The Impact of Iranian EFL Learner's Gender on Their Vocabulary Retention Ability Regarding Authentic Versus Non-authentic Texts

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Abstract

In this current study the researchers have tried to investigate the possible effect of Iranian EFL learners' gender on their ability of vocabulary retention concerning authentic versus non-authentic texts. Despite a great deal of studies conducted in the area of EFL/ESL learning, the effect of EFL learners' gender on their vocabulary retention regarding authentic versus non-authentic texts has almost gained little attention and been under-researched. To this end and to fill this gap, the sample selection was done by a proficiency PET (Preliminary English Test). So, out of 114 EFL learners, 74 learners both male and female were chosen as the participants to take part in the research. The findings from repeated measurement test revealed that the learners' gender has no impact on EFL learners' vocabulary retention ability in authentic and non-authentic texts.

Keywords: authentic text, non-authentic text, vocabulary retention, EFL learners

1. Introduction

1.1. The Matter of Word, Vocabulary and Comprehension

Nash and Snowling (2006) describe vocabulary as "the knowledge of words and their meanings" (p. 336). While Sheehan (2002) states vocabulary is "the ability to understand and use words to acquire and convey meaning". (Vocabulary, p. 1) Vocabulary is an essential element of reading instruction.

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Clearly, vocabulary and comprehension are closely connected skills. Each skill is imperative to reading achievement, yet one relies heavily on the other. This intricate relationship has been documented by many researchers. "Vocabulary development is both an outcome of comprehension and a precursor to it, with word meanings making up as much as 70-80% of comprehension". (Bromley, 2002, p. 528) Harmon (2002) notes, "Many students continue to struggle with comprehension because of limited vocabulary knowledge and ineffective strategies". (p. 606)

One of the most important issues in studies on second language vocabulary acquisition concerns the definition of what it is to know a word. Read (2000) asserts that knowing a word implies not only being aware of only one of its meanings but also its other meanings, its associations with other lexical items, derivations, collocations, frequency, and grammatical rules. According to Nation (1990) and Richards (1976), knowing a word includes what Read (2000) defines, in addition to the mastering of the orthographical and phonological forms.

For Eckle and Garret (1998) and Channell (in Carter & McCarthy, 1988), acquiring vocabulary in a foreign language comprises (a) the ability to recognize the meaning of the word; and (b) the recall of the word and the ability of producing it in speech. According to these authors, the learning of L2 vocabulary takes time and needs practice to be developed and acquired.

1.2. Authentic Language Input

The employment of authentic language input through authentic materials in foreign/second language learning has a long history. Henry Sweet (1899, cited in Gilmore, 2007) was one of the pioneers who utilized authentic texts in his books because he was aware of their potential advantages over contrived materials.

In order to determine the definition of authentic language input as precisely as possible, the term authenticity should be considered first. In this regard, there are a variety of definitions of this concept which relate to the foreign/second language (Gilmore, 2007; Taylor, 1994;

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Nunan, 1999; just to name a few). These varieties of definitions originate from the debate as to whether authentic materials in the foreign/second language are in fact authentic or not.

Considering the concept of authentic language input, Gilmore (2007) defined authentic language input as the language carrying a real message which is created by a real speaker or writer for a real audience. Taylor (1994) also considered authentic language input as any material in English which has not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching. In fact, authentic language materials are spoken or written language materials that have been produced in the course of real communication and not specifically produced for the very purpose of language teaching. (Nunan, 1999)

1.3. Authenticity and Authentic Material

The definitions of authentic materials are slightly different in literature. What is common in these definitions is 'exposure to real language and its use in its own community'. Rogers (1988) defines it as 'appropriate' and 'quality' in terms of goals, objectives, learner needs and interest and 'natural' in terms of real life and meaningful communication. (p. 467) Harmer (1991), cited in Matsuta (n.d., p. 1) defines authentic texts as materials which are designed for native speakers; they are real texts, designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language. In fact, authentic texts are texts that are not written for language teaching purposes. Authentic material is significant since it increases students' motivation for learning, makes the learner be exposed to the 'real' language as discussed by Guariento & Morley. (2001, p. 347)

Hulstijn et al. (1996) believe that "If one does not know the meaning of the words occurring in a text, understanding is severely hampered". (p. 54) Hence, learners should pay attention to the words as a part of a message and individual words as well. (Nation, 2001) Besides, using applicable strategies and appropriate material plays an important role in language learning. Studies on the acquisition of a second language have shown that using authentic material motivates learners in learning the new language. On the other hand, because learners are not familiar with L2 culture, religion, customs, taboos and …, learning the new vocabulary seems intangible and therefore de-motivating. Furthermore, language is defined as a device for

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communication; so, as long as language learners have customs, culture, religion and taboos in common in their own community, using non-authentic materials also seems inevitable.

The other reason this study is important is that the findings of this study will be helpful to teachers who are looking for appropriate ways to help students increase the size of their vocabulary knowledge and facilitate their reading comprehension.

To ensure whether authenticity of the material has had any possible effect on the vocabulary retention of upper-intermediate, both male and female Iranian EFL learners, we were in need of a yardstick to evaluate the learner's performance in this regard.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Integrating Authenticity into Foreign Language Education

"The central premises of the authenticity-centred approach are the use of authentic texts for language learning and the preserving of this authenticity throughout the procedures in which they are implicated". (Mishan 2005: ix)

By reviewing past and current definitions of authenticity it becomes apparent that authenticity in education is not a simple concept manifested, for example, solely in the authenticity of learning materials. Referring to the different definitions of authenticity discussed in section 2.1 and as illustrated by the citation above (Mishan 2005: ix), it can be concluded that in constructing a framework for an authenticity-centred approach it is crucial to acknowledge authenticity as a process, an interaction between materials, tasks and students themselves, specifically, their experiences, attitudes, needs and emotions.

The following section discusses authenticity connected to its three manifestations: materials, tasks and learners. The main goal is to portray how the authenticity-centred approach is realized in practice. Even though presented here as separate sections, authenticity in language education relies in fact on an interaction between all the three components: the relationship and appropriateness between text and task as well as the learner's attitude and response to both.

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2.2. Using Authentic Materials: At Which Level?

Guariento & Morley (2001) claimed that at post-intermediate level, the use of authentic materials is available for use in classroom. This might be attributed to the fact that at this level, most students master a wide range of vocabulary in the target language and all of the structures. They also note that at lower levels, the use of authentic materials may cause students to feel de-motivated and frustrated since they lack many lexical items and structures used in the target language. Matsuata (n.d.) states that the use of authentic materials is a burden for the instructors teaching beginning students as they have to spend a lot of time to prepare for authentic materials regarding the ability level of the students. Do all these mean we are not able to use authentic materials in lower-level classes apart from post-intermediate and advanced levels? According to the findings of the survey carried out by Chavez (1998), learners enjoy dealing with authentic materials, since they enable them to interact with the real language and its use. Also they do not consider authentic situations or materials innately difficult. However, learners state that they need pedagogical support especially in listening situations and when reading literary texts such as the provision of a full range of cues (auditory and visual including written language).

From what has been discussed above, it is concluded that learners feel better with authentic materials helping them involve in the 'real' language, as long as teachers provide them with pedagogical support. In order to achieve this, we have a wide range of choices. Martinez (2002) suggests that teachers may use authentic materials for the learners to look for the gist of the information presented and also he adds that by using authentic materials teachers will have the opportunity to encourage students to read for pleasure, especially certain topics of their interest. Matsuta (n.d.) claims that using audio-visual materials aiding students' comprehension is beneficial since it will prevent students especially beginning ones from being frustrated about authentic materials. Materials such as popular and traditional songs will help us to create a non-threatening environment. Guariento & Moley (2001) suggest that authentic materials should be used in accordance with students' ability and adds that suitable tasks can be given to learners in which total understanding is not important. According to Jordan (1997), in the earlier stages, non-authentic materials can be used, but stresses that upon students' dealing with materials from their own subject area, authentic materials should be introduced.

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2.2. Using Authentic Texts in Language Classroom

Breen and Candlin cited in Rutherford (1987, 149-150) contend that,

"In the past, it has seemed easier to somehow separate the learner from the knowledge to be learned – to 'objectify' the target language as something completely unfamiliar to the learner. This objectification of the language in relation to the learner has perhaps been encouraged by a narrow definition of what the object of learning actually is, and by an incomplete view of what the learner has to offer. We have tended to see the target only in terms of 'linguistic competence' or textual knowledge, and we have limited such knowledge to the level of syntax without reference to structure above the sentence. Thus, ideational and interpersonal knowledge, which textual knowledge and from which textual knowledge evolves, have tended to be overlooked or neutralized."

However, the use of authentic text in the classroom may bring the learner and the knowledge together, because the learner is lifted from the confinements of traditional and more recent methodologies to become an intricate part of the language learning process. Furthermore,

"Generalization is a crucially important and pervading strategy in human learning. To generalize means to infer or derive a law, rule, or conclusion, usually forms the observation of particular instances." (Brown, 1994: 91)

Hence, authentic text may present learners opportunities to make generalizations about grammar and vocabulary language use for themselves and observe how prior language use knowledge may be employed or adapted in new circumstances.

Authentic text also appears to supply the essential input needed to increase learner awareness of language use in written and spoken mediums and decrease reliance on pedagogic language rules, which may be viewed as inadequate since they are simplifications of language use. Likewise, authentic text may provide an alternative to outdated textbooks, which may not

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meet the needs of learners, and provide learners with the various genuine texts they need to aid and improve reading comprehension.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were 74 adult Iranian EFL learners of ages within the range of 17 to 32 years. The sample comprised of 30 male and 44 female learners at the upper-intermediate level studying at Aryanpour English institute in Tehran and Kishair English Institute in Esfahan.

In the present study, the sample selection was done by a proficiency test. So, a large sample of 114 upper-intermediate EFL learners was selected and a piloted language proficiency test, sample Preliminary English Test (2010), was administered to them. Following the administration of PET, in order to have a homogeneous sample, 74 EFL learners whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the sample mean, were chosen as the participants to take part in the research.

It is worth mentioning that, 15 upper-intermediate students (9 females and 6 males) formed the pilot group participants who were studying English at the same language institutes where the main study was conducted and had the same characteristics and language proficiency level as those of the target sample.

3.2. Instruments

In order to conduct this thesis, the following instruments were used:

A) The six authentic and non-authentic texts

Three non-authentic texts were selected from a vocabulary practice book named 'English Vocabulary in Use, Upper-intermediate, Third Edition' by Michael McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell and three authentic texts were selected from a web site which belongs to TIME FOR KIDS magazine '*www.timeforkids.com'*. All six texts were given in the form of copies to both groups.

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B) Language proficiency test (PET)

First the sample PET (Preliminary English Test) published by Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL, 2010) was piloted. In the piloting phase, the reliability came out to be 0.83. Then the sample PET was utilized for homogenizing the participants of the study in terms of their English proficiency. In fact, EFL learners whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the sample mean were chosen as the participants to take part in the research. The reliability of the test in this phase was 0.71.

C) The vocabulary test

A 30-item vocabulary test, which was designed and piloted by the researcher based on the materials of the treatment, consisted of 12 multiple-choice, 6 matching, and 12 fill-in-the-blank items (for which the students were to select the appropriate word from a list and write it down in the blank), each of which tested one single vocabulary. The allotted time for doing the test was 30 minutes (one minute for each item). In order to ensure the reliability of the vocabulary test, at the piloting stage it was administered to 15 students of similar groups taking part in the study. Based on the data gathered, the reliability was calculated to be 0.8. The present researcher also asked two experts in the same field of the study to evaluate the test in terms of its effectiveness. The experts' feedback confirmed the content validity of the current research.

D) The 30-word list

The purpose of the word list which contained as the same vocabularies, the vocabulary test was to make sure that the students would not mark the correct answer in the test by chance. A vocabulary checklist that contained the same vocabularies as the vocabulary test in which, the participants were required to write a synonym or a definition in either L1 or L2.

3.3. Procedure

To achieve the objectives of this study the following procedures were conducted by the researcher:

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After reviewing the related literature in the field of second and foreign language authentic and non-authentic text use and vocabulary retention, the first phase of the study was the preliminary study in order to find the most suitable six authentic and non-authentic texts.

In the second phase, for homogenizing texts with upper-intermediate students, the texts readability indices indicated. Readability is the ease with which a text can be read and understood. Various factors to measure readability have been used, such as "speed of perception," "perceptibility at a distance," "perceptibility in peripheral vision," "visibility," "the reflex blink technique," "rate of work" (e.g., speed of reading), "eye movements," and "fatigue in reading (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia). All six texts had a readability index between 9 to 12 which is acceptable for upper-intermediate level.

The third phase was the pilot phase during which 15 upper-intermediate students with similar characteristics to the target sample took all the assessment instruments including the sample PET (used for homogenization), and a 30-item vocabulary test. For the vocabulary tests, first the researcher selected 50 words from the target texts and gave the list of these words to the pilot group to mark the known words by providing a synonym or the meaning in either L1 or L2. As a result, 17 words which were proved as known by 60% of the students were discarded. To equalize the number of words of the vocabulary test from both authentic and non-authentic texts, three more words were discarded, so number of words was reduced to 30. In the next stage, a vocabulary test was designed based on the remaining 30 words and piloted with the same group.

After running item analysis the results showed that there was not any malfunctioning item. There was no item which was answered correctly by 60% of the participants, and no item was answered even by the two EFL learners of the piloting group and the reliability of the test was 0.8, so the test did not change. Therefore, the researcher came up with a 30-item vocabulary test which was used for pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test.

The fourth phase comprised of the administration of the piloted tests to the target students for the purpose of participant selection. The piloted sample PET (2010) was administered to 114

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male and female students at Aryanpour English institute in Tehran and Kishair English institute in Esfahan in order to choose the participants who held the same level of language proficiency.

Out of the 114 students, those whose scores were 1SD below the mean were taken as Low and those whose scores were 1SD above the mean as High level, making 74 students in total.

In the fifth phase of the study the 74 homogeneous students took part in the piloted 30-item teacher-made vocabulary test (pre-test) containing the target vocabularies. Thirty target vocabularies which the participants did not know at the onset of the study were presented in two forms, one a vocabulary checklist in which the participants were required to write a synonym or a definition in L1 or L2, and the other in the form of a vocabulary retention test with multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank and matching items. The reason for having the two forms for the vocabulary test was to check to what extent the participants were able to retain the vocabularies in both decontextualized (through the checklist) and contextualized (through the vocabulary test) ways.

It took 20 minutes to administer the vocabulary list and 30 minutes was allotted to administer the vocabulary test. In order to avoid student fatigue, a 10 minute gap was allowed between the two tests. Every individual was awarded a score of one for each vocabulary that he/she had both selected the correct response from among the alternatives on the vocabulary test and provided the correct synonym or definition in Persian or English on the checklist indicating retention of that vocabulary. If only one of these were correct, the candidate could have guessed the answer on the multiple choice test and would receive a score of zero on that vocabulary indicating lack of retention.

In the sixth phase, to arrive at the pre assumed results, giving a relative treatment was needed.

Therefore, the present researcher provided the learners with the following treatment type:

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Both female and male EFL learners were exposed to target vocabularies' dictionary meaning and the researcher used some vocabulary teaching strategies such as butchering, surrounding and brain storming to teach the new words. Besides, all six texts were read aloud and learners repeated the correct form of the words' pronunciation.

The treatment was done during three sessions. In each session two texts; one authentic and one non-authentic were taught. Between teachings of these two texts in each session, participants had a break in order to avoid learner's fatigue to influence EFL learners' vocabulary learning. Also, the allotted time for each text and its five unknown vocabularies was 30 minutes and the time duration was enough for all six texts because the readability and length of texts were close together and proper for upper-intermediate level.

The seventh phase was just the next session after finishing the treatment. The post-test which was the same as the pre-test was administered to all participants including both female and male students from both institutes.

Two weeks after the completion of the treatment, the post-delayed-test was administered to all participants which were again the same vocabulary tests in addition to the 30-word list. The students were not told that they would take a vocabulary retention delayed post-test and the interval of two weeks was chosen because less than this time the students might use their short-term memory to answer the questions and in more than two weeks further learning may occur.

3.4. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the obtained data, the researchers computed them by means of the statistical package SPSS. The kinds of analyses that were used included Mean Scores, Standard Deviation, and Repeated Measures of Variance.

4. Results

To investigate whether the gender of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners had any Impact on their vocabulary retention regarding authentic versus non-authentic text the data were

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analyzed based on Repeated Measures of variance (GLMRM), because of the existence of within subject factors in three levels (pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test). Test scores of the three vocabulary tests (pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test) in authentic and non-authentic texts from male and female EFL learners have been measured.

Table 1: Tests of Within-Subjects Effects

Measure: Teaching

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Time	Huynh-Feldt	5178.613	1.368	3785.588	1161.512	.000
Time * Text	Huynh-Feldt	.127	1.368	.093	.028	.926
Time * Gender	Huynh-Feldt	1.285	1.368	.939	.288	.665
Time * Gender * Text	Huynh-Feldt	2.216	1.368	1.620	.497	.540
Error(Time)	Huynh-Feldt	312.096	95.759	3.259		

In the fourth row as you can see, the effect of EFL learners' gender on their vocabulary retention ability regarding authentic and non-authentic texts, were analyzed. According to the last column of this table the significance level is 0.5. As you see this is greater than 0.05 so, the null hypothesis is accepted. As a matter of fact, the Iranian EFL learner's gender has no impact on their vocabulary retention ability regarding authentic versus non-authentic texts.

Although the null hypothesis is accepted, in order to see whether the treatment had any effect on EFL learners' vocabulary retention, learner scores in pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test were analyzed.

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Table 2: Pairwise Comparisons

Measure: Teaching

(I) Time	(J) Time	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-10.820	.263	.000	-11.465	-10.176
	3	-10.030	.315	.000	-10.802	-9.259
2	1	10.820	.263	.000	10.176	11.465
	3	.790	.141	.000	.444	1.136
3	1	10.030	.315	.000	9.259	10.802
	2	-.790	.141	.000	-1.136	-.444

Regarding the reported significance level column in the above table, it is considered that significance level for the difference of learning and retaining words among pretest, post-test and delayed test in all mutual comparisons is less than 0.05 (Sig=0.000). Therefore, it is concluded that there is a meaningful significant difference between dependent means of learning and retaining vocabulary among independent variable levels (Figure 1).

For better understanding of the matter, the following graphic figure is presented:

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Figure 1: Diagram of estimated marginal means of grades of learning and retaining in pre-test (1), post-test (2) and delayed post-test (3)
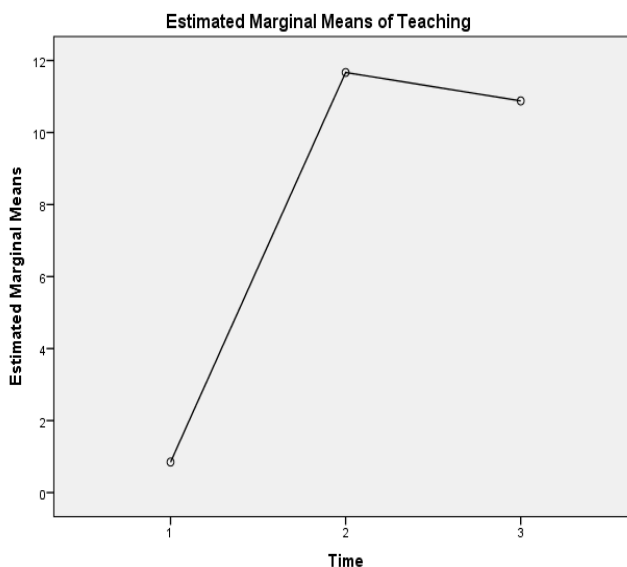
The above figure shows the diagram of marginal means estimated of learning and retaining grades in pre-test(1), post-test(2) and delayed post-test(3). Regarding the diagram, it is distinguished that there is difference among means of learning and retaining words in the three tests (pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test); and language learners have not done the same at every three test. This means teaching vocabulary to language learners is effective on their learning and retaining words.

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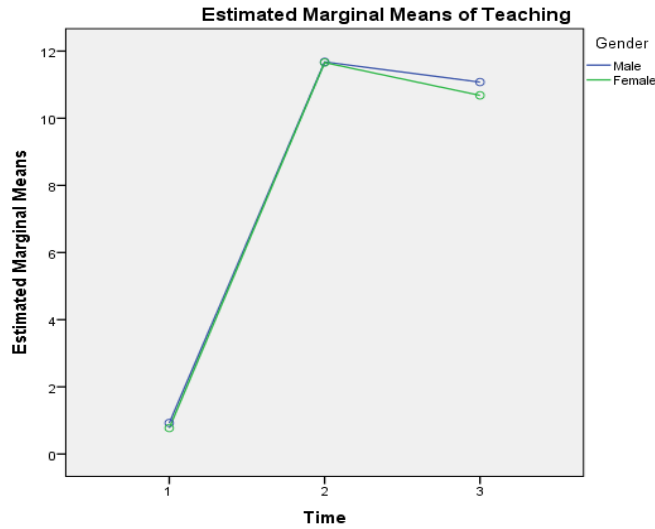
Figure 2: Diagram of estimated marginal means of vocabulary learning and retaining grades at pre-test (1), post-test (2) and delayed post-test (3) taken by male (blue) and female (green) language learners.

The above figure, shows the linear diagram of estimated marginal means of learning and retaining vocabulary grades of pre-test(1), post-test(2) and delayed post-test(3) taken by male(blue) and female(green) language learners. Regarding positions of the liens, it is realized that male learners in comparison with female ones have got no different performance. In other words, teaching vocabulary has equal effect on the ability of learning and retaining of male and female language learners. That is to say, female and male language learners present no difference in ability of learning and retaining vocabulary.

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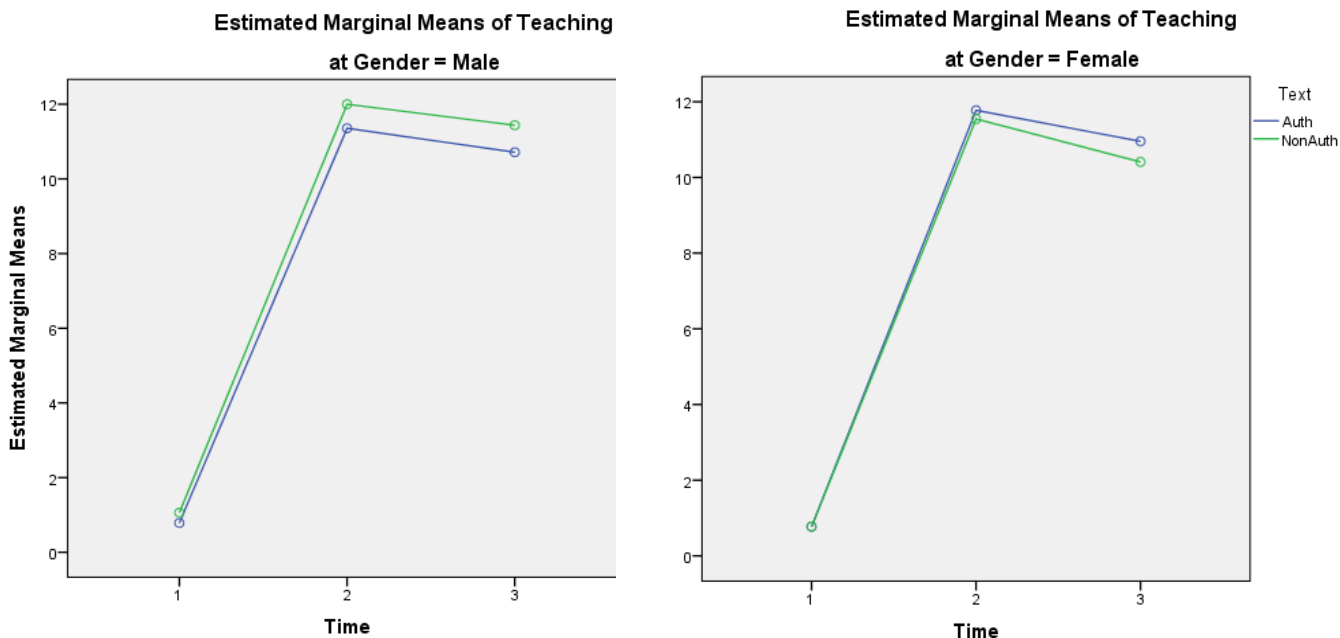
Figure 4: linear diagrams of estimated marginal means of learning and retaining vocabulary grades of pre-test (1), post-test (2) and delayed post-test (3) taken by male language learners (left diagram) and female (right diagram) in authentic (blue) and non-authentic (green).

Figure above, shows linear diagram of estimated marginal means of learning and retaining vocabulary grades of pre-test (1), post-test (2) and delayed post-test (3) taken by male language learners (left diagram) and female (right diagram) in authentic (blue) and non-authentic (green). According to the position of these lines, it is realized that learning and retaining ability of male and female language learners' vocabulary of authentic and non-authentic texts are similar. It means language learners' gender has no effect on learning and retaining vocabulary of authentic and non-authentic texts; it is seen that Iranian language learners' ability of learning and retaining authentic and non-authentic text vocabulary has no relation with their gender; that indicates accuracy of the hypothesis of the present research.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of doing this research was to investigate whether the Iranian EFL learners' gender has any effect on their vocabulary retention considering text authenticity. According to

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the analyzed data of the study, there was not any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' gender in vocabulary retention ability, whether the text is authentic or non-authentic.

6. Pedagogical Implications

As the results of the study provided evidence that the gender of Iranian EFL learners' gender has no impact on their vocabulary retention, foreign language teachers, especially those who teach in language institutes, can benefit from this research. While teaching vocabulary, language teachers should focus on other factors rather than EFL learners gender as there is no significant difference in their vocabulary retention ability. Beside teachers, curriculum designers and test makers can benefit from this study's results as they can use both authentic and non-authentic texts regardless of learners' gender.

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