

## Iraqi EFL Learners' Ability in Figuring out Inferring Questions in Literary Texts

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### Abstract

It is clear that reading is an essential skill that is needed in the context of teaching/learning a foreign language. For that, literary texts are often included in EFL curriculum. This study is set out to find out whether Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in inferring literary texts exploring the problems and difficulties encountered by them. Therefore, the researchers' intention in conducting the current study is to bring these problems and difficulties into focus of evaluation as much as possible to provide evidence of how language is learned which would hopefully help EFL teachers in their task. For that, 200 EFL secondary school pupils were set as the participants for the present study. They were set to a written test including a number of inferential questions as well as literal ones. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS program. The results confirmed that the participants do face problems in inferring literary texts and that it is more difficult for them to answer inferential questions than the literal one. More over the study found that both male and female are equal in their ability to infer literary texts.

**Key words:** EFL learners, inferring literary texts, difficulties in reading, literal questions, inferential questions.

### 1. Introduction

Different types of literary texts are involved into a language teaching environment in many ways for secondary classes, and literary texts are not given much time to practice (Nunan, 2001:249). Moreover; foreign language readers/learners are generally not qualified in linguistic skills and have limited vocabulary bulk than do first language readers. They do not have an intuitive base in the components of another language and they lack the cultural knowledge that is needed in understanding literary texts (Scovel, 2001).

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The use of literary texts in EFL teaching issues are tackled by many writers Murcia (2001:188), for example, clarifies that the ability to read requires that the reader draws information from a text combining it with information and expectations that s/he already has. This interaction of information is a common way to explain reading. The current study intends primarily to raise the questions of the main difficulties that Iraqi secondary school pupils face in inferring literary texts. Consequently, the answers for the following questions are sought:

- 1- What are the difficulties in inferring literary text that the Iraqi EFL secondary school learners face?
- 2- Do Iraqi EFL secondary school students face more difficulties in answering inferential questions than in literal questions?
- 3- To what extent the learner's gender affects inferring literary texts?

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL secondary school learners do face difficulties and problems in inferring literary texts and that it is more difficult for them to answer inferential questions than literal question. Moreover, it is hypnotized that male students are more likely to face difficulties in this regard.

The present study is hoped to be of some value as it helps the teachers in this field to a clearer idea about the ability of EFL learners in inferring literary texts which would lead to butter achievement in the teaching/learning process. This study is limited to literary texts. The texts covered are taken from the textbook at the program “Exchanges”. It is also limited to Iraqi preparatory learners for the fifth stage during the academic year (2018/2019). For that, caution should be sought in making generalization of the results obtained.

To achieve the aims of the present study, a number of Iraqi secondary school students were randomly chosen. Then, an achievement test was constructed to collect the required data. The collected data were analyzed by using the SPSS proper statistical tools to obtain the results and to help reaching some conclusions and recommendations.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

Inferential comprehension is the ability to understand language in context and to fill in information that is not explicitly stated, i.e. it is the ability to read between the lines. Being able to do this successfully requires drawing on world knowledge, previous contextual experience and social scripts.

Leinonen and Letts (1997: 37) include inferential understanding under the umbrella of pragmatic comprehension as it involves going beyond linguistic comprehension to the integration of internal world knowledge, previous experiences and social scripts (i.e. what is said in certain situations) to be able to work out the possible intended meanings of the speaker. Trabasso and Magliano (1996:255), on the other hand, state that the function of verbal inferences is to fill in information that is not explicitly provided and to form connections amongst events in a text or conversation in order to enable comprehension of the overall meaning of the scenario.

Adams et al. (2001:132) describe inferential comprehension as an ‘above sentence level’ comprehension ability. This includes understanding of suprasegmental features of spoken language. Moreover, Ryder et al. (2008:427) define inference as “the integration of contextual information (via a reasoning process) and pragmatic demands in language comprehension to work out an intended meaning”. They call this ability ‘implicature’. Fielding and Pearson (2015:749) state that inferential comprehension requires the ability to understand each morpheme, word and sentence; to have a knowledge of the world; to take into account others’ knowledge, motivations and intentions; to understand expected social behavior; etc. Inferential comprehension is often described simply as the ability to read between the lines. It requires a reader to blend the literal content of a selection with prior knowledge, intuition, and imagination for conjecture or to make hypotheses.

Barrett’s Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension (1974) identifies eight subtasks which enable students to make inferences with facility:

- a) Inferring supporting details – guessing about additional facts the author could have included in the selection that would have made it more informative, interesting or appealing.
- b) Inferring the main idea – providing the main idea, general significance, theme, or moral that is not explicitly stated in the selection.
- c) Inferring sequence – guessing what action or incident might have taken place between two explicitly stated actions or incidents or making hypotheses about what could happen next, such as inferring comparisons – inferring likenesses and differences in characters, times, or places.
- d) Inferring cause-and-effect relationships – hypothesizing about the motives of characters and their interactions with others and with time and place.
- e) Inferring character traits – hypothesizing about the nature of characters on the basis of explicit clues presented in the selection.
- f) Predicting outcomes – guessing the outcome of a selection after reading an initial portion of it.

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- g) Inferring about figurative language – inferring literal meanings from the author’s figurative use of language.

Keene and Zimmerman (1997) state that when a proficient reader infers a text, s/h is able to draw conclusions from it making reasonable predictions as s/he reads, tests and revises those predictions as s/he reads further. Moreover, they highlight that a proficient reader is able to create dynamic interpretations of the texts that are adapted as s/he continues to read. Moreover, s/he can make a good use of the combination of background knowledge and explicitly stated information from the text to answer the questions that come into mind as s/he reads. They add that a proficient reader can make connections between the drawn conclusions and other beliefs or knowledge. Finally, Keen and Zimmerman notice that it is important for proficient readers to make critical or analytical judgments about what they read.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Population and Sample Selection**

The population of the present study includes 40 fifth grade preparatory school students in the city of Babylon in Iraq, during the academic year 2018-2019. The sample was 40 students who were randomly chosen. Both male and female students participated in the study; the number of the male students was 100 and the number of the female students was also 100. The students were randomly distributed over two sections which have been appointed to accomplish the purpose of the study. All the participants were equal in regard to their academic study and the number of the years of learning English as a foreign language. All of them were living in a similar context i.e. not one live in a foreign country.

### **3.2 Instruments**

A test was carefully designed to be used as the main instrument in the present study. It consists of two passages; each one is followed by 13 questions. Some of the questions are literal and others are inferential. The test was presented for 10 expert teachers in the field of TEFL and Applied Linguistics in order to examine its validity. After making some modifications and corrections it was confirmed to be a valid test.

The test's reliability was also examined by using Cronbach-Alpha value which was found to be 0.798 (See table 1 below).

Table1: The Cronbach-Alpha Value for the Test

	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of items
1 <sup>st</sup> passage	.706	.707	10
2 <sup>nd</sup> passage	.702	.702	10
Total	.889	.889	20

As the Cronbach-Alpha value is more than 0.7, the reliability of the test is also confirmed.

All the participants involved in the present study have been exposed to the test. The test material (the literary text) is adopted from the series of "Exchanges" – Intermediate level (2011). (See table 2):

Table 2: Distribution of Items of the Test

Passage	Literal items	Inferential items	Scores for each passage	Total score
A	7	6	13	26
B	6	7	13	

### 3.3. Data Analyses and Results

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The analyses of data are done using different statistical operations within SPSS software. Statistical description as well as independent samples t-test are run to get answers for the research questions. Regarding the first question which deals with finding out whether the participants do face problems in inferring literary texts, descriptive statistics was run. As mentioned before, the total items in the test were 26 items divided into 13 items in each of the two passages given in the test. Running the descriptive statistics it was found that the mean score was 27.52 out of 52 with a minimum score of 4 and maximum of 52, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the participants' total scores in the test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Both Literal & Inferential Q	200	4	52	27.52	12.770
Valid N (listwise)	200				

In order to have a clearer interpretation of the figures in the table above, (i.e. the students' total scores in the test) all the scores were transferred into 100. Accordingly, we can say that 97 of the total 200 participants (forming 48.5%) has passed the test scoring 50 or more out of 100, while 103 (forming 51.5%) have not managed to pass. This result indicates that the participants do face difficulty in inferring literary texts, which confirms our hypothesis.

In order to answer the second research question, i.e. to specify the types of questions which are more difficult for Iraqi EFL secondary school students, a descriptive statistics was run for inferential and literal questions separately. It was found that the mean score of the participants' response to the literal questions is 14.43, while it is 12.31 for their response to the inferential questions (See table 4):

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Total Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Letiral Q	200	2	26	14.43	6.346
Inferential Q	200	0	28	12.31	6.949

Valid N (listwise) 200

As shown in the table above, the participants have managed to get higher scores in the literal questions which lead to the conclusion that they are better in answering literal questions than in answering inferential questions.

As for the third research question which investigates whether there is any significant difference between male and female pupils in regard to their scores in the test, an independent sample t-test was run. It was found that there is no statistically significant difference between the scores of male and female pupils. The results of the independent sample t-test are given in table 5 below:

Table (5): An Independent Sample t-test for the male and female pupils

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference
Equal Variances assumed			1.523	198	.129	.886	
Equal variance not assumed	1.867	.173	1.523	197.034	.129	1.350	.886

In table (5) the Sig. value is to check whether the assumptions for this test are fulfilled. One of the most important assumptions is that the variance of the scores for the two groups under investigation (males and females) is the same. The outcome of the test leads us to correctly choose the t-values that SPSS provides. Since the Sig. value is larger than 0.05, the first line in the table (which refers to Equal variances assumed) is used. Now we notice the Sig. (2-tailed) value. As this value is above 0.05, we conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female pupils in regard to their ability to infer literary texts. In other words, gender has no effect on the Iraqi secondary school pupils' ability to infer literary texts.

## 5. Discussion

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The current study is set out to examine the Iraqi EFL secondary school pupils' ability to infer literary texts. The results designate that it is difficult for the participants to correctly infer literary texts. It is also found that inferential questions are more difficult for the participants to answer than literal questions. This result can be explained as follow: in answering literal questions the students mainly need to have a good vocabulary knowledge and good grammar, they can simply scan the literal texts to find the answers. While in answering inferential questions they need to have a good background related to the context of the literary texts and to be able to infer, depict, and conclude from the text, i.e. they should be able to understand the events, the characters' personality and the whole atmosphere and to guess the events that might happen and to explain the reasons for what the events in the literary text.

The findings of the present study support that though using literature in teaching English as a foreign language, literary text still form one of the most challenging issues for EFL learners, i.e. those who participate in his study. It is also found that understanding literary texts is of a noticeable difficulty for the participants in his study and that it should be taken an extreme attention both by EFL teachers and education authorities.

### **6. Conclusion**

The role of literature in TEFL has often been regarded as a basic component in the language curriculum. Its use is beneficial being authentic material that helps to enrich learners' language (Collie and Slater, 1990:3). In order to make the best investment of literary texts it is important to make sure that EFL learners can infer those texts correctly. This study investigates the difficulties face by Iraqi EFL secondary school students. It reaches to the following conclusions:

- 1- Literary texts are among the difficult materials for the participants. They are not able to correctly infer literary texts.
- 2- Answering inferential questions is more difficult for students than answering literal questions.
- 3- Both male and female learners are equal – gender has no influence on the learners' ability to infer literary texts.

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