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the development of materials for EFL/ESL students in general, and for students at different levels of language ability, in particular.

For instance, if the materials are intended for elementary level students, the paragraphs for reading comprehension should be selected such that the topic sentences are located at the beginning of the paragraphs. As the level of proficiency of the students increases, so would the variety of the selected paragraphs. Further, test developers would utilize the findings of this research in selecting passages for reading comprehension tests. In fact, the location of the topic sentence can function as one of the indicators of language proficiency level of the language learners. Of course, further research is needed to both verify and consolidate the findings of this research. That is the location of the topic sentence and its relation to reading comprehension should be investigated across the texts and texts and across the disciplines. Since reading is an important factor in academic contexts, the issue should be investigated with academic passages in general, and with texts prepared for the students of ESP/EST, in particular. And finally, investigating the form of the paragraph in which the topic sentence does not overtly exist would be of great importance. Such research will definitely shed more light to our understanding of the process of reading comprehension in relation to text structures.

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Alderson, C. (1984). Reading in a foreign language: a reading problem or a language problem. In Alderson, C. and A.H. Urquhart (1984).

of the passages and did equally well on all regardless of the location of the topic sentence. While the location of topic sentences in the middle or at the end of the text confused the low proficiency group. That is, the location of the topic sentence did not have any effect on the performance of high proficiency group, while low proficiency group performed significantly better on the paragraphs with the topic sentence at the beginning. Thus, the topic sentence as an element of discourse organization and pragmatic clue was beneficial for low proficient students only. The following is a summary of the findings:

1. Location of the topic sentence in an expository paragraph influences the process of reading comprehension.

2. The passages with topic sentence at the beginning are the easiest passages to be understood by all the readers (high or low proficient ones).

3. For highly proficient readers, location of the topic sentence does not have a significant role in the process of reading comprehension.

Passages with topic sentence in the middle or at the end proved to be difficult for low proficient readers to understand.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS EDUCATIONAL

Among many factors contributing to language teaching and language learning, educational factors are of considerable importance. One of the educational factors is the content of the materials and textbooks. Material developers and textbook writers should be abreast of the findings of research. The findings of this research would contribute to

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study focused on the effect of the location of the topic sentence on reading comprehension ability at different levels of language proficiency. The findings support the idea levels of language proficiency. The findings support the idea of level dependency of language processing tasks. As many scholars have recently argued (Skehan 1988, 1989; Anivan 1991). Learners at high level of proficiency tend to perform well on the skills and components regardless of the nature of the task. Empirical evidence support the idea that students with high language proficiency do not heavily depend on linguistic and / or pragmatic clues which are assumed to be helpful in processing language tasks. In this regard, Davanloo (1995) examined the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension. Her findings indicated that students at the advanced level did not need to be led by background knowledge to a great extent. similarly Janfeshan (1995) demonstrated that explicit teaching of text or paragraph organization did not help advanced students very much, but was quite influential in the reading rate of elementary and lower intermediate students.

The findings of this study also support the important role of overall language proficiency in processing language tasks. The results of the analyses showed that the low proficiency group of subjects did differently on all 3 passages while such a difference in the performances of high proficiency group of subjects was not discerned. In other words, high proficiency group of subjects had no difficulty with the three forms

Table 5
**One Way ANOVA for Comparison of Means of Low Group
 For Three Reading Comprehension Passages**

Sources of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F
Between Groups	8.8	2	4.40	49.77
Within Groups	163.18	79	2.06	
Total	625.63	81		

P<0.01 F critical= 4.92

The results indicate that, there is no significant difference on the performance of subjects in high proficiency group on different passages. That is, the location of the topic sentence is not a factor to either enhance or impair reading comprehension. For the low group, however, the outcome is quite different. That is, the location of the topic sentence is an important factor contributing to the degree of reading comprehension. This may imply that low proficiency students benefit more from the information provided by the topic sentence than students with high proficiency do. This may be in support of the simple view on reading" (Hoover& Gough, 1990; Gough et.al.; 1996) which emphasized both recognition and comprehension processes. That is, at the low levels of language proficiency, readers resort to more of recognition at the word levels of language ability. Whereas at higher levels of language ability, comprehension processes are more active than recognition process.

paragraphs, was not significantly different across the groups. Whereas for paragraphs labeled B and C, in which the topic sentences were in the middle and at the end, respectively, groups.

Since the readability levels of the passages were adjusted to the levels of proficiency, it can be concluded that both groups benefited from the location of the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraphs. However, when the topic sentences were located in the middle or at the end of the paragraphs, high proficiency students "are capable of utilizing strategies which would compensate for the potential complexity resulting from the location of the topic sentence in positions other than the beginning of the paragraph. Subjects in low proficiency group, however were not capable of compensating for the lack of topic sentence at the initial position.

The second set of analyses was conducted to check on differences between the performance of the subjects on each test, Two one way ANOVA were conducted of which the results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

**One Way ANOVA for Comparison of Means of Low Group
For Three Reading Comprehension Passages**

Sources of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F
Between Groups	369.33	2	184.66	49.77
Within Groups	256.3	69	3.72	
Total	625.63	71		

P < 0.01

F critical = 4.92

Table 1

T-test on The Mean Scores of High and Low Groups (Passages A)

	N	Mean	SD	t-observed
High Group	79	7.78	.85	.05
Low Group	71	7.78	.75	
P<0.01				t-critical=2

Table 2

T-test on The Mean Scores of High and Low Groups (Passages B)

	N	Mean	SD	t-observed
High Group	79	7.48	.81	75.99
Low Group	71	4.67	1.44	
P<0.01				t-critical=2

Table 3

T-test on The Mean Scores of High and Low Groups (Passages C)

	N	Mean	SD	t-observed
High Group	79	7.95	.85	16
Low Group	71	5.71	1.00	
P<0.01				t-critical=2

As the Tables show, the performance of the subjects on passages labeled A, in which the topic sentences were at the beginning of the

given one point and no penalty was considered for wrong responses.

RESULTS

The major question dealt with whether there was any relationship between levels of language proficiency and the reading comprehension regarding the location of the topic sentence in a paragraph. In order to answer the question, two sets of analyses were conducted. The first set of analyses was conducted to find out whether subjects at different levels of proficiency performed differently on different reading passages. Therefore the performance of the subjects in low and high groups was compared on the nine reading passages. It should be mentioned that in contrast to many other research projects in which students with low or high levels of language proficiency take the same test, in this study, each group (high or low) took the tests corresponding to their own level of language proficiency. Therefore, difference in performance of the subjects on different tests should not be attributed to their language ability, but the structure of the paragraph. The results of the independent group t-test are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

the data, the scores of 34 subjects who did not complete all the study measures were excluded from the data. Thus, the data for this study were obtained from 150 subjects. Based on the performance of the subjects on an earlier version of the Michigan Language Proficiency Test, they were divided into two groups: high group those scoring above the mean and low group those scoring below the mean.

Instrumentation

Two tests were used in this study. The first one was the Michigan Test of Language Proficiency which included three subtests of structure, vocabulary, and reading comprehension with 40, 40, and 20 multiple-choice items, respectively. The second was a reading comprehension test developed exclusively for this study. The procedures of test development are briefly explained below.

Since the subjects were divided into two groups of low and high proficiency, it was necessary that they receive tests corresponding to their language ability. Therefore, on the basis of the readability indexes of the passages in the criterion measure, two sets of reading comprehension tests with different readability indexes were developed. Each set included nine passages of similar readability levels. Out of the 9 passages in each set, three passages had the topic sentence at the beginning, three in the middle, and three at the end. Each passage was followed by three multiple choice items. Thus, altogether, 18 passages with 54 items were constructed. These tests were piloted, revised, and prepared for final administration. These tests were administered concurrently with the criterion measure. In all cases, each item was

element signaling the framework of the message influences text comprehension. Such sentences are often called topic sentences, and are considered important for skills such as skim reading. It is often possible, just by reading the first sentence, to state what a paragraph is saying about its theme.

One important point which has not been taken into account in previous research was the interaction between the level of language proficiency, the location of topic sentence, and the degree of reading comprehension. Recent research on language proficiency strongly supports the variability of processing tasks in relation to language ability. That is more proficient students utilize macrostrategies or metacognitive strategies more frequently than less proficient students (Lachini, 1996). As the location of the topic sentence at the beginning, middle, or the end of the paragraph may create variability in comprehension, so would the level of proficiency will benefit the topic sentence and its location in a paragraph or not has a significant implication for both teaching, reading and developing materials for EFL students. Therefore, this research is an attempt to shed some light on the ways of improving reading comprehension considering the location of topic sentence, level of language proficiency, and their interaction on reading comprehension.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 184 randomly-selected undergraduate female English majors at Azzahra university in Tehran. To secure the validity of

information and backgrounding supporting information, and (b) placing important information in the first position (Grabe, 1997). Applying these two principles to the more traditional unit of a text, i.e., a paragraph, seems to imply that the discourse structure of a paragraph has a role in reading comprehension. A paragraph is often identified as having a topic sentence and some supporting statements. In fact the foregrounding of main information is achieved through the location of the topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph.

As early as 1917, Thorndike claimed that understanding a paragraph is like solving a problem in mathematics which requires selecting the right elements and putting the right amount of weight for each. In reading too, the mind must select, repress, emphasize, create, and organize all pieces of information. The topic sentence purports to aid the readers in just this fashion by providing them with the topic or main idea. As the existence of the topic sentence in a paragraph is important, so is its location.

In the last three decades, many studies were conducted to investigate the effect of the location of the topic sentence on the reading comprehension. Most of them found that comprehension was significantly improved when the topic sentence was presented before the material. (Bransford & Johnson, 1974; Thorndyke, 1977; Rickards 1972; Kupka, 1977; Kreider 1981). McCarthy (1991) also claims that in a text in addition to sequencing chain of clauses within sentences, and sentences within paragraphs, discourse features are also important. For instance, it has been observed that first sentences often imply what the whole paragraph is about. That is, macro level front-placing of an

component skills potentially in simultaneous operation. The interaction of these cognitive skills leads to fluent reading comprehension. Grabe (1991) implies the concept by referring to the research literature (Carrel, 1989; Eskey, 1986; Rayner & Pollatse, 1989) and concludes that reading involves both an array of lower-level rapid, automatic identification skills and an array of high level comprehension interpretation skills.

From among components contributing to reading comprehension, formal discourse, and knowledge of text structure have received considerable attention. There is convincing evidence that knowing how a text is organized influences the comprehension of the text. For example Carrell (1984) has shown that texts with specific logical patterns of organization, such as cause-effect, comparison, contrast, and problem solution improve recall and comprehension compared to texts organized loosely around the collection of facts. Alderson (1984) states that research into the cause of difficulty with comprehending a text has shown that certain principles of text organization such as rhetorical technique of cause effect influence the recall of information in a text (Urquhart, 1984). Carrell (1985) demonstrated that the kind of organization of a text significantly increased the amount of information that students recalled. Carrell (1991) also claims that awareness of text structure is analogous to awareness of reading strategies and influences the quality of information recalled as a function of text structure.

There is ample evidence that discourse structuring principles have significant effect on reading comprehension process (Lorch & ÓBreien 1995; Singer 1990). Two of these principles are (a) foregrounding main

reading is not a process of picking information from the written materials in a word by word fashion. Rather, reading is a process of selection. However, after almost 30 years of research scholars tend to reject this view. Grabe (1997) claims that "the psycholinguistic guessing game model of reading is clearly wrong and is not considered seriously by current researchers."

Another view trying to explain the process of reading is that good readers use world knowledge they bring to reading and use the process of prediction in order to make sense out of the written text (Smith, 1982). The notion of readers' knowledge contribution to their reading comprehension ability, led to an expansion of the utilization and application of background knowledge or schema theory to reading activities. This line of research led to the development of three perspectives referred to as (a) bottom up processing in which the primary emphasis was on textual decoding, (b) top-down processing in which the focus was on reader interpretation and prior knowledge, and (c) interactive processing in which both textual code and background knowledge are utilized interactively. (Barnett, 1988, 1989; Grabe; 1996). Although this view has been criticized on some grounds, it still provides useful insights to the process of reading. A comprehensive overview of the schema theory in relation to reading comprehension is given by Grabe (1997).

Another line of research which has been promising focused on the components of reading skill. Grabe (1991) claims that component skills approach to understanding the nature of reading is a useful perspective. In fact, many scholars believe that reading is the interaction of many

believes that reading in English is a pre-requisite to almost all graduate programs.

In spite of such an importance, most foreign students suffer, sometimes seriously, from deficiencies in reading in comparison to their native counterparts. Therefore, applied linguists have been concerned with developing theoretical models as well as practical activities to enhance foreign students' reading ability. To this end research on reading skills has been rapidly growing within the last quarter of century.

The most significant path of research in this regard has centered upon developing a sound understanding of what reading comprehension is and how a printed linguistic message is processed. The long standing idea to consider reading a passive skill because it does not manifest any overt activity on the part of the speech organs is no longer valid. Reading is undoubtedly an active mental process of interaction with the written materials. As Widdowson (1979) stated, the text by itself does not carry meaning; rather, the interaction of the reader with the text leads to an extracted meaning.

This is exactly where the explosion of ideas with the theoretical approaches to interactive process of reading has emerged. In old days, reading was seen as a reinforcement for oral skills. However, with the decline of audiolingual type approaches to language teaching and with the ever growing needs for advanced level readers, most scholars, attempted to delve into the reading process through the findings of psycholinguistics. A well-known but old psycholinguistic model of reading process is the one offered by Goodman (1967; 1971). He argued that reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. He further stated that

On hundred and eighty four undergraduate English majors were randomly selected and divided into two groups of high and low proficiency through the Michigan language proficiency test. Two reading comprehension tests corresponding to each level of language proficiency were developed. Each test consisted of 9 passages of which three passages had the topic sentence at the beginning, three passages in the middle, and three passages at the end. The tests were administered under strict testing conditions.

The results revealed an interaction between the level of proficiency, the location of the topic sentence and the degree of reading comprehension. That is, at the high level of proficiency, the location of the topic sentence did not significantly influence the performance of the students, whereas at the low proficiency level, the comprehension of the text was enhanced when the topic sentence was at the beginning of the paragraph. Further details of the findings are presented and implications and applications to various areas of applied linguistics are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is recognized as one of the most important skills in academic and professional success in general, and in second and / or foreign language education, in particular (Grabe, 1991; Carrell, 1989). Furthermore, due to the prominence of the English language as an international means of communicating scientific and technical information around the globe, reading in English acts as a satellite to receive the published information. That is probably why Alderson (1984)

Location Of The Topic Sentence, Level Of Language Proficiency, and Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Research on reading comprehension supports the contribution of the topic sentence to better understanding of the paragraph by EFL readers. However, the level of language proficiency, which has recently been recognized as an interacting factor with many language processing tasks, has not been taken into account in previous research. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the location of the topic sentence in a paragraph and the degree of reading comprehension at different levels of language proficiency.