

Does Cultural Knowledge Matter? Investigating the Effect of Cultural Knowledge on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

As teaching culture is an important parameter in learning a foreign language, the present study aimed to explore the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension of EFL learners. For this purpose, 60 EFL learners from three classes were randomly divided into three groups, a control group and two experimental groups. They were male and female pre-intermediate learners studying in an institute in Aliabad, northern Iran. The control group did not receive any special treatment, whereas one experimental group received texts of British culture (BC) and another experimental group received texts of Persian culture as well as British one (P-BC) for eight sessions. The data were analyzed via ANOVA. The findings indicated that the learners in the P-BC group outperformed the ones in the other two groups in the posttest. Further, the findings displayed that learners from the BC group did better than the ones in the control group.

Keywords: *cultural knowledge; reading comprehension; culture; EFL learners*

Introduction

As cultural knowledge may motivate the EFL learners to be more activated and understand the text better, the role it can play in reading comprehension of EFL learners was the main aim of the present study. The way people behave and live refers to the culture of their society. Thus, the EFL learners should be aware of the culture of the new language as it affects the learning of new language (Demir, 2012).

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Learners are able to contrast the culture of new language with their own language in a good way if they know the culture of the new language. Culture is one of the most important aspects in learning a new language as it is an essential part for learning a new language (Chastain, 1988). Thus, it is recommended that learners should have cultural knowledge of new language.

Experienced readers are different from inexperienced readers since they are able to recognize word in advance, but inexperienced readers focus on the word one by one (Lin, 2002). It is obvious that learning a language does not include just teaching grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, rather it involves some features of its culture such as folklores, ceremonies, funeral, etc. for reading comprehension (Rashidi & Heidari Soureshjani, 2011).

Reading is a process which needs different types of activities to be done at the same time. When learners read, they get its meaning from processing the text in smaller parts of language to the larger ones (Erten & Razi, 2009). As Chastain (1988) maintains reading is an optional process; it requires the use of minimal language points chosen from conceptual input based on the learners' knowledge. English language learners have some problems and difficulty while they have to read some texts that they do not have any experience and knowledge about them.

Berhardt (1991, as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009) indicated that readers tend to deal with both micro-level text driven features, such as pattern recognition, letter identification, and lexical access, and macro-level reader-driven features such as activation of prior knowledge and monitoring comprehension.

The goal of reading is to get the meaning of its writer. Reading to have better pronunciation, and study new words do not form reading as it requires comprehension and if learners do not comprehend it, then it is not reading (Chastain, 1988). Learners are able to activate their schemata while they remember the more important materials. Interest is a significant factor which affects what they may remember. The lack of interest will be caused by the lack of comprehension for non-native learners (Al-Shumaimeri, 2006).

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Cultural knowledge is the development of a special culture's familiarity that gives the light on the role of cultural knowledge in the process of reading comprehension (Rokhsari, 2012). Johnson (1982 as cited in Chastain, 1988) found that readers better understand content that is related to their own cultural background. Even professional ESL readers recall more from a text based on their own culture than they do from a text based on a foreign culture. Therefore, knowing the culture of the new language is more beneficial on reading comprehension rather than knowing the structure of that language (Chastain, 1988).

Some researchers assume that reading comprehension is a critical process. So, it is recommended that research should be done in this area because cultural knowledge surely affects the learners' reading comprehension (Al-Shumaimer, 2006).

Time is not so much related to the performance of learners but the effectiveness of material is related to learners' reading performance. The learners will have poor performance because of the effect of material which is not acquainted to them (Chastain, 1988).

Teachers should try to facilitate the process of reading comprehension to connect the learners' prior knowledge to their knowledge of new text on their minds (Spyridakis & Wenger 1991). Activating prior knowledge about reading may be facilitated by processing and comprehending reading materials. Reading and listening are known as the active process which includes the meaning of decoding text. Each language has its own cultural information which affects people's thought on how they act on and comprehend the text (Hayati, 2009).

Traditionally some of the researchers have focused on the psychological processes of individual but recently the focus is on the comprehension of the written sources and how the readers interpret them and to communicate with each other which include the social, cultural knowledge of the readers and what is stated in the texts so that they have better comprehension (Grath-McCullough, 2008).

Some of the researchers such as Jalilifar and Assi (2008) prefer to nativize the text into their own culture to improve learners' ability to read and comprehend the text and the new culture. Some others like Al-Shumaimeri (2005) presented two different types of texts, one familiar and the other unfamiliar to learners.

Anderson (1999 as cited in Li & Lai, 2012) noted that reading is an active, fluent process involving the reader and reading material in making meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page. Synergy takes place in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the reader's background knowledge and experiences. In fact, the English teachers must be aware of the process of reading in the classroom as it is very important that learners comprehend what they read.

Background

It should be emphasized that there are two kinds of processes for reading comprehension, one is bottom-up and the other is top-down processing; the bottom-up refers to how learners gain the meaning from the words of a text and comprehend its main idea, and top-down processing refers to the ability of learners for comprehending a text based on their knowledge while they look the whole text (Freimuth, 2008).

Rivers (1981 as cited in Rajabi, 2009) propounds that a reading is a most important activity in many language classes, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language.

There are many problems for learning a language such as English. One of the most important refers to the lack of cultural knowledge of the new language, so it is seen as a main obstacle for comprehending the text of the new language. If the learners become familiar with the topic of the text and the new culture, they can comprehend easier because they are able to relate it to their own background knowledge which they experience in their own language (Othman & Vanathas, 2004).

It is to be noted that readers must have background knowledge since it can help them read and comprehend effectively but they should activate their knowledge. Thus it is crucial for them to read a story from the native culture to activate their knowledge and comprehend the text effectively (Al-Issa, 2006).

Some researchers (e.g., Chastain 1988; Krasner, 1999; Rashidi & Heidari Soureshjani; 2011; Rivers, 1981) mentioned different aspects of teaching and learning culture as a basis of learning a language and maintained that these cultural aspects should be taken into consideration while teaching a foreign language in order to motivate their students. Moreover, Brown (2007) stipulated that because learning a second language implies some degree of learning, it is important to understand what we mean by the process of culture learning.

Bedir (1992 as cited in Rashidi & Heidari Soureshjani, 2011) studied and tried to define the relationship between culture and language. His experimental group was trained through television, role-play, picture, simulation games and a native speaker while the control group received their regular curriculum. According to the result of the posttest, the experimental group performed much better than they did in pretest. That might be because of the use of cultural background. The participants who were trained with cultural schemata are inevitable for successful reading comprehension.

Rashidi and Heidari Soureshjani (2011) investigated whether the effect of teaching cultural texts on Persian and English as a foreign language learners' reading comprehension. They selected 102 Persian EFL learners from two classes. The experimental group received treatment and a questionnaire for motivating. The results showed that knowing the culture of the new language had an effect on reading comprehension and also it increased the learners' motivations.

Jalilifar and Assi (2008) attempted to find the effect of nativization in reading comprehension of short stories in the target language on Iranian EFL learners. They selected three American short stories which were nativized into their own culture. Two types of

comprehension tests, one based on the original stories and one based on the nativized version were developed. They selected two groups of advanced EFL learners including 29 males and 31 females participated in the study. One group received the relevant data about the new culture. The results showed that cultural nativization had an effect on comprehension of the stories.

Erten and Razi (2009) did the same as Jalilifar and Assi (2008) had done. They did it for 44 advanced level students of English at a state university in Turkey. Their research investigated whether cultural familiarity influences comprehension of short stories and whether nativizing the story or using reading activities can compensate for the lack of such familiarity. They designed four experimental groups in which first group read the original story, the second group read the same story with some activities, the third one read the nativized story and the fourth read the story like the third group along with some activities. The results showed those who read the nativized story had better performance in comprehension.

Al-Shumaimeri (2006) indicated the effect of content familiarity and language ability on reading comprehension of Low- and High- ability of Saudi students of English as a foreign language. In this research 132 male and female students participated to perform two reading comprehension tests on the familiar and unfamiliar texts. The results showed that when student read the familiar text facilitated reading comprehension, and the language ability had a major effect on the comprehension of students at different levels. The research displayed that language ability had a significant role in comprehending the unfamiliar text.

Pritchard (1990) examined the role of the cultural schemata on the reading comprehension processes of the 11th grade readers with an American or Palauan background. In that study two groups read two texts in their native language which was related to the funeral ceremonies. Then they had to give verbal reports of what they read. He concluded that cultural schemata had an effect on their strategies of reading and their comprehension.

Thus, the main goal of this study was to investigate the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension by using some texts which are related to the culture of the new language and to answer the following question:

Does cultural knowledge have any effect on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

In this study, sixty pre-intermediate learners both male and female aged 13-18, were selected from three classes in a language institute in Aliabad, northern Iran. Their first language was Persian and they had studied English for 5 years. They were randomly divided into three groups, a control group and two experimental groups. The control group did not receive any treatment, while one of the experimental groups (BC) received texts of British culture and the other group (P-BC) received texts of both British as well as Persian culture.

Instrumentation

Background Questionnaire

It covered issues such as the participants' age, gender, first language status, their parents' socio-educational background and job. Based on this test all of the learners' mother tongue was Persian and learning English was very important for them especially for academic purposes.

Proficiency Test

In order to be assured of the homogeneity of the control and experimental groups in terms of English language proficiency, NELSON test, series 400B, after being piloted on a similar group of twenty students, was administered one day before the pretest. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice items in four parts of cloze tests, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The time allotted was 40 minutes.

Reading Comprehension Test

The test included some authentic reading comprehension materials. It consisted of twenty multiple choice items. It was used as pretest and posttest and the time allotted was 15 minutes. The learners in the three groups were administered the test as the pretest before any treatments and the posttest after the instructional treatment.

Treatment

To gain the purpose of this study, eight texts of British culture and five texts of Iranian culture were selected. The learners in group 2 (experimental group 1) were exposed to texts on British culture (Guy Fawkes' Night, Easter, Shrove Tuesday, Valentine's Day, Lent, Ash Wednesday, Mother's Day, and New Year), while the learners in group three (experimental group two) received texts on both British culture as well as Persian one (Ramadan, Mother's Day in Iran, Valentine's Day finds a niche in Islamic Iran, Chahar Shanbeh Soori, and Norooz).

Procedure

To begin with, the learners in all the three groups received an Individual Background Questionnaire, The Attitudinal Questionnaire and the pretest. For the next eight sessions, the learners in group two were presented to eight texts of British culture and the learners in group three were exposed to both these texts of British culture and Iranian culture. Finally, they were all administered the same reading test as posttest. The data were analyzed by SPSS software.

Results

To find the answer to the research question, the data were collected and analyzed by ANOVA. An initial ANOVA indicated that there was no significant group effect on the pretest means ($F=.280$, $df_1=2$, $df_2=59$, $p=.757$). It shows that the groups had similar variances and similarities at the time of pretesting. Additionally, based on the Scheffe multi-comparison table, the degree of difference is bigger than .05 which indicates that the groups were similar at the beginning.

After posttesting the three groups, one-way ANOVA was run into the investigation. As table 1 shows the performance of the participants on the reading test in the posttest, there was a significant difference in the three groups.

Table 1: ANOVA Results for the Posttest in Three Groups

ANOVA

Posttest					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	230.533	2	115.267	34.007	.000
Within Groups	193.200	57	3.389		
Total	423.733	59			

A scheffe test was also run to compare the groups two by two. As table 2 displays, there was a significant difference between the learners in three groups in the posttest. The learners in group three (P-BC) did better than learners in group two (BC) in the posttest and learners in group two outperformed the ones in group one.

Table 2: Scheffe Test in the Three Groups

Multiple Comparisons

**Posttest
Scheffe**

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-3.20000*	.58219	.000	-4.6633	-1.7367
	3	-4.70000*	.58219	.000	-6.1633	-3.2367
2	1	3.20000*	.58219	.000	1.7367	4.6633
	3	-1.50000*	.58219	.043	-2.9633	-.0367
3	1	4.70000*	.58219	.000	3.2367	6.1633
	2	1.50000*	.58219	.043	.0367	2.9633

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion

As mentioned above, most of the learners in this study were in the same range of attitude based on the Attitudinal Questionnaire and they sounded very eager to learn new things about the British culture. They also wanted to learn English to improve their knowledge about how to be able to meet and speak with foreigners, to have enjoyable experiences. The present study indicated that in order to improve learners' knowledge about knowing the culture of new language, they should study about the culture of their language while learning a new language. Thus, with respect to the research question: "Does cultural knowledge have an effect on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners?", it can be said that the scores of learners in P-BC group increased from pretest to posttest and the learners in P-BC group outperformed the ones in the other two groups.

The result of this study can be a support to the study conducted by Hayati (2009). In that study there were four groups in which every group received a kind of listening about Target Culture, International Target Culture, Source Culture and Culture-Free. The result of the study showed that the learners' listening comprehension who received the culture of target language increased. So, it is a good idea to select different listening materials which are related to the target language and make the learners aware of what they are acquiring.

Further, the result of this study can be in congruent with the results of the studies by Erten and Razi (2002) and Jalilfar and Assi (2008) in which nativizing short stories of the target language to the native language can be a good way for improving learners' reading comprehension.

In addition, the result of this study can confirm what Rashidi and Heidari Soureshjani (2011) did in this regard. They examined the effect of teaching culturally-based texts on the Persian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' motivation and reading performance. The result of this study indicated that teaching cultural-oriented materials is a parameter which helped learners have better reading comprehension performance, Furthermore, it increased their motivation to acquire a foreign language and be able to apply all skills in a good way.

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Moreover, the result of the present study can be a support to the studies conducted by Al-Shumaimeri (2005) and Grath-McCullogh (2008). The findings of those studies displayed that content familiarity and cultural knowledge increased learners' reading comprehension and facilitated the process of reading comprehension. Consequently, the learners who were familiar with the culture of target language had higher scores on reading comprehension.

Finally, the result of this study can be in congruent with the findings of the studies by Demir (2012) and Li and Lai (2012) who studied the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension. The results of those studies indicated that background knowledge had a significant role in the learners' reading comprehension performance since it helped them to become aware of their cultures. So it improved the process of reading comprehension and, it affected their minds and representation so that they could have better performance.

To sum up, this study, like the above-mentioned studies, indicated that if learners receive the texts which are related to the both culture (British and Iranian culture), they will have better comprehension performance in contrast to the learners who just received the texts only about British culture. Consequently, having better knowledge about both British and Iranian culture can have a positive effect on learners' reading comprehension performance.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

As noted earlier, the goal of this study was to explore the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension. Teaching a culture is an important parameter in learning a foreign language as Chastain (1988) stipulated 'it is an integral component of the course content.' On the other hand, Anderson (1999 as cited in Li & Lai, 2012) maintained that 'reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and reading material in building meaning.' Thus, it can be concluded that having good knowledge about cultures while reading can be a big help for EFL learners.

English learners are able to communicate with the foreigners while they are familiar with the culture of the target language since it is possible that they know how they behave in an

especial time or situation with the people in the target culture, so teaching culture of target language is necessary and should be included in a course for language learners.

In sum, English language learners need to improve their knowledge about British culture, so the designers of course books should add some parts which are related to the culture of English language and the teachers should come to know the importance of teaching culture and should try to increase learners' knowledge about the new language culture. Teachers can also use different ways to teach cultures, English as well as Persian ones and they should attempt to make some situations for learners while they get and be familiar with the British culture explicitly and ask learners to compare the cultures of two languages. Then, learners can have enough knowledge about the cultures of two languages and they are able to comprehend it in a better way.

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