# DOES GENDER REALLY MATTER? L2 READING IN SPANISH AT THE INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL

Silvia M. Peart
UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY, LANGUAGES & CULTURES DEPARTMENT

René Ibarra
CAMPBELL UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Hilda Y. Salazar
WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE, FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND FINE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

*Reading provides L2 learners access to cultural and linguistic information, making it an important part of second language acquisition. At the intermediate-level, learners should have the skills needed to start reading lengthier and more complex texts. However, this is not always the case. This study analyzed the effect of gender on L2 reading comprehension in Spanish at the third semester of instruction in a U. S. university. Two types of assessment were used: multiple choice and written recall. Also, the cognitive strategies used by students to understand the texts provided were evaluated. The statistical analyses revealed a significant difference between female and male participants as to reading comprehension as well as in the cognitive strategy in this process.*

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Resumen

*La lectura en una L2 posibilita al estudiante el acceso a la cultura y a información lingüística, lo que la convierte en una parte esencial de este proceso. Los estudiantes de nivel intermedio deben poseer las habilidades necesarias para comenzar a leer textos más largos y complejos; sin embargo, esto no siempre ocurre. Esta investigación analizó el efecto del género con relación a la comprensión lectora con estudiantes que aprenden español en su tercer semestre de instrucción en una universidad en los Estados Unidos. Se usaron dos tipos de instrumentos: preguntas de opción múltiple y retención escrita. Se evaluaron también las estrategias cognitivas empleadas para comprender dichos textos. Los análisis estadísticos revelaron una diferencia significativa entre hombres y mujeres con relación a la comprensión del contenido de los pasajes, así como en cuanto a las estrategias cognitivas empleadas para acceder a los mismos.*

La correspondencia relacionada con este artículo debe dirigirse a:
Silvia M. Peart
Languages & Cultures Department
United States Naval Academy
589 McNair Road
Annapolis, Maryland
USA, 21402
peart@usna.edu

## 1. Introduction

Learners who study a foreign language or a second language (L2) at the university level typically move from simpler texts to lengthier and more complex L2 reading passages. At the intermediate-level of instruction, students should have the necessary skills to access such texts. However, at the beginning of the 2000s, many U.S. university language departments began reviewing their curricula (Rava, 2000) because the faculty found that students were not sufficiently prepared to shift from plot-level discussions to text analysis and interpretation. Part of this assessment included an evaluation of the impact of student gender on content comprehension in the second language context. Brantmeier (2003) concluded that it is crucial to have more research into this question, especially at the intermediate-level where students move from a grammar- and vocabulary-focused approach to a content and literary one. In addition to reading authentic and short literary texts, many introductory language programs are currently incorporating more discipline-specific texts such as excerpts from science, medical journals, and articles about social issues. This means that learners have access to a variety of texts. However, contrary to this new multifaceted scenario, reading continues to be a silent activity without any strategic training completed outside of the classroom. Overall, this situation grants a closer look at how learners interact with different L2 passages, particularly at the intermediate-level, when students move from a lower-level to an upper-level proficiency in the target language.

The question of how second-language learners acquire literacy has received extensive attention in the field of Second Language Acquisition. In this context, background knowledge itself (*i. e.,* first-language literacy and second-language knowledge) has been found to account for about 50% of the variance in second-language reading assessment results (Bernhardt, 1991; Brantmeier, 2005). The remaining 50% has not yet been explained fully; nonetheless, several authors have indicated that gender may play a role in how learners access and process an L2 passage. Research in this field has not reached a consensus; however, empirical studies have indicated that gender, along with type of reading comprehension selected (*i. e.,* essay, short story, history), and the assessment strategy (*i. e.,* recall, sentence completion, and multiple choice) are factors that contribute to L2 reading comprehension (Bügel & Buunk, 1996; Chavez, 2001; Brantmeier, 2003, 2004; Dornyei, 2005). This study represents an effort to build on these results and assess

the role of learners' gender, passage content, and strategy use in Spanish language reading at the intermediate-level.

## 2. Background theory and literature review

### 2.1. *Background knowledge and L2 reading*

Research on L2 reading has shown that the learner's background knowledge is partially linked to gender (Carrell & Wise, 1998), and significantly impacts how he/she processes reading material as well as his/her ability to construct meaning (Hudson, 1982; Carrell, 1983a, 1983b). This process involves the connection of new and old information where the reader "must allow the new information to enter and become part of their knowledge store" (Lee & VanPatten, 1995: 192). Researchers of L2 reading comprehension have explored the concept of background knowledge extensively (Koda, 2005; Hudson, 2007; Grabe, 2009), supporting the idea that topic familiarity has a facilitative role in reading comprehension. This role has been motivated through schema-based models of comprehension (*e. g.,* Rumelhart, 1980; Hudson, 2007; Nassaji, 2007), which state that each readers' background knowledge is a contributing factor to his/her understanding of texts. The nature of the knowledge that readers possess will influence not only what they remember of the text but also their understanding of the text, and the way they process it (Rumelhart, 1980; Carrell, 1984; Alderson, 2000; Hudson, 2007; Leeser, 2007; Nassaji, 2007). Research in this area of L2 reading originally focused on English as a Foreign Language (efl) and English as a Second Language (esl). These initial investigations indicate that the concept of content schemata is crucial to understanding L2 reading.

According to schema theory, background knowledge strongly impacts what the reader understands and processes when reading L2 materials. In this context, Bruning (1995) defined the term schemata as the mental organization of knowledge and the mental framework that learners create in order to organize knowledge. Furthermore, Hudson (1982) claimed that reading problems in L2 are caused when the learner activates the wrong schemata. Following this path of research, Bügel and Buunk (1996) found that schema theory may explain why different L2 texts can influence men and women in different manners. They argue that men and women have different interests; therefore, they read different types of texts,

which results in different schemata for men and women. In the same venue of research, Brantmeier (2004) found that gender is an important element affecting schemata in the process of L2 reading comprehension. The study used two authentic violence-oriented texts, and found that women outscored men in the text which involved male-to-female violence. Although she warns that it might be too strong of a claim, one possible reason is that female readers might become identified to a greater extent with the female victim and do better in the written recall. Based on the results obtained, all of these investigations seem to support the claim that more empirical studies on gender and L2 reading are needed to better understand how readers process and comprehend L2 texts.

## 2.2. *L2 reading and gender*

Few studies have investigated the role of gender on L2 reading comprehension, and they have obtained mixed results largely because these investigations were conducted with subjects at different proficiency levels in multiple languages. Some empirical investigations regarding the effects of gender on L2 reading have revealed that topic familiarity and passage content affect how women and men process an L2 text. For example, Bügel and Buunk (1996) conducted an L2 investigation in the Netherlands with high school students who have had three or more years of EFL. They found that men outperformed women on male-related topics, while women outperformed men on female-related topics. Brantmeier (2003) had the same results using two different reading passages with Spanish students at an intermediate-level. Furthermore, Ismail and Nadia (2010) found that men outperformed women on a gender-neutral passage. Al-Shumaimeri (2005, March) investigated gender differences with EFL students and she found that male students outperformed women on two multiple-choice tests. The subjects read a passage with a familiar topic and one with an unfamiliar topic. They also responded to pre-test and post-test surveys to evaluate their prior and post knowledge of the two topics presented in the readings. After each passage, they completed a 10 item comprehension multiple-choice test. Finally, Peart and Barrett (2013) found that women outperformed men on male-oriented and female-oriented passages using a written recall assessment. However, men outperformed women on the gender-neutral passage. Learners were in their fifth semester of Spanish and Peart and Barrett used literary texts in their study.

Other investigations found that women perform better than men regarding L2 reading. Schueller (1999) found higher reading comprehension scores among women studying German at an intermediate-level in comparison to men regardless of strategic training and comprehension assessment. Brantmeier (2004) examined passages with minimal gender-related differences with students learning Spanish at the intermediate-level and found that women performed better than men on written recall tasks. Keshavarz and Ashtarian (2008) showed that female and male EFL intermediate learners differ in L2 reading comprehension ability, with women performing better than men. Subjects were given two tests: the Test of English as a Foreign Language and a reading comprehension test on three types of texts: history, essay, and short story. Women outperformed men on both tests.

On the other hand, empirical studies reveal no difference between women and men regarding L2 reading. For example, Brantmeier (2002) reported no significant differences between genders in the comprehension of two passages, one female-oriented and the other male-oriented, with advanced students of Spanish. Consistently, Young and Oxford (1997) found similar results in textual recall ability between genders in intermediate-level Spanish across a variety of gender-neutral topics such as economics, foreign cultures, and history. Finally, Shokouhi and Parvaresh (2010) found no significant difference between male and female high school and pre-university students in the comprehension of two gender-neutral authentic and non-authentic expository texts.

Among the aforementioned empirical investigations, eight found some relationship between L2 reading and gender. The fact that the results were mixed suggests that gender remains an important variable to consider when investigating L2 reading comprehension. While gender alone does not predict comprehension, the studies mentioned above suggest that gender and passage content may have an impact on comprehension. Furthermore, the general trend is for women to outperform men.

## 2.3. *Research on gender and language learning strategies*

The relationship between gender and language learning strategies (LLS) has been the focus of L1 and L2 research. Ehrlich (2001) argues that female superiority in L1 acquisition had a strong impact in the L2 acquisition field based on research that shows female superiority.

Research in the area of LLS has shown a strong relationship between learners' gender and LLS use, namely, that female students use a wider range of strategies than men. For example, Ehrman and Oxford (1988) reported that women use certain strategies (*i. e.,* general study strategies, functional practice, strategies for searching and communicating meaning, and self-management strategies) more frequently than men. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) argued that female students use more formal, rule-based strategies, general study strategies and conventional input-elicitation strategies than men. Bacon and Finnemann (1992) reported that female students have higher levels of strategy use than men. In the context of learning Japanese, Oxford (1993) reported that female students demonstrated higher levels of strategy use than men. In Palestine, Kalil (2005) conducted a study of strategies use and gender at high school level. The results reveal that female students preferred the use of social-affective strategies while men did not.

Other empirical studies reveal rather different results. In some cases, no difference in strategy use between women and men was reported, or men outperformed women in the use of certain strategies. For example, Young and Oxford (1997) investigated strategy use by men and women in L1 (English) and L2 (Spanish) settings. They found no significant differences in strategy use in L2 reading comprehension. Phakiti (2003) compared the strategy use of university students learning English in Thailand. He found no significant difference between men and women. However, men reported a slightly higher use of metacognitive strategies than women. Bacon and Finnemann (1992) reported that men use translation more often as a learning strategy than women. Liyanage (2004) also reported that men prefer translation as a learning strategy. Liyanage and Bartlett (2012) investigated the use of learning strategies with Sri Lankan learners of ESL. They found that some strategies were clearly preferred by men while others were clearly preferred by women. Yazdanpanah (2007) obtained similar results regarding strategy use and L2 reading, where the overall performance of men and women on a reading test was not significant. Nevertheless, the findings of the study reveal that men and women performed differently on particular test items. Women scored higher in main idea identification, guessing meaning from context, and text coherence questions. Men outperformed women in reading for specific information, identifying referential information, and matching titles with paragraphs.

The results of strategy use in different learning contexts (not only in L2 reading comprehension) have shown mixed results. Some studies reveal the typical

outcome from literature where women outperform men. However, other studies show that men use a greater range of metacognitive strategies or they report no difference in strategy use between women and men.

## 2.4. *Research on reading comprehension strategies*

More specifically in the realm of reading comprehension, research on strategy use has proven to be a complex endeavor. The first obstacle has been to define the term strategy; Abbott (2006: 636) clearly states the challenges associated with this task: "The very concept of strategy is difficult to define, observe, measure, describe and classify." However, based on previous research (Hosenfeld, 1977; Alderson, 1984; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998), she offers a definition of the term strategy as "the mental processes or behaviors that language learners employ in L2 acquisition, L2 use, or L2 testing simulation" (Abbott, 2006: 637). More specifically in the context of reading comprehension, she defines strategies as "mental operations or comprehension processes that readers select and apply in order to make sense of what they read" (Abbott, 2006: 637). In general, strategies are considered to be conscious acts, therefore, open to self-examination (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986; Abbott, 2006).

Reading researchers usually divide reading comprehension strategies into two major categories: cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The former help the reader in constructing meaning from a given text; the later function to regulate or monitor cognitive strategies (Flavell, 1981; Devine, 1993). In our study we are going to concentrate on cognitive strategies.

Studies in L1 and L2 reading comprehension provide a binary classification of cognitive strategies into bottom-up and top-down categories (*e. g.*, Block, 1986; Carell, 1989; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993). According to Aebersold and Field (1997), by using bottom-up strategies, readers start processing information at the sentence level. They focus on identifying the meaning and grammatical category of a word or sentence syntax. Bottom-up strategies are local and language-based, they focus primarily on text details that are related to lower level cues in a passage, for example: breaking words into smaller parts, using knowledge of syntactic structures or punctuation, scanning for specific details, looking for key vocabulary or phrases. As the reader process this information, they use top-down strategies to check how this information is related to the whole text by checking background knowledge,

trying to make predictions, or skimming the text (Barnett, 1988; Carrell, 1989). Top-down strategies are global and knowledge-based reading strategies, and are generally associated with attending to higher level cues in text which the reader is processing. Examples of top-down strategies are: recognizing the main idea, integrating scattered information, making an inference, making predictions or recognizing the text structure.

This standard classification of reading comprehension strategies appear in several studies associated with reading comprehension and strategy use within this field, and we will follow it in our study (see Block, 1986; Carrell, 1989; Pritchard, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Purpura, 1997; Young & Oxford, 1997; Phakiti, 2003; Schueller, 2004; and Abbott, 2006).

Research on reading comprehension strategy use generally shows that skilled readers tend to use more strategies than less skilled readers (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). Furthermore, Carrell (1989) found a negative correlation between bottom-up reading strategies and reading performance. Advanced readers in his study seemed to use more top-down strategies, where lower level tended to use more bottom-up strategies. A number of empirical studies show the connection between increased reading strategy use and skilled reading among L2 learners. For instance, Zhang (2001) found that lower-level L2 readers used fewer strategies than those who were more proficient in the target language. Low-level readers used bottom-up strategies such as using the dictionary and analyzing sentence-level grammar, which are language-based strategies. In contrast, skilled readers frequently used skimming strategies, predicting meaning, and comprehension monitoring, which are more global and knowledge-based reading strategies. A number of studies using strategy inventories with English language learners have also found significant strategy use differences between more proficient and less proficient readers, where better readers tend to be more active strategy users (see Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008; Sheorey, Kamimura & Freiermuth, 2008). In terms of reading strategies and gender, most empirical studies reveal that women tend to be superior strategy users than men. Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) conducted an investigation with ESL students who completed the Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS). The results of this investigation indicate that there was only one individual strategy in which there was gender difference, with women scoring higher. Similarly, Poole (2005) conducted a study with ESL students who completed the SORS; results show that overall women reported using significantly more strategies than

men. In a similar study, Sheorey's (2006) results reveal that overall women used more strategies than men. Finally, Sheorey and Baboczy (2008) used the same instrument with Hungarian college students, and obtained similar results where women outperformed men on strategy use.

## 3. The present study

This study extends on previous studies to assess the role of gender in L2 Spanish language reading, specifically building on the findings of Brantmeier (2003), Yazdanpanah (2007), Ismail and Nadia (2010), and Peart and Barrett (2013). The selection of three reading passages (one male-oriented passage, one female-oriented passage and one gender-neutral) were motivated by the aforementioned studies. The criteria followed for the classification of these passages was based on the aforementioned studies and it was first introduced by Bügel and Buunk (1996).

### 3.1. *Research questions*

The first objective of this study is to investigate the effects of university level learners' gender and passage content on Spanish L2 reading comprehension at the intermediate-level. The second objective is to explore the impact of gender on comprehension strategies that L2 learners use when reading a Spanish text. The research questions (RQ) are:

RQ1: Does gender affect L2 reading comprehension?
RQ2: Does passage content (female-oriented, male-oriented and gender-neutral) affect L2 reading comprehension?
RQ3: Does gender affect strategy use for L2 reading comprehension?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. *Participants*

A total of 85 students, 63 women and 22 men, participated in the study. The students were enrolled in four groups of Intermediate Spanish at a private university in the southeastern United States. This course is the last of a three-course series

that students take in order to meet lower-level Spanish requirements. Students in these classes are typically at the intermediate-low/intermediate-mid level of proficiency according to ACTFL standards (A2 in the CEFR). Each class meets for fifty minutes three times per week or an hour and twenty minutes twice a week. Four groups of this course participated in the study and they were taught by three native speakers of Spanish, one from Colombia and two from Mexico.

## 4.2. *Selected reading passages*

Three reading passages were chosen. The passages were similar in difficulty and length to those introduced throughout the course; they were not authentic texts but simplified texts as defined by Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy, and McNamara (2007). The topics of the readings were controlled so as to have a traditionally male-oriented, a female-oriented, and a neutral gender orientation. All three passages were from the *¡Anda!* (Heinning-Boynton & Cowell, 2013) textbook: "Los deportes en el mundo hispano" [Sports in the Hispanic World], "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica" [Malls in Latin America], and "¿Dónde viven los españoles?" [Where do Spaniards live?]. "Los deportes en el mundo hispano" gives an overall view of the sports that are practiced in Latin America, a traditionally male-oriented topic. "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica" deals with the emergence of malls and the new trends this is creating, a traditionally female-oriented topic. "¿Dónde viven los españoles?" describes the kind of housing found in Spain, a gender-neutral orientation topic. The classification of male-oriented, female-oriented and neutral was based on Bügel & Buunk's (1996) study and on subsequent studies which applied the same criteria for this classification (see Brantmeier, 2002, 2003, 2004; Yazdanpanah, 2007; Ismail & Nadia, 2010; and Peart & Barrett, 2013). All three passages had similar conceptual density, extension and organization; they were formatted using the same font to give them a similar appearance.

## 4.3. *Reading comprehension tests*

Reading comprehension is affected by the type of test used (Liu, 2009). It has been found that multiple-choice and true-false questions tend to be the easiest (Shohamy, 1984; Wolf, 1993), and fill-in-the blank and open-ended questions to be the hardest (Samson, 1983; Liu, 1998). In an attempt to control for this effect, two types

of tests were used, a multiple-choice and an open-ended written recall. According to Bernhardt (1986), the open-ended written recall assessment is the purest measure of L2 reading comprehension and does not influence the reader's comprehension because there are no retrieval cues provided. It is also considered "the most straightforward assessment" (Johnston, 1983: 54). By not having multiple-choice or fill in the blank questions, learners are not limited to specific information over the text. They are encouraged to write all ideas. For these reasons, the written recall was chosen as one of the assessments, and it was the first one to be administered.

After reading each passage, students completed the written recall, a multiple-choice section, and a survey to examine reading strategies. All three assessments were done in English, the students' native language. Written-recall is a common assessment modality used to measure reading comprehension (Lee, 1986; Riley & Lee, 1996). In the written-recall for this study, participants were encouraged to write down as many details as they remembered about the text.

After the written-recall, the student had to answer ten multiple-choice questions over the reading passage. Special attention was given in the design of these items to avoid incidentally providing information that could be used to answer any of the multiple-choice questions.

4.4. *Reading strategy survey*

While reading, the best readers use certain specific strategies (Alderson, 1984; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). These strategies include the use of background knowledge to interpret texts, appraising comprehension as they read (Pressley & Afflerback, 1995), and identifying contradictions and inconsistencies in textual understanding. Hence, after reading each passage and doing the written-recall and multiple-choice assessments, students were asked to answer 11 statements about strategy use. Each statement was based on a 5 point Likert scale and learners responded to each statement on a scale of one to five—one being complete disagreement with the statement and five being complete agreement with the statement. The instrument used in this study was previously used by Peart and Barrett (2013) where they investigated the strategy use on native speakers of English who were learning Spanish in an advanced Latin American culture course. The survey contained 11 items with a combination of bottom-up (*e. g.*, focusing on cognates / word families, rereading, translate, and attention to text structure), and top-down items

(*e. g.*, skimming, inference, prior knowledge, separate main ideas from supporting details). Although there are other more detailed instruments to survey readers about their strategy use (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Liyanage & Bartlett 2012), time constraints regarding the institution where the study was conducted determined that the researchers used a more abbreviated version of the instrument for this study.

## 4.5. *Procedures*

Participants were asked to complete a formal consent form agreeing to participate in the study. Although these activities were part of the course work, the researchers explained to students that they could refuse to give permission to use their results in the study without penalty to their grade. In order to diminish or eliminate teacher-student pressure, the evaluation was conducted by another professor. After the participants completed the consent form, they were given a package that contained each passage, followed by the written recall, multiple-choice questions and strategy statements. The order of the passages was randomly selected. Before students started, they were given specific instructions not to return to the passage once they flipped the page. After reading a passage, writing as many details in the written recall, answering the multiple-choice and strategy statements, students were presented with the same order of tasks for the second and third passages. There were no other class activities on the day of the study.

The investigation was conducted during one regular class session at the end of the term. One of the researchers was present at all times and the instructions were the same for all participants. The multiple-choice section was scored according to correct responses, with one point awarded for each correct answer. There were 10 multiple-choice questions for each reading passage, therefore, a maximum of 10 points were possible for each multiple-choice task. The written recall assessment was scored using Riley and Lee's (1996) criteria to identify each "unit of analysis," the unit of analysis may be an idea or a proposition. In order to score the written recalls, we followed the authors' criteria in order to identify idea units in the passages. One point was awarded for each idea, whether it was literal and inferred, following Brantmeier (2003). Two researchers scored the written-recall for each student separately, and when there was a disparity, a third researcher was called in to score and make a final decision.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. *Data analysis procedures used*

a) Descriptive statistics on the performance of women and men for each of the 3 passages included in this study.
b) *T-test* to compare the mean value of women and men for each of the 3 passages, and for the 2 assessment instruments utilized in the study.
c) Descriptive statistics for the strategies used by women and men in each of the 3 passages.
d) *T-test* to compare the strategy used by women and men in regards of each of the 3 passages used in this study.

### 5.2. *Reading recall*

For the three passages, "Los deportes en el mundo hispano", "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica", and "¿Dónde viven los españoles?" women recalled a mean of 8.78, 8.78 and 8.67 ideas for each text respectively. Men recalled fewer ideas in all passages with a mean of 7.45, 5.68, and 7.45 respectively. The difference between means was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level for all three stories, with a $p$-value of 0.0239, 0.0021, 0.0049, respectively. Table 1 shows a summary of all results on the reading recall assessment.

Table 1. Reading recall scores

|  | $n$ | $M$ | $SD$ | $p$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LOS DEPORTES |  |  |  | 0.0239 |
| Men | 22 | 7.45 | 2.11 |  |
| Women | 63 | 8.78 | 2.74 |  |
| LOS CENTROS |  |  |  | 0.0021 |
| Men | 22 | 5.68 | 4.10 |  |
| Women | 63 | 8.78 | 4.18 |  |
| DÓNDE VIVEN |  |  |  | 0.0049 |
| Men | 22 | 7.45 | 1.71 |  |
| Women | 63 | 8.67 | 2.09 |  |

## 5.3. *Multiple choice*

Similar to the results in the reading recall, two of the three mean scores on the multiple choice assessment were statistically significant. Nevertheless, for the only story with no statistically significant differences in mean score, "Los deportes del mundo hispano," women scored slightly higher with a mean of 7.86, while men obtained a mean of 7.45.

Women outscored men on "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica," with a mean of 8.30 versus 7.27 for men (*p*-value of 0.0009). Women also outscored men on "¿Dónde viven los españoles?" with a mean of 8.78 versus 8.27 (*p*-value of 0.0439). Table 2 shows a summary of all results on the multiple choice assessment.

TABLE 2. Multiple choice scores

| | *n* | *M* | *SD* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LOS DEPORTES | | | | 0.0670 |
| Men | 22 | 7.45 | 1.06 | |
| Women | 63 | 7.86 | 1.08 | |
| LOS CENTROS | | | | 0.0009 |
| Men | 22 | 7.27 | 1.16 | |
| Women | 63 | 8.30 | 1.52 | |
| DÓNDE VIVEN | | | | 0.0439 |
| Men | 22 | 8.27 | 1.20 | |
| Women | 63 | 8.78 | 1.02 | |

## 5.4. *Reading strategies*

The study showed that women and men used some particular reading strategies more often than others. Notably, strategy use varied depending on the reading passage as well.

For the male-oriented passage, "Los deportes en el mundo hispano," women scored higher than men on the following strategies: relying on cognates, rereading, guessing from context, making inferences, identifying the main idea, using background knowledge, translating into English, and identifying text organization. On the other hand, men scored higher than women on the following strategies: skimming, predicting actions, and thinking in Spanish, with the result on predicting actions to be significant at the 95% confidence level (*p*-value of 0.0414). This

means that men performed significantly better at predicting what was coming next in the passage than women. Table 3 shows a summary of all results on the strategy use for the male-oriented passage "Los deportes en el mundo hispano".

Similar results were obtained for the female-oriented passage "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica." Women scored higher than men on the following strategies: relying on cognates, rereading, predicting actions, making inferences, identifying the main idea, using background knowledge, translating into English, thinking in Spanish, identifying text organization, with the results on making inferences, identifying the main idea, translating into English, and identifying text organization to be significant at the 95% confidence level (*p*-value of 0.0186, 0.0101, 0.0183, 0.0181, respectively). Men obtained higher scores on the following strategies: skimming, and guessing from context. However, the difference was not statistically significant. Table 4 shows a summary of all results on the strategy use for the female-oriented passage "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica".

The gender-neutral text "¿Dónde viven los españoles?" rendered similar results to those already reported. Women scored higher than men on the following strategies: rereading, making inferences, identifying the main idea, using background knowledge, translating into English, and identifying text organization; with the result on translating into English to be significant with a *p*-value of 0.0402. Men outperformed women on the following strategies: skimming, relying on cognates, guessing from context, predicting, and thinking in Spanish; with the result on skimming to be significant with a *p*-value of 0.0207. Table 5 shows a summary of all results on the strategy use for the neutral-oriented passage, "¿Dónde viven los españoles?"

This study reveals that in all 3 passages, women scored higher than men on the following strategies: rereading, making inferences, identifying the main idea, using background knowledge, translating into English, and identifying text organization. From these results, it seems that women use a greater variety of cognitive strategies to comprehend an L2 text.

On the other hand, out of all 3 passages, men scored higher on one strategy: skimming. It is important to note, however, that men scored higher than women on the male-oriented passage, and on the neutral-passage on the following strategies: predicting and thinking in Spanish. These results show that, at least in this case, men used a more limited number of strategies when accessing an L2 text while women used a wide variety of strategies, with statistically significant differences favoring women on both written recall task and multiple choice questions.

TABLE 3. Reading strategies scores for reading passage "Los deportes en el mundo hispano"

| | n | M | SD | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKIM PASSAGE | | | | 0.3405 |
| Men | 22 | 2.91 | 1.27 | |
| Women | 63 | 2.78 | 1.31 | |
| RELY ON COGNATES | | | | 0.4273 |
| Men | 22 | 3.95 | 1.00 | |
| Women | 63 | 4.00 | 0.98 | |
| READ AGAIN | | | | 0.2595 |
| Men | 22 | 3.73 | 1.32 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.94 | 1.24 | |
| GUESS CONTEXT | | | | 0.3334 |
| Men | 22 | 4.23 | .69 | |
| Women | 19 | 4.30 | .71 | |
| PREDICT THE ACTION | | | | 0.0414 |
| Men | 22 | 3.32 | 1.17 | |
| Women | 63 | 2.81 | 1.09 | |
| MAKE INFERENCES | | | | 0.4295 |
| Men | 22 | 3.64 | 1.09 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.68 | 0.88 | |
| IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS | | | | 0.0930 |
| Men | 22 | 3.36 | 1.14 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.73 | 0.97 | |
| USE BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE | | | | 0.2701 |
| Men | 22 | 3.18 | 1.22 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.37 | 1.13 | |
| TRANSLATE TO ENGLISH | | | | 0.1875 |
| Men | 22 | 4.45 | 0.67 | |
| Women | 63 | 4.60 | 0.66 | |
| THINK IN SPANISH | | | | 0.3589 |
| Men | 24 | 2.64 | 1.26 | |
| Women | 19 | 2.52 | 1.23 | |
| NOTE TEXT ORGANIZATION | | | | 0.1030 |
| Men | 22 | 3.27 | 1.16 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.63 | 1.05 | |

TABLE 4. Reading strategies scores for reading passage "Los centros comerciales en Latinoamérica"

| | n | M | SD | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKIM PASSAGE | | | | 0.4274 |
| Men | 22 | 3.09 | 1.27 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.03 | 1.38 | |
| RELY ON COGNATES | | | | 0.1858 |
| Men | 22 | 3.73 | 0.94 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.94 | 0.93 | |
| READ AGAIN | | | | 0.2463 |
| Men | 22 | 3.73 | 1.20 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.94 | 1.27 | |
| GUESS CONTEXT | | | | 0.4889 |
| Men | 22 | 4.22 | 0.69 | |
| Women | 19 | 4.23 | 0.85 | |
| PREDICT THE ACTION | | | | 0.1742 |
| Men | 22 | 2.36 | 1.26 | |
| Women | 63 | 2.65 | 1.11 | |
| MAKE INFERENCES | | | | 0.0186 |
| Men | 22 | 2.86 | 1.28 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.52 | 1.05 | |
| IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS | | | | 0.0101 |
| Men | 22 | 2.86 | 1.32 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.62 | 0.99 | |
| USE BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE | | | | 0.0880 |
| Men | 22 | 2.71 | 1.13 | |
| Women | 63 | 2.32 | 1.25 | |
| TRANSLATE TO ENGLISH | | | | 0.0183 |
| Men | 22 | 4.09 | 0.87 | |
| Women | 63 | 4.54 | 0.71 | |
| THINK IN SPANISH | | | | 0.3691 |
| Men | 24 | 2.36 | 1.14 | |
| Women | 19 | 2.46 | 1.23 | |
| NOTE TEXT ORGANIZATION | | | | 0.0181 |
| Men | 22 | 2.91 | 1.31 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.59 | 1.09 | |

TABLE 5. Reading strategies scores for reading passage "¿Dónde viven los españoles?"

| | n | M | SD | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SKIM PASSAGE | | | | 0.0207 |
| Men | 22 | 2.86 | 0.99 | |
| Women | 63 | 2.30 | 1.32 | |
| RELY ON COGNATES | | | | 0.4879 |
| Men | 22 | 3.86 | 0.83 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.36 | 0.95 | |
| READ AGAIN | | | | 0.1961 |
| Men | 22 | 3.55 | 1.22 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.81 | 1.26 | |
| GUESS CONTEXT | | | | 0.313 |
| Men | 22 | 4.14 | 1.13 | |
| Women | 19 | 4.00 | 1.06 | |
| PREDICT THE ACTION | | | | 0.4402 |
| Men | 22 | 3.00 | 1.35 | |
| Women | 63 | 2.95 | 1.11 | |
| MAKE INFERENCES | | | | 0.4178 |
| Men | 22 | 3.68 | 0.95 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.73 | 0.90 | |
| IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS | | | | 0.1557 |
| Men | 22 | 3.55 | 1.01 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.79 | 0.86 | |
| USE BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE | | | | 0.1071 |
| Men | 22 | 3.05 | 1.50 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.49 | 1.19 | |
| TRANSLATE TO ENGLISH | | | | 0.0402 |
| Men | 22 | 4.45 | 0.74 | |
| Women | 63 | 4.76 | 0.50 | |
| THINK IN SPANISH | | | | 0.2348 |
| Men | 24 | 2.55 | 1.41 | |
| Women | 19 | 2.30 | 1.16 | |
| NOTE TEXT ORGANIZATION | | | | 0.0884 |
| Men | 22 | 3.14 | 1.21 | |
| Women | 63 | 3.54 | 1.10 | |

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. *rq1: Does learner gender affect L2 reading comprehension?*

### 6.1.1. Recall scores

The results of this study revealed that women were better than men regarding the written recall in all three stories. Women outperformed men in the male-oriented passage, in the female-oriented passage and in the gender-neutral passage revealing statistically significant differences in each case ($p = 0.0239$, $0.0021$, $0.0049$). These results are consistent with those obtained by Schueller (1999); Brantmeier (2003, 2004); Keshavarz and Ashtarian (2008); Ismail and Nadia (2010), and Peart and Barrett (2013). In all these empirical investigations the researchers found that women performed better than men on recall tasks. In addition, our results follow the general trend in second language acquisition, whereby women usually perform better than men regarding foreign language learning (Chavez, 2001).

### 6.1.2. Multiple choice scores

Multiple choice scores are similar to those obtained for written recall. Women outscored men in all three passages, but there were statistically significant differences between genders in mean scores for two of the three passages. On the male-oriented passage, women scored slightly higher than men, 7.86 versus 7.45, but the result was not statistically significant. This is consistent with the results obtained by Keshavarz and Ashtanian (2008), who found that women scored higher than men in overall tasks. On the female-oriented passage, women outperformed men, and the difference was statistically significant. This is also consistent with Brantmeier's (2003) results in which women performed better than men on the female-oriented text.

On the gender-neutral passage, women outscored men, and the difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. This result contradicts those obtained by Ismail and Nadia (2010) where men outperformed women on the gender-neutral passage. Overall, our results, which found that women scored higher than men, agree with previous research, which found that women generally score

higher on L2 reading comprehension assessments (*e. g.*, Schueller, 1999; Chavez, 2001; Brantmeier, 2003, 2004; Yazdanpanah, 2007; Keshavarz & Ashtorian, 2008).

## 6.2. *RQ2: Does passage content (female-oriented, male-oriented and neutral) affect L2 reading comprehension?*

As discussed in research question one, female performance on comprehension tasks was better than male performance. These results suggest that at the intermediate-level of Spanish instruction, women *may* perform better than men on written recall tasks and on multiple choice tasks regarding L2 reading. These results seem to support the findings of Young and Oxford (1997) and Yazdanpanah (2007) who claimed that passage content does not influence one gender over the other. Nevertheless, the results are contradictory to Bügel and Buunk (1996) and Brantmeier (2002, 2003, 2004), who argued that gender interacts with L2 reading comprehension at the intermediate-level. Notably, our study follows the design and theoretical framework of Brantmeier's (2002, 2003, 2004) previous studies. However, those of Yazdanpanah (2007), Young and Oxford (1997), Bügel and Buunk (1996) are different in terms of target language of the study, population and methodological design. Therefore, comparison is limited in those cases.

In our study, women outperformed men in all passages regardless if passages were female-oriented, male-oriented or neutral, which in this case seems to indicate that the topic of the passage was not a key factor for learners' comprehension of these texts. However, notably, the only passage where women score slightly higher, without statistically significant differences favoring women, was the male-oriented passage "Los deportes del mundo hispano" in the multiple choice test.

## 6.3. *RQ3: Does learner gender affect strategy use for L2 reading comprehension?*

The overall results of this study suggest that women show a higher level of strategy use at the intermediate-level of Spanish when accessing a text in the target language. Women scored higher than men on both written recall and multiple choice, using a wide range of strategies to access each passage and extract its meaning. These results seem to indicate that learner gender affects strategy use for L2 reading comprehension, confirming research findings in foreign language

learning investigations which argue that gender differences play a role in strategy use. These findings support the results obtained by Yazdanpanah (2007) and Liyanage and Bartlett (2012), where women show a greater use of strategies to access an L2 reading passage. In fact, women use a combination of top-down (identifying the main idea, using background knowledge), and bottom-up strategies (rereading, translating into English and identifying text organization). Women used a combination of local, language-based reading strategies that permitted them to understand details of each passage, but paying attention to lower-level cues did not prevent them from understanding each passage. On the contrary, they were able to use this information and achieve a more global understanding of the passages. While processing information provided by each sentence and keywords, female readers were able to check how all this information fitted together. Men, on the other hand, used more top-down strategies, such as skimming, predicting actions, and thinking in Spanish. Although men were able to get the essence of the texts, they were not able to obtain and process more detailed information, which was reflected in the scores of all assessments.

The results of this study seem to indicate that women use more strategies to access an L2 passage than men. This outcome brings to our attention the fact that gender differences, as Liyanage and Bartlett (2012) have indicated in their study, reside not only in the strategies that women and men use more often as foreign language learners, but also on the metaprocess by which men and women decide on what strategy works in certain situations. This invites one to consider the relationship between how cognitive and metacognitive strategies relate to one another. However, this investigation did not involve metacognitive strategies: our study focused only on cognitive strategies and not on the process of regulating and monitoring cognitive strategies. Nevertheless, it is important to note that more research needs to be devoted to studying how men and women process L2 passages at different proficiency levels and the strategies they use in order to access and comprehend these passages.

## 7. Conclusions

This study shows that women outperformed men on multiple choice and recall assessments when reading an L2 passage. On the recall task, women outperformed men on all three passages showing statistically significant differences. Similarly,

in the multiple choice task, women outscored men on the three passages. However, the results showed significant differences only on the female-oriented passage and on the gender-neutral passage.

These results suggest that gender *may* have an impact on L2 reading comprehension at the intermediate-level of Spanish instruction, which follows the general trend in second language acquisition, whereby women usually perform better than men in learning a foreign language (Chavez, 2001).

This investigation also reveals that the strategies that men and women use to comprehend an L2 passage are different. Women were found to be more skillful than men at using top-down and bottom-up strategies to process all three passages; they show a wider range of strategies to access all passages. Our results seem to indicate that strategy use varies by gender at the intermediate-level of Spanish language proficiency. Therefore, it is crucial to continue researching on the role and impact of gender on L2 reading in similar and different contexts and proficiency levels.

Based on the overall results of our investigation, we suggest that at the intermediate-level of Spanish, women *may* be better readers than men. These results have important implications for teaching students to read in Spanish at this level. For example, teachers should introduce both top-down and bottom-up reading strategies and teach how to apply them when reading an L2 passage. Moreover, foreign language teachers should show a wide range of strategies to access an L2 passage to those students who are not successful readers or are not consciously aware of what type of strategies they may use when reading an L2 passage. Instructors should help learners identify which strategies work best and encourage learners to use these strategies when reading. Good readers use repertoires of strategies in combination rather than overusing single strategies. In this study, women used a combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies which proved to be successful, while men seem to overuse a small number of top-down strategies. This difference in strategy use could be due to proficiency variation. Possibly, women were more proficient Spanish speakers than men; therefore, more skilled Spanish readers. However, this study did not control for that factor. Although students enrolled in the course where the study took place are at the intermediate-level of proficiency, perhaps women are at the upper range of the intermediate proficiency and men at the lower range. Future studies should take this variable into consideration. Nevertheless, whatever the reason for these differences, it is interesting to note that

the results of this study are in line with other empirical investigations (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Poole, 2005; Sheorey, 2006 and Sheorey & Baboczky, 2008) in which researchers reported that women used more reading strategies than men. This suggests that women *may* be more strategic readers regardless of their L2 proficiency level.

An interesting approach in reading comprehension is to consider strategy training during the semester while new texts are presented. This would most definitely improve L2 reading and second language acquisition as a whole. Significantly, teachers should take time to find out whether their students are aware of the reading strategies that they use to comprehend a variety of texts. For example, Poole (2009) suggests to informally administer strategy surveys to determine the extent to which students are conscious of the type of strategies they use with each text, how they use them and if they do it successfully. Students could make a list with the most and least frequent strategies they use, and share it in pairs discussing their results. A classroom discussion of this sort could help students become more aware of strategies of which they were previously unaware, or of new strategies previously unknown to them; and how to implement different strategies in particular contexts. Modeling strategic behavior for L2 readers is a key component in strategic training. In this way, learners think about the mental processes they use while they read, identifying which strategies "work" better for them under specific contexts. This is the first step in raising awareness of what it means to be a strategic reader. The survey used in this study or other more detailed (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2012) could be a conversation starter. However, it is important to note that instructors should teach strategies over an entire semester, not just in a single lesson or unit, allowing strategic instruction to permeate the whole foreign language curriculum from lower level to upper level of instruction. As Mokhtari and Sheorey state: "skilled readers do not get that way over night. They learn how to become strategic by engaging in reading over long periods of time, with lots of different texts, and with lots of opportunities to practice" (2008: 224).

Besides strategic training, instructors should introduce a wide range of topics in L2 texts. Having a variety of themes ensures that both women and men will be interested and become engaged in the process of reading. By looking at this study's results, at first glance, passage content might not be important, since women outperformed men in all passages. However, other empirical studies discussed in this article have argued that passage content is still important to improve

reading comprehension. Until more research in this area is conducted, instructors should present a variety of L2 texts that appeal to both women and men. In terms of assessments, instructors need to use a combination of multiple-choice and open ended / written recall tests to avoid gender bias.

Finally, instructors should aid learners in identifying the strategies they use when accessing L1 texts and transfer those that are effective to L2. Learners already have strategies that they use in their L1 reading, but they may not be cognizant of them. A short discussion about these strategies can make learners aware that they already have and use strategies when confronted with a text. Talking about these before being introduced to an L2 text will make students more conscious and hopefully help them transfer these strategies to their L2 reading.

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## 9. Appendix

*Strategy use survey*

Read the statements and answer indicating in what degree they represent you.

**1** = I completely disagree with the statement        **5** = I completely agree with the statement

1. I skimmed the passage to get a general idea about it.
         1          2          3          4          5

2. I relied in cognate and word families to understand the reading passage.
         1          2          3          4          5

3. I read the passage several times to be able to understand it.
         1          2          3          4          5

4. I read the text and guessed within the context when I was not able to understand.
         1          2          3          4          5

5. While I was reading, I was able to predict what was going to happen in the story.
         1          2          3          4          5

6. While I was reading, I was able to make inferences from the passages.
         1          2          3          4          5

7. I was able to separate main ideas from supporting ideas.
         1          2          3          4          5

8. I had background knowledge, that helped me understand the passage better.
         1          2          3          4          5

9. While I was reading I tried to translate each paragraph into English to understand what was going on.
         1          2          3          4          5

10. I tried to "think in Spanish" all the time to understand what was going on.
         1          2          3          4          5

11. I paid attention to the organization of the text, including quotation and paragraph breaks.
         1          2          3          4          5