tangible factor influencing students' academic interests and achievement and other learning interests, needs, and styles. Many recent studies on gender (Oda 2018; Reilly, Neumann and Andrews 2018) have investigated its effect on academic interests and achievement. These scholarly efforts have created a fertile research area for Second Language (L2) instructors and researchers who examined the relationship between gender and academic achievement in the four language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking).

As reading is a crucial skill in L2 learning, it has received considerable attention in the literature on the relationship between gender and reading skills. This research stream has included literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative reading levels (Oda 2018).

On the basis of recent studies (Reilly and Neumann and Andrews 2018; Oda 2018), females have surpassed males in reading skills. These findings assert that females are generally better in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) than males. However, some scholars refuted this argument by showing that both genders can significantly understand and comprehend different texts. In other words, males and females have no significant difference in reading skills.

Given the controversial issue surrounding gender differences in reading skills, investigating male and female students' reading skills in English subject is necessary. Therefore, the present study examines the reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) of 11th Grade students in public high schools in the UAE. We assess the reading skills of 600 students ( $n = 300$  male,  $n = 300$  female) in their English classes. Our results shed some light on the controversial debate concerning gender differences in reading skills and experiences. To sum up, we take another look at the differences between male and female students in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) and determine the extent to which gender differences are statically significant.

### ***Hypothesis***

To achieve these objectives, we test the following null hypotheses:

1. Male ( $n = 300$ ) and female ( $n = 300$ ) students in 11th Grade have no significant differences in lower-level reading skills, including literal reading.
2. Male ( $n = 300$ ) and female ( $n = 300$ ) students in 11th Grade have no significant differences in inferential, critical, and appreciative reading skills.

### ***Review of the Literature***

#### ***Gender and reading attainment***

Reading has become the focus of considerable research as it is considered a fundamental skill for achieving educational success in First Language (L1) and L2 studies. Scholars asserted a clear gender gap in reading achievement between males and females. However, the hypotheses and arguments regarding the gender gap in reading achievement have not reached a consensus. Studies continually provide conflicting evidence on the issue of females being better than males in academic achievement. This disagreement has resulted in various research questions and hypotheses to test the gender gap in academic achievement, particularly in reading. However, gender differences remain controversial, and whether they are statistically significant requires further investigation.

Many scholars (Logan and Johnston 2009; Arellano 2013; Reilly, Neumann and Andrews 2018; Van Hek and Buchmann and Kraaykamp 2019) proved that females are superior to males in academic achievement. For instance, an experimental study by Arellano (2013) examined the reading achievement of 141 high school students in Spain. The results showed that female students obtained better reading scores and outperformed male students in specific reading objectives that required critical reading, such as deduction of meaning from context, gleaning general information, and looking for meaning embedded in the text. A quantitative study conducted by Logan and Johnston (2009) examined the competency in reading skills of 232 children (50% male) aged from 10–11 years in UK schools. The results showed that female students were more competent in reading than male students. A quantitative study by Van Hek et al. (2019) investigated 1,525,604 students' reading performance in PISA tests across six waves from 2000 to 2015 in 37 countries. The results showed that males had significantly lower reading scores than females in general. Reilly et al. (2018) concluded that females outperformed males in reading skills. They investigated 934,800 male and female students' achievement in the NAEP reading assessments, which tracked student achievement from 4th to 8th Grade and 12th Grade in the US from 2004 to 2015. The results showed that female students gained significantly higher reading scores than boys across every wave of the assessment and every grade level.

The above studies proposed several biological, psychological, social, and cultural reasons for their arguments. Some of them attributed the gender gap to female verbal superiority (Oda, 2018; Reilly et al. 2018), indicating that females are better at learning a language than males. Others put forward gender differences in reading and learning, showing that female students have exhibited more motivation to learn English and language arts and reading than male students (Oda 2018). Reilly et al. (2018) and Arellano (2013) attributed gender differences in language competency and reading to cultural stereotypes where language learning and reading are generally considered feminine. In other words, males and females are accustomed to such cultural beliefs, which shape their gender roles within society in general.

In support of the above findings, Van Hek et al. (2019) argued that the gender gap in reading performance across countries could not be ascribed only to genetic factors. Instead, one should also consider social or educational factors as they can differ between countries. They also assumed that student motivation and interest play a crucial role in reading performance, and male students are not as interested in reading as female students. Moreover, educational policies have significant effects on gender differences. Van Hek et al. (2019) believed that males lagging behind females in learning achievement, particularly in reading performance, is highly related to the standardization of educational curricula and instruction. Similarly, Hochweber and Vieluf (2016) showed in their longitudinal study on the gender gap in reading achievement that male 9th-grade students in Germany perform poorly in reading achievement after exposure to poor teaching strategies and teachers' support. Their achievement had improved after aligning the teaching quality with good support from teachers.

Overall, gender differences in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) remain controversial. For instance, Koban Koç (2016) and Moafian and Ghanizadeh (2011) found no significant difference between males and females in argumentative or critical thinking. Koban Koç (2016) conducted a quantitative study to examine the effect of gender on comprehension of different reading genres. A total of 60 first-year college students (30 males and 30 females) at a university in Turkey participated in the above study. He found that the students, regardless of their gender, were good at understanding and comprehending different texts. In other words, no significant difference exists between male and female students. White (2007) also assessed reading achievement and skills between male and female students and found a non-significant difference.

To sum up, the literature shows no consensus regarding the gender gap and the traditional view that presents females as superior to males in academic achievement. Therefore, the present study contributes to the current body of knowledge related to the gender gap debate in reading.

### ***Purpose of the study***

This study aims to investigate the gender differences in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) of 11th Grade students ( $n = 600$ ) in public high schools in UAE. It also examines the extent to which gender differences in reading skills are statistically significant.

### ***Significance of the study***

This study investigates the stereotypical view of female superiority in reading achievement with similar teaching practices, curriculum content, and evaluation tools.

**Research questions**

1. Do male and female 11th-grade students in UAE public high schools have significant differences in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) in English?
2. To what extent female 11th-grade students are better than their male counterparts in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) in English?
- 3.

**Limitation of the study**

The scope of this study was limited to a few public high schools under the Ministry of Education supervision. Therefore, our results cannot be easily generalized to other populations (Creswell 2013). The small study sample affects the generalizability of our results to a larger population. A larger sample could have revealed more details on the reading experiences in English classes. Moreover, in this study, we used descriptive statistic by which we are reporting and relaying what the data is saying.

**Methodology**

This descriptive study adopted a quantitative approach to obtain results. The quantitative method allows for the empirical testing of our assumptions to yield statistically verifiable evidence. We used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Our questionnaire comprised six parts based on the levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Needs, which follows a hierarchal order from the lower levels of knowledge, comprehension, and application to the higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Each section included five statements reflecting possible reading practices (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) in English language reading classes.

**Validity and reliability**

A jury of experts reviewed and modified our questionnaire to ensure comprehensibility, ease of reading, and the sensitivity of the statements. We also administered a pilot study to 48 participants (20 males and 28 females), whose demographic criteria were similar to those in the main study. Each part of the questionnaire was scrutinized to ensure that the items were understandable.

We proved the items’ reliability by measuring Cronbach’s alpha reliability degree for significance using SPSS. We obtained a value of 0.9 for Cronbach’s alpha, indicating a high degree of reliability (Gliem and Gliem 2003).

Table 1: Cronbach’s Alpha Reliability

Category	Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
Knowledge	0.71	5
Comprehension	0.86	5
Application	0.75	5
Analysis	0.76	5
Synthesis	0.69	5
Evaluation	0.82	5

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<b>All items</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>30</b>
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### ***Data collection***

We visited the sample institutions to distribute the reading skills questionnaire to the 11th Grade students ( $n = 300$  male,  $n = 300$  female) throughout six emirates in UAE. The participants took 15–20 min to complete the questionnaire as they were provided time to think and retrieve their thoughts about their reading experiences. Confidentiality was guaranteed, and identities were not revealed in the report as we used pseudonyms for the participants. The intentions and purpose of the study were also clearly explained beforehand.

### ***Participants***

A sample size of 600 participants (public high school students across UAE) completed the questionnaire. The participants were chosen via random selection to ensure the validity of the results. They were all 11th Grade students enrolled in public high schools. The questionnaire was distributed equally to male and female students, with 300 (50%) males and 300 (50%) females (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participants' Gender ( $n = 600$ )

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	300	50%
Female	300	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>100%</b>

### ***Research context***

We surveyed public high schools across different emirates in UAE. We only chose public high schools for this study. Unlike private schools, they implement the curriculum for the English language recommended by the Ministry of Education.

### ***Data analysis***

We analyzed our data using SPSS version 25 and a one-way ANOVA to describe, analyze, and interpret any gender differences between male and female students in UAE high schools in reading skills.

### ***Findings***

We investigated 11th Grade students' reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) in this study. We based our questionnaire on Bloom's Taxonomy, which has six hierarchically arranged cognitive levels of ability. They start from lower levels and ascend to the higher ones. In order, they are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Table 3 exemplifies the descriptive statistics gleaned from the students' views of their reading experiences and displays the overall mean for each category of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for Reading Skills of 11th Grade Students

Gender	CR Categories	N	M	SD
<b>Males</b>	Knowledge	300	3.54	1.11
	Comprehension		3.64	1.18
	Application		3.06	1.25
	Analysis		2.90	1.14
	Synthesis		2.44	1.26
	Evaluation		2.80	1.42
<b>Female</b>	Knowledge	300	3.69	1.03
	Comprehension		3.88	1.03
	Application		3.08	1.20
	Analysis		2.98	1.14
	Synthesis		2.56	1.22
	Evaluation		2.79	1.23
<b>Overall</b>		<b>600</b>	<b>3.11</b>	<b>1.18</b>

In general, 11th Grade students in public high schools had limited and poor experiences of reading practices that engaged higher-order thinking skills, such as inferential, critical, and appreciative reading. Although the overall average mean score was high ( $M = 3.11$ ), the mean scores reduced (Male:  $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ; Female:  $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) when approaching the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (i.e., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). The questionnaire results showed that female students used many reading practices dealt with comprehension (Female:  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; Male:  $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and knowledge (Female:  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ; Male:  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), which are at the lower end of Bloom's Taxonomy and merely stimulate literal reading and lower-level thinking skills, such as recognition, term and idea identification, and factual detail determination.

The mean scores for the higher levels of Blooms' Taxonomy for females ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) were higher than for males ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), indicating that female students experienced inferential and critical reading practices more than male students. The standard deviation values represent the amount of variation in scores within each gender group. The standard deviation column showed that the scores obtained by female students ( $SD = 1.19$ ) varied less than those of males ( $SD = 1.21$ ). Thus, male and female students have different literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative reading experiences. Whether this difference has any statistical significance is investigated further.

**Ho1:** Male ( $n = 300$ ) and female ( $n = 300$ ) students in 11th Grade have no significant difference in lower-level reading practices, such as literal reading.

Table 4: Comparison of Literal Reading Experiences involving Lower-Level Thinking Skills of 11th Grade Students

Category	Gender	N	M	SD	F	Sig.
Literal reading practices with lower-level thinking skills (Knowledge, comprehension, and application)	Male	300	3.49	1.14	6.778	0.202
	Female	300	3.54	1.08		

Note:  $*p = 0.202 > 0.5$ .

Female students obtained higher mean scores ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) for reading practices with lower-level thinking skills (literal reading). However, male and female students exhibited no statistically significant difference in reading practices with lower-level thinking skills, as shown in Table 4. Moreover, the one-way ANOVA score ( $F = 6.778$ ,  $p = 0.202$ ) was higher than the standard 0.05 alpha level. The above results supported the null hypothesis ( $H_01$ ).

**Ho2:** Male ( $n = 300$ ) and female ( $n = 300$ ) students in 11th Grade have no significant differences in inferential, critical, and appreciative reading skills.

Table 5: Comparison of Inferential, Critical, and Appreciative Reading Skills between Male and Female Students

Category	Gender	N	M	SD	F	Sig.
Inferential, critical, and appreciative reading practices with higher thinking skills (Analysis, synthesis, and evaluation)	Male	300	2.71	1.21	2.780	0.363
	Female	300	2.77	1.19		

Note:  $*p = 0.36 > 0.5$ .

Males and females had no statistically significant differences in inferential, critical, and appreciative reading experiences in English, as shown in Table 5. The  $F$  value ( $F = 2.780$ ,  $p = 0.36$ ) was higher than the cut-off alpha value of 0.05. The above results supported the null hypothesis ( $H_02$ ).

### Discussion

This study investigated the reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) of 11th Grade students ( $n = 300$  male,  $n = 300$  female) in English classes in public high schools in UAE. The overall results indicated that female students obtained higher mean scores ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) for reading practices with lower-level thinking skills (literal reading). They also experienced inferential and critical reading practices more than male students, as they had higher scores ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) for higher levels of Blooms' Taxonomy than males ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). However, male and female students had no statistically significant difference in reading practices with lower-level thinking skills and inferential, critical, and appreciative reading experiences in English.

Many scholars showed that females generally outperform males in reading achievement (Arellano 2003; Logan and Jonston 2009; Oda 2018; Riely et al. 2018; Van Hek et al. 2019). However, our review of the literature indicated an ongoing debate on the gender gap in reading.

Although the literature has raised various questions and advanced many hypotheses to test the gender gap in academic achievement, it remained controversial. Disagreements over the research questions, methods used to collect and analyze data, and interpretations of the results continued. Several studies (Oda 2018; Reilly et al. 2018; Sadiku and Sylaj 2019) asserted female superiority in reading achievement. Others (Hanna 1994; White 2007; Heinzmann 2009; Kelly and Alberta 2016; Evan, Akmal and Jakiela 2020) argued that the gender differences in reading achievement are statistically not significant. Moreover, the notion of underachievement of males in the area of reading achievement is overstated.

Overall, gender differences and the traditional view indicating females as superior to males in academic achievement require further investigation. Researchers worldwide discussed several psychological, environmental (school practices), and instructional (teaching methods) factors that may affect students' academic achievement, regardless of their gender.

Students' academic success mainly depends on the education system, including teaching methods, curricula, school culture, and regulations. Otherwise, confirming that females are better than males or vice versa is prejudiced. This study strongly supports (White 2007) that individuals have equal abilities after their births, but teaching practices and social and cultural treatment will help shape and determine their strengths and weaknesses.

Nevertheless, scrutinizing and weighing the arguments that support female students' superiority in reading achievement are necessary. Many studies have compared male and female students in language learning. The majority have found that females are better than males in L1 and L2 learning, often attributed to female verbal superiority (Oda 2018; Reilly et al. 2018). Oda (2018) showed that the gender gap comes from the high motivation among females to learn the English language and their favorable motivational disposition in the language arts and reading activities. Others pointed out the difference in attitude and personal preferences of male and female students. Males are more concerned with learning mathematics and improving their cognitive skills, whereas females are more concerned with language learning and improving their verbal skills (Oda 2018). Saidi (2012) argued that gender differences in L2 learning might also come from the variation in learning strategies. He assumed that male and female students differ in their learning styles and strategies when learning a second language. Specifically, females use metacognitive and social strategies more frequently than males. The remainder associated the gender gap in reading achievement to the different brain wiring, chemistry of males and females, and motivation rates (White 2007).

Although some of the above explanations seemed logical, the rest offered weakly and overstated evidence for explaining why females outperformed males in reading. White (2007) argued that the explanations and solutions provided by many studies supporting the gender gap in reading achievement are not new nor convincing as they are too simple for a complex problem and not based on sufficient empirical evidence. Consequently, this issue remains unsolved for many decades and controversial for many researchers. White (2007) also affirmed that the observed gender difference in reading achievement is overstated and maybe of little practical consequences. Hence, blaming personal interests, individual differences, and biological features has never provided a tangible solution for the existing problem.

Moreover, studies supporting female superiority in academic achievement are solely based on standardized tests or textbook tests, whereby, Furgione and Evans and Russell III and Jahani (2018) retreated the gender gap in academic achievement to the standardized test. Hanna (1994) argued that standardized tests received severe criticism for being incomplete and target factual knowledge. In other words, they are inconsistent with the current view of learning that is active and constructive.

Others blamed teaching methods for the gender gap in academic achievement. They argued that males and females should receive different learning approaches. The present study does not support this argument as no gender-based teaching methods exist, only better ways of teaching. Teaching practices in the classroom, the school culture through its regulations, and the literacy culture in society have mainly shaped and determined students' academic achievement, regardless of their gender. Kelly and Alberta (2016) argued that students could be good readers and have high academic achievements if school literacy practices are continuously adapted to modern times. Community culture should also create literacy practices that enable them to be successful in language learning.

In UAE, teaching practices are overregulated, and teachers lack autonomy that enables them to teach pragmatically in accordance with student demands. Teachers should be the decision-makers at the classroom level and have the freedom to shape and modify the curriculum on the basis of student needs, regardless of their gender (Abo-Salem 2004; Al Dakkak 2010; Ridge and Farah and Kipples 2017). Otherwise, neglecting teachers' autonomy "undoubtedly brings problems, such as teachers' lack of interest to implement new curricula, passive involvement in the teaching activity, and low motivation to improve in terms of pedagogy" (Cheng and Wang 2004 : p. 3).

The above issues result in inconvenient teaching practices that miss the practicality and precision to fulfill student needs and scaffold their learning. Hammett and Sanford (2008 cited in Kelly and Alberta 2016) argued that educators misread and misunderstood the literacy practices of their students. This issue has been reflected in inconvenient teaching methods and curricula that do not fulfill their needs

Teaching practices well define whether the gender gap exists in accordance with individual differences or some other social, cultural, and educational factors. Evan, Akmal, and Jakiela (2020) asserted that the gender gap rarely persists in countries where males and females similarly attain a high level of teaching practices. In some countries like Finland, Singapore, and Norway, the gender gap rarely exists because the teaching practices and teachers' quality are high. A longitudinal study conducted by Hochweber and Vieluf (2016) on the gender gap in reading achievement on 9th Grade students in Germany found that males perform poorly in reading achievement after exposure to poor teaching strategies and teachers' support. Their achievement had improved when the teaching quality was aligned with good support from teachers. Hence, Hochweber and Vieluf (2016) concluded that teaching quality and teachers' support are strongly correlated with student achievement in reading, regardless of gender.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated gender differences in reading skills (literal, inferential, critical, and appreciative) of 11th Grade students ( $n = 600$ ) in public high schools in UAE. It also examined the extent to which the gender differences in reading skills are statistically significant. We used a quantitative questionnaire to survey the participants' reading experiences in English. A total of 600 students ( $n = 300$  male,  $n = 300$  female) participated in this survey. We analyzed the data using a one-way ANOVA test. The results indicated that female students obtained higher mean scores ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) for reading practices with lower-level thinking skills (literal reading) and experienced inferential and critical reading practices more than male students. However, male and female students did not have a statistically significant difference in reading practices with lower-level thinking skills and inferential, critical, and appreciative reading skills in English.

Overall, the gender gap in learning achievement, particularly in learning, remains conflicting and controversial among researchers. The first stream of research (Arellano 2003; Logan and Jonson 2009; Oda 2018; Riely et al. 2018; Van Hek et al. 2019) asserted and

attributed female superiority in reading achievement to biological, psychological, social, and cultural reasons to support their argument. The second stream of research (Hanna 1994; White 2007; Heinzmann 2009; Kelly and Alberta 2016; Evan and Akmal and Jakiela 2020) argued that gender differences in reading achievement are statistically not significant. Moreover, the notion of underachievement of male students in the area of reading achievement is overstated. This disagreement shows that consensus on gender differences and the traditional view indicating females as superior to males in academic achievement has not been reached yet.

Hence, further investigation should extend this research domain to other Middle East countries and large student samples. Researchers should also determine whether the power of reading skills can be positively correlated with mastery of the three other language skills (writing, listening, and speaking) in English as a Second Language and is worthy of consideration and implementation.

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