

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF READING INTEREST BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE EFL STUDENTS
AT SMAN 3 KABUPATEN TANGERANG

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the difference in reading interest between male and female students at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang, examined both as an overall construct and across four dimensions: feelings, attention, willingness, and awareness. A quantitative comparative design with an ex post facto approach was used, as sex was treated as a pre-existing, non-manipulable grouping variable. From a population of 481 eleventh-grade students, a purposive sample of 140 students (70 male, 70 female) was selected from classes taught by the same English teacher to minimize instructional bias. Data were collected using a 19-item Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Arvianto et al. (2025), validated through expert judgment (95%, very valid) and shown to be highly reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = .884). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, normality and homogeneity tests, and Independent Sample T-Tests. Results showed no significant difference in overall reading interest between male and female students ($M = 59.40$, $SD = 7.11$ vs. $M = 57.27$, $SD = 6.66$; $t(138) = 1.828$, $p = .070$). However, significant differences emerged at the dimensional level: male students scored significantly higher in feelings ($t(138) = 2.257$, $p = .026$) and attention ($t(138) = 2.381$, $p = .019$), while willingness and awareness showed no significant differences. Supplementary data also showed that female students most frequently preferred Romance & Drama Fiction (44.3%), whereas male students most frequently preferred Adventure, Sports & Action (35.7%). These findings indicate that sex does not determine reading interest as a whole, but may influence specific affective and cognitive dimensions as well as topic preference, supporting the multidimensional nature of reading interest. Teachers are recommended to design reading materials that sustain both male and female students' focus and emotional engagement during English reading activities.

Keywords: Comparative Study; English Foreign Language; Gender Differences; Reading Interest; Senior High School

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most essential skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it allows students to gain information, develop knowledge, and support their academic achievement. In the Indonesian educational context, reading comprehension is particularly important since students are required to understand various English texts in classroom learning activities and examinations. According to Snow (2002), reading comprehension is the process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction with written language, so students

are expected not only to read fluently but also to interpret information and draw conclusions from what they read.

Reading comprehension nevertheless remains one of the major challenges faced by EFL students in Indonesia. Many students still experience difficulty identifying main ideas, interpreting vocabulary in context, making inferences, and understanding detailed information, largely because of limited vocabulary mastery, low reading practice, and low engagement during reading activities (Rahmah & Mistar, 2023; Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023; Napratilora et al., 2024). This concern is echoed at the international level: the OECD PISA 2022 report shows that Indonesian students' reading performance remains relatively low compared with many other participating countries (OECD, 2023), underlining that improving reading ability is still an important issue in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

During a preliminary observation conducted by the researcher through the PLP-H (teaching internship) program at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang, reading activities were found to be dominated by teacher-centered instruction, and several students showed low participation, particularly when reading long English texts. The researcher also observed a difference in participation between male and female students: female students tended to be more willing to read the text and to answer the teacher's questions, while several male students appeared less interested in reading long texts and participated less actively. However, active participation did not always indicate that students fully comprehended the text, which suggested that a factor other than comprehension itself, such as reading interest, might underlie these classroom patterns.

Reading interest refers to students' willingness, attention, enjoyment, and tendency to engage in reading activities, and students with higher reading interest are generally more willing to interact with reading materials and participate actively in class (Alfatihah & Tyas, 2022; Dewani et al., 2024). Several studies further suggest that male and female students may differ in reading participation, strategies, and preferences. Rianto (2021) found differences in reading strategies and reading skills between male and female EFL university students; Milal et al. (2021) reported different reading preferences between male and female undergraduate students; and Putri and Melani (2022) found differences in reading comprehension achievement between male and female students in higher education. These findings indicate that gender-related differences in reading remain an important issue to investigate.

However, most previous studies examined only one aspect of reading at a time, such as reading strategies and proficiency among university students (Rianto, 2021), leisure-time reading preferences (Milal et al., 2021), or reading interest measured as a single overall score (Saputra & Fatmalia, 2022). Even a classroom-based study such as that of Liu and Ganapathy (2023) treated reading interest either as part of an intervention or as one component of a broader literacy framework rather than as a separate multidimensional construct. Consequently, it remains unclear whether male and female students consistently differ across all facets of reading interest, namely awareness, willingness, attention, and feelings, particularly at the senior high school level in the Indonesian EFL context, where research using validated multidimensional instruments is still very limited.

Based on this background, the present study aims to investigate the difference in reading interest between male and female EFL students at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang, examined through its four dimensions. The research question addressed is: Is there any difference in reading interest between male and female students at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang?

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to investigate whether such a difference exists. This study is expected to enrich the theoretical discussion on individual differences in English Language Teaching (ELT) and to provide practical input for teachers, students, and the school in designing more inclusive and engaging reading materials, as well as a reference for future researchers interested in gender-related factors in EFL reading.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reading Interest and Its Dimensions

Interest is a psychological state characterized by affective components in which a person shows a preference or attraction toward certain content (Widiana et al., 2023). In the context of reading, Santi et al. (2021) define reading interest as a strong willingness to read accompanied by an individual's own effort to do so, while Arvianto et al. (2025) describe it as a feeling of pleasure and attraction toward reading that drives individuals to read by their own free choice, without external pressure. Dewani et al. (2024) add that reading interest also involves a strong preference for particular reading materials, which triggers the desire and willingness to read. Taken together, reading interest can be understood as a combination of affective pleasure and conative will that keeps students engaged in literacy activities.

Interest can further be classified into situational interest, which is triggered by external stimuli and tends to be temporary, and individual interest, which is a more stable tendency originating from within the student (Widiana et al., 2023; Arvianto et al., 2025). To capture reading interest comprehensively, Arvianto et al. (2025) developed a measurement instrument consisting of four dimensions: feelings (enjoyment and positive emotional response), attention (ability to focus and avoid distraction), willingness (intrinsic motivation and self-initiated reading), and awareness (recognition of the value and benefits of reading). This four-dimensional framework allows reading interest to be examined not merely as a single global attitude but as several related, and potentially distinct, components of students' engagement with reading, which is the framework adopted in the present study.

2.2 Gender and Reading Interest in EFL Learning

Several studies suggest that male and female students often display different tendencies in reading participation, strategies, and preferences. Rianto (2021) reported that female EFL university students significantly outperformed male students in reading strategies and English proficiency; Milal et al. (2021) found that female undergraduate students engaged more actively in leisure reading than male students; and Saputra and Fatmalia (2022) found that female senior high school students scored higher on a general reading interest index. A classroom-based intervention by Liu and Ganapathy (2023) further showed that restructuring reading groups and diversifying materials helped narrow the gender gap in EFL reading engagement. Across these studies, a broadly consistent pattern emerges in which female students show stronger reading engagement than male students, although the constructs, instruments, and educational levels examined differ considerably.

Two theoretical perspectives help explain why such gender-related differences may occur and why they may vary across contexts. First, Muntoni et al. (2021) found that when boys believed reading was more of a "girls' activity", their reading self-concept, self-efficacy, and motivation tended to be lower, whereas the same belief tended to support girls' motivation; this effect was also reinforced by classmates' shared beliefs, not only by the individual student's own view. Second, Torppa et al. (2018) showed that gender gaps in PISA reading scores in

Finland could largely be explained by differences in reading fluency, classroom behavior, leisure reading, and homework habits rather than by sex itself, and that the gap narrowed once these factors were statistically controlled. These two perspectives suggest that gender differences in reading are not fixed biological outcomes but are shaped by beliefs, classroom context, and instructional conditions, which is particularly relevant to the present study because its sample was purposively drawn from classes taught by the same English teacher, a design choice intended to minimize instructional sources of variation between male and female students.

2.3 Previous Studies

A closer look at previous research shows both a consistent pattern and a clear gap that motivates the present study. Rianto (2021) examined gender differences in metacognitive reading strategies, online reading ability, and English proficiency among Indonesian EFL university students and found that female students significantly outperformed their male peers; however, that study focused on reading strategies and proficiency, at a different educational level, rather than on reading interest. Milal et al. (2021) examined leisure-time reading preferences among Indonesian undergraduates using open-ended questions and likewise found female students to be more engaged, but their focus on out-of-classroom leisure reading differs from the present study's focus on reading interest as an academic, in-classroom variable. Saputra and Fatmalia (2022) examined a reading interest index among senior high school students, matching the present study's educational level, and also found female students scoring higher; however, their instrument treated reading interest as a single overall score rather than as separate dimensions, making it impossible to identify which specific aspect, such as feelings, attention, willingness, or awareness, actually drove the observed gap. Liu and Ganapathy (2023) took a more classroom-oriented approach, using a one-semester literature-circle intervention with EFL senior high school students in China, and found that restructuring reading groups and diversifying materials helped narrow the existing gender gap in reading engagement; this shares the present study's educational level and EFL classroom setting, but differs in design, as it evaluated an intervention rather than a naturally occurring comparison.

Taken together, these four studies point to a consistent pattern in which female students demonstrate stronger reading-related engagement than male students, whether in university, general high school, or EFL classroom settings. At the same time, they reveal a clear gap: almost none of them examined reading interest as a separate multidimensional construct among senior high school EFL learners in Indonesia. Most either studied a related but different construct (strategies, proficiency, or general literacy), a different educational level (mostly university), or treated reading interest as a single overall score. The present study addresses this gap by measuring reading interest through four distinct dimensions among Grade 11 EFL students, offering a more detailed comparison than the single-score approach used in most previous research and opening the possibility that gender differences may exist in some dimensions of reading interest but not in others.

2.4 Research Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical framework and the formulation of the problem above, the following hypothesis was proposed and tested statistically: H₀ (Null Hypothesis) – there is no difference in reading interest between male and female students at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang; H_a (Alternative Hypothesis) – there is a difference in reading interest between male and female students at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Design and Variables

This study employed a quantitative comparative design with an ex post facto approach, since sex is a pre-existing characteristic that cannot be manipulated by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012). The grouping variable was sex category (male and female), and the dependent variable was reading interest, operationalized through the dimensions of feelings, attention, willingness, and awareness.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population consisted of 481 eleventh-grade students (221 male, 260 female) at SMAN 3 Tangerang Regency in the 2025/2026 academic year, distributed across 12 classes. Using a cluster-based sampling approach, the researcher purposively selected five classes (XI B1, XI B2, XI B3, XI C1, and XI C2) taught by the same English teacher, in order to minimize variation arising from differences in teaching style, instructional pace, and learning materials. From approximately 156 students in these five classes, a balanced final sample of 140 students (70 male and 70 female) was selected to provide an equal basis for statistical comparison between the two groups. Because the sample was purposively drawn from these five classes, the findings are interpreted within this specific context and are not automatically generalized to all 481 eleventh-grade students at the school.

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from Arvianto et al. (2025), consisting of 19 closed-ended Likert-scale statements measuring the four dimensions of reading interest (feelings, attention, willingness, and awareness), plus one additional item asking students to select their most preferred reading topic from ten categories. The original instrument had already been established as valid and reliable through expert validation, item validity testing, and Cronbach's Alpha reliability testing; for the present study, the instrument was curated, the Likert scale was adjusted, and it was re-validated by an English teacher at the research site as the content-validity expert, following the interpretation criteria of Riduwan (2015).

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0 through three stages. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum) were computed for male and female students. Second, assumption tests were performed, comprising the Shapiro-Wilk normality test (appropriate for small-to-moderate samples; Pallant, 2020) and Levene's homogeneity-of-variance test. Third, hypothesis testing was conducted using the Independent Sample T-Test at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, both for the overall reading interest score and for each of the four dimensions. In addition, effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d and interpreted following Cohen's (1988) criteria (0.2 = small, 0.5 = medium, 0.8 = large) to indicate the practical magnitude of any observed difference. The null hypothesis was accepted whenever the two-tailed significance value exceeded .05, indicating no statistically significant difference between male and female students, and rejected whenever it fell below .05.

3.5 Research Procedure

The research was carried out through several interrelated stages, adapted from Creswell (2012): (a) conducting a preliminary observation during the PLP-H teaching-internship program to identify classroom problems related to students' reading interest; (b) reviewing relevant

theories and previous studies on reading interest and gender differences in EFL learning; (c) formulating the research problem, objective, and hypothesis; (d) designing the reading-interest questionnaire; (e) validating the instrument through expert judgment by an English teacher and revising it based on the validator's feedback; (f) determining the population and purposive sample of eleventh-grade students; (g) administering the questionnaire to the selected participants during active class hours; (h) collecting, checking, and tabulating the questionnaire results; (i) inputting the data into SPSS version 26.0 for descriptive and inferential analysis; and (j) interpreting the results and drawing conclusions in relation to the research questions and hypothesis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Participants

The final sample consisted of 140 eleventh-grade students, equally divided between 70 male and 70 female students, purposively selected from five classes (XI B1, XI B2, XI B3, XI C1, and XI C2) taught by the same English teacher out of a total population of 481 students (221 male, 260 female). This balanced design was intended to provide an equal basis for the subsequent independent-sample comparison.

4.2 Instrument Validity and Reliability

Expert judgment of the questionnaire yielded a total score of 38 out of a maximum of 40 (95%), which is categorized as "very valid" according to Riduwan's (2015) criteria, covering content relevance, language, construction, and suitability for the EFL senior-high-school context, as summarized in Table 1. After distribution to the 140 participants, the 19-item instrument obtained a Cronbach's Alpha of .884, well above the minimum criterion of .50, indicating good internal consistency and confirming that the instrument was reliable for measuring students' reading interest.

Table 1. Expert Validation and Reliability of the Reading Interest Questionnaire

Assessment Aspect	Max. Score	Obtained Score	Cronbach's Alpha
Content Relevance	8	8	
Language	12	11	
Construction	16	15	
Suitability	4	4	
Total (95%, Very Valid)	40	38	.884 (19 items)

4.3 Overall Reading Interest

Descriptive statistics (Table 2) show that male students obtained a slightly higher mean reading-interest score ($M = 59.40$, $SD = 7.11$) than female students ($M = 57.27$, $SD = 6.66$), a difference of 2.13 points, with comparable score ranges (45-76 for males, 46-76 for females).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Overall Reading Interest

Sex	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Male	70	45	76	59.40	7.11
Female	70	46	76	57.27	6.66

Both the Shapiro-Wilk test (male: $p = .059$; female: $p = .061$) and Levene's test ($F = .145$, $p = .704$) confirmed that the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were satisfied, allowing an Independent Sample T-Test to be conducted. As shown in Table 3, the test yielded $t(138) = 1.828$, $p = .070$, which exceeds the .05 significance threshold; the null hypothesis (H_0) was therefore accepted, indicating no statistically significant difference in overall reading interest between male and female students. The corresponding effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.309$) was small, confirming that although male students scored numerically higher, the practical magnitude of the difference was minimal and likely attributable to sampling variation rather than a genuine population-level difference.

Table 3. Independent Sample T-Test of Overall Reading Interest

t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Cohen's d	Decision
1.828	138	.070	0.309	Not significant

4.4 Reading Interest Dimensions

Further analysis at the dimensional level (Table 4) reveals a more nuanced pattern. Male students scored significantly higher than female students in feelings ($M = 15.64$ vs. 14.81 ; $t(138) = 2.257$, $p = .026$, $d = 0.382$) and attention ($M = 13.94$ vs. 12.97 ; $t(138) = 2.381$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.402$), both with small effect sizes. In contrast, no significant differences were found in willingness ($M = 15.80$ vs. 15.59 ; $t(138) = 0.560$, $p = .576$, $d = 0.093$) or awareness ($M = 14.01$ vs. 13.90 ; $t(138) = 0.387$, $p = .699$, $d = 0.063$), both showing negligible effect sizes.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and T-Test Results by Reading Interest Dimension

Dimension	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	t	Sig.	d	Decision
Feelings	15.64 (2.32)	14.81 (2.01)	2.257	.026	0.382	Significant
Attention	13.94 (2.51)	12.97 (2.31)	2.381	.019	0.402	Significant
Willingness	15.80 (2.12)	15.59 (2.39)	0.560	.576	0.093	Not significant
Awareness	14.01 (1.79)	13.90 (1.70)	0.387	.699	0.063	Not significant

These dimensional findings show that the absence of a significant overall difference does not mean male and female students responded identically to every aspect of reading interest. Rather, the two groups differed significantly in their reported feelings and attention while remaining comparable in willingness and awareness, a pattern that would not have been visible had reading interest been analyzed only as a single total score.

4.5 Reading Topic Preference

As supplementary, non-hypothesis-tested information, students were also asked to select their most preferred reading topic from ten categories. Across all 140 participants, Romance & Drama Fiction was the most preferred topic overall (31.4%), followed by Adventure, Sports & Action (20.0%). When broken down by sex (Table 5), female students most frequently preferred Romance & Drama Fiction (44.3%), followed by Mystery/Detective/Thriller (15.7%) and Fantasy & Magic (12.9%), whereas male students most frequently preferred Adventure, Sports & Action (35.7%), followed by Romance & Drama Fiction (18.6%) and Science, Technology & Space (14.3%).

Table 5. Top Three Reading Topic Preferences by Sex Category

Female (n = 70)	%	Male (n = 70)	%
Romance & Drama Fiction	44.3%	Adventure, Sports & Action	35.7%
Mystery, Detective & Thriller	15.7%	Romance & Drama Fiction	18.6%
Fantasy & Magic	12.9%	Science, Technology & Space	14.3%

4.6 Discussion

The finding of no significant overall difference in reading interest contrasts with the broader Indonesian context reflected in the PISA 2022 results, where girls scored 23 points higher than boys in reading literacy (OECD, 2023). This apparent contrast is not necessarily contradictory, however, because PISA measures reading performance, whereas the present study measures reading interest; students may hold different attitudes and feelings toward reading even when performance patterns point in another direction. The result also differs from Milal et al. (2021), who reported stronger reading-related preferences among female undergraduate students, but that study examined a different population (university students) using a different, single-dimension approach to reading preference, whereas the present study used the four-dimensional framework of Arvianto et al. (2025) among senior-high-school students. Because different studies measure different constructs, at different educational levels, with different instruments, their results should be interpreted according to what was actually measured rather than assumed to reflect the same underlying gender pattern.

The specific classroom context of this study may also help explain the pattern found. Because the sample was purposively drawn from classes taught by the same English teacher, sources of instructional variation, such as teaching style, pace, and materials, that often contribute to gender gaps in less controlled settings (Torppa et al., 2018) were largely

minimized before data collection began. This may explain why the overall difference observed here was smaller and statistically non-significant compared with the larger gaps often reported in less controlled classroom settings.

At the dimensional level, male students' significantly higher scores in feelings and attention were somewhat unexpected given the researcher's preliminary classroom observation, in which female students appeared more active in classroom discussions. This discrepancy suggests that visible classroom participation is not a reliable proxy for internal, self-reported reading interest: a student may participate actively because they feel confident about a particular question while still holding neutral feelings toward reading in general, and conversely, a quieter student may still hold strong positive feelings toward reading. The self-reported nature of the attention dimension also means that the finding should be interpreted as a difference in perceived attention-related interest rather than as direct proof of superior concentration ability among male students. Meanwhile, the absence of significant differences in willingness and awareness indicates that male and female students were equally motivated to engage in reading and equally aware of its importance and value, which tempers any interpretation of a general male advantage in reading interest. Muntoni et al.'s (2021) findings on gender-related reading stereotypes offer one possible, though untested, explanation for why the direction of such affective differences can vary across school contexts rather than following a single universal pattern.

Finally, the clear divergence in topic preference, romance/drama for female students versus adventure/sports/action for male students, indicates that sex may be more closely related to what students want to read than to how much interest they generally have in reading. This is consistent with the concept of topic interest, which is content-specific and situational rather than a general disposition (Cancino, 2023; Li & Gan, 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Oh et al., 2022), and helps explain why male and female students can report comparable overall reading interest while still gravitating toward markedly different reading materials. Practically, this suggests that English teachers may sustain both male and female students' focus and emotional engagement more effectively by offering a wider variety of topics rather than assuming a single type of material will appeal equally to all students.

It should also be emphasized that these findings must be interpreted within their specific boundaries. The study did not measure students' reading comprehension achievement, their beliefs about reading as a sex-typed activity, or their reading-related behavior outside the questionnaire itself; the theoretical explanations drawn from Muntoni et al. (2021) and Torppa et al. (2018) are therefore used only to help interpret the quantitative pattern found here, not as variables that were tested statistically. Likewise, because the sample was purposively drawn from only five classes taught by a single teacher at one school, the findings describe the specific instructional context of this study rather than eleventh-grade EFL students in general. With these boundaries in mind, the present study nonetheless makes a meaningful contribution: rather than treating gender as a factor that uniformly determines reading interest, it shows that the relationship between gender and reading interest depends on which dimension is examined, which instrument is used, and the specific educational context in which students learn, thereby extending the discussion beyond the single-score comparisons used in much of the earlier literature (Rianto, 2021; Milal et al., 2021; Saputra & Fatmalia, 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined whether reading interest differs between male and female eleventh-grade EFL students at SMAN 3 Kabupaten Tangerang, both as an overall construct and across four dimensions. The independent sample t-test showed no statistically significant difference in overall reading interest ($t(138) = 1.828$, $p = .070$), even though male students obtained a slightly higher mean score ($M = 59.40$, $SD = 7.11$) than female students ($M = 57.27$, $SD = 6.66$), with a small effect size ($d = 0.309$). At the dimensional level, however, male students scored significantly higher in feelings ($p = .026$) and attention ($p = .019$), while no significant differences were found in willingness ($p = .576$) or awareness ($p = .699$). Supplementary data further showed that female students most frequently preferred Romance & Drama Fiction (44.3%), while male students most frequently preferred Adventure, Sports & Action (35.7%).

These findings indicate that sex category alone does not determine students' overall reading interest, but it may be associated with specific affective and cognitive dimensions of reading interest as well as with reading topic preference, supporting the view that reading interest is a multidimensional rather than a unitary construct. Because the sample was purposively drawn from five classes taught by the same teacher, these findings should be interpreted within this specific instructional context and not generalized to all eleventh-grade students at other schools or settings.

Based on these findings, English teachers are encouraged not to assume that either sex is automatically less interested in reading, but to design reading materials covering a wider variety of topics, including both romance/drama and adventure/sports/action content, and to pay closer attention to strategies that sustain students' focus and emotional engagement during reading activities. Students are encouraged to be aware that their internal interest in reading may differ from their classroom participation and to explore a broader range of reading topics. Schools may use these findings to build a more balanced and inclusive collection of reading materials in libraries and reading corners. Future researchers are encouraged to directly measure related variables not covered in this study, such as students' beliefs about reading as a sex-typed activity, reading self-efficacy, or reading comprehension, to further clarify the mechanisms underlying gender-related differences in EFL reading interest.

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