

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL SCHEMATA IN INFERENTIAL READING COMPREHENSION: AN INVESTIGATION IN THE IRANIAN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Reading is an important skill in many foreign language teaching situations and is valuable for both teachers and EFL students because it provides great opportunity for EFL learners to be exposed to the target language and improve their language proficiency by receiving appropriate input. For this purpose, 67 BA students, majoring in English language and literature at Hakim Sabzevari University were the participants. There were two groups of participants, one group served as the experimental group and the other as the control group. The students' schema in experimental group was activated by giving them prior knowledge (background knowledge) while the participants in control group received no treatment. The results of the t-test showed that the means of experimental and control group on the three tests were significantly different. Thus, it can be concluded that, providing related cultural background about the text has a significant effect on inferential reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners since readers are expected to attain the writers intended meaning by linking their existing information with what they read. Therefore, according to study's reports it can be stated that conducting readers' cross-cultural background knowledge is in fact a powerful instructional strategy to EFL reading comprehension. As an implication of the study, administrators can use certain programs to train language teachers on the appropriate methods of activating students' schema before reading cultural texts.

Keywords: Cultural schemata, prior knowledge Reading comprehension,

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is an important skill in many foreign language teaching situations and is valuable for both teachers and EFL students because it provides great opportunity for EFL learners to get exposure

to the target language and improve their language proficiency by receiving appropriate input. However, reading is not the only applicable source for getting linguistic input but maybe it is the best source for EFL learners. Anderson (1999) believed that "Reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page ... (a) synergy occurs in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the reader's background knowledge and experiences." (p. 1). Therefore, he has emphasized the importance of prior knowledge in reading comprehension. Similarly, Goodman stated that reading is a 'psycholinguistic guessing game', and readers are supposed to infer the text's meaning based on minimal linguistic information, and optimum use of activated background knowledge. (Goodman, 1982)

Inference is at the heart of the reading comprehension (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). It involves reasoning beyond the text. Inferences are driven by schemas, or previous (background) knowledge. Hence, without considering schema theory, an understanding of inferential comprehension is not possible (Fincher-Kiefer, 1992). Schema theory is defined as the reader's ability to use previous knowledge to learn from text and comprehend it (Ajideh, 2003). The readers' previous knowledge or background knowledge and the previously acquired knowledge structures are called schemata (Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Adams, 1979; Ajideh, 2003). Inferential reading comprehension is often described as the ability to read between the lines. In this ability the reader combines the literal content of a text with the prior knowledge, intuition, and imagination for conjecture or to make hypotheses (Carr & Thompson, 1996).

The importance of background knowledge in the reading process has been discussed within schema theory (Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). It is the background knowledge that enables the reader to make predictions about the text and plays a vital role in text comprehension and interpretation.

When teachers give background knowledge to the learners, they will link their stored knowledge and the information of the text faster and easier. Piaget (1972) stated that comprehension is the process of integrating old knowledge and new information through accommodation and assimilation. Possessing old knowledge about the topic is as vital as new information in the comprehension process. The lack of background knowledge causes difficulty for the learners, especially while reading culturally-loaded texts which have unfamiliar concepts (McCarthy, 1990). If the reader has no experience and previous knowledge about the content to apply while reading, then he or she will not be able to achieve the hidden meanings that of the text.

The readers' passive role became active in 1970s (Aron, 1986) and then in recent years, this active role was changed by an interactive one. This substitution of an active role by an interactive one was the result of using pre-reading activities to activate students' schema before reading texts. It was found that various types of pre-reading activities done in reading comprehension program can simplify the comprehension of short stories which are seen as interlocking mental structures representing readers' knowledge (Alderson, 2000).

Unfortunately, the readers' background knowledge or schema is not activated by warm up activities in most EFL classes (Ahmadi & Gilakjani, 2012; Maghsoudi, 2012; McCarthy, 1990; Rahman, 2007). When teachers use materials about the target culture specially occasions like Halloween or Easter it is necessary to give background knowledge to students (Wang, 2011). Due to the shortage of research in this area in Iran (Maghsoudi, 2012) and the importance of reading comprehension and schema activation (Nassaji, 2002), this study seems significant. The main purpose of the study is to determine whether schema activation has any effect on the reading comprehension ability of cultural texts among Iranian EFL learners or not.

1.1 Research Question

Does cultural schema have any effect on inferential reading comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners?

This study aimed at considering the role of cultural schemata in reading comprehension in the Iranian EFL Context. The main purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of schema activation through providing background knowledge on the EFL learners' comprehension of the culturally-loaded texts. The study addressed the following null hypothesis:

H0 1. There is no significant difference in the performance of advanced EFL learners who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge on inferential reading comprehension tests.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Schema Activation Effect on Reading Comprehension

In the 1970s, many researchers began to conclude that reading comprehension is a process in which readers use their knowledge to aid them in comprehending the texts better and not a process in which they try to get information from the texts. In primary theories on this matter, the

passive reader changed to an active one. Today, reading is not an active skill but it is an interactive skill, in which the readers extract meaning from texts by the interaction of their schema (Carter & Nunan, 2002). Studies on reading comprehension showed that readers comprehend texts with familiar themes more rapidly than texts with unfamiliar themes. When the author and the readers' cultural background is different, the readers usually do not understand the texts completely and appropriately.

The results of this schema activation revealed that the cultural origin of the passage had a much more influence on comprehension than the syntactic or semantic complexity of the text. Chen and Graves (1995) also investigated the effects of previewing and giving background information on Taiwanese college students. The results showed that this treatment (previewing and giving background knowledge) improved students' understanding of the stories. Similarly, in a study by Johnson (1981) the effect of the cultural origin of a passage and the linguistic complexity of it was examined in a group of Iranian ESL students and American monolingual students. One group read two culturally unfamiliar English stories: one of the stories was related to American folklore and the other was related to Iranian folklore. The other group read the same stories in simplified English. The results revealed that the cultural origin of the story had a significant effect on the comprehension of the participants than the level of semantic and syntactic complexity. The results of Johnson's examination (1981) also revealed that for the native English students both the cultural origin and the level of syntactic and semantic complexity affected the students' comprehension. (The subjects' reading comprehension was tested through the use of multiple-choice questions.)

Many studies from other L2 studies that provided cultural background to L2 readers have the same results and affirmed that providing background knowledge for the readers plays an important role in learning text information (Gatbonton & Tucker, 1971; Graves et al., 1983; Dole et al., 1991). These findings provide convincing evidence that activating readers' schema and giving them background knowledge will help them to have a better comprehension.

2.2 Schema Activation

The importance of background knowledge (previous knowledge, prior knowledge or schema) in the process of schema activation and reading comprehension is emphasized by researchers, teachers, and material developers (Hudson, 1982; Johnson, 1981; Steffensen et al., 1979; Pritchard, 1990; Roller, 1990; Carrell, 1987). According to Anderson and Pearson (1984) schema

is defined as the “previous knowledge that is already stored in reader’s memory and plays an important role in interpreting new information and allows it to become a part of the knowledge store”. Alptekin (2003) stated that there are three types of schema: content schema, formal schema, and abstract schema. Content schema is defined as knowledge of the world (Carrell, 1983) and is divided into two different types of schema: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge; the first one is being the knowledge which may or may not be related to a particular text and the second is being directly related to text and the topic (Alderson, 2000). Through schema-theoretic models, readers are expected to make a connection between the text they are reading and their previous experiences.

Schema activation is a process in which a language learner recreate an experience, so new information can be associated with what is already known. Therefore, schema activation is connecting the learner’s stored or previous knowledge with written information. So, in activating schema, the readers try to relate the events of life to the text (Cook, 1997).

Bensoussan (1998) believed that comprehension is the interaction between bottom-up processing from statements expressed by the texts and top-down processing from activated schema. Cook (1997) also indicated that schema theory is the process in which readers use a combination of their prior knowledge and experience with the text they are reading. In EFL teaching situations students must deal with the content, which may include unfamiliar target culture cues and the linguistic complexities of a text such as syntax (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). It is necessary to activate the readers’ background knowledge before the process of reading comprehension by providing pre-reading activities which would lead them to a better comprehension (Yule, 2000). Activating schema is a concept that revolves around accessing the individual learner’s prior knowledge of the information being learned. Schema activation has a crucial role but it is often ignored in teaching reading texts (Yin, 1985).

2.3 Background Knowledge

According to Steven’s (1980) definition, background knowledge is what the reader already knows about a topic. Prior knowledge or background knowledge has two main components: “our assimilated direct experiences of life and its manifold activities, and our assimilated verbal experiences and encounters” (Swales, 1990, p.9). The real information and message of texts is contributed by the readers with interaction between the printed texts and knowledge of the topic, vocabulary, and structure of the text. In activating the previous knowledge, the reader is linking

his information to what he is reading. Brown (2001) stated that texts do not by themselves carry meaning, it is the reader who brings information and culture to the printed texts.

Background knowledge may be an old stored information or a recent experience of the reader. It means that what we understand from different texts depends on the schema that readers possess while reading and comprehending texts. Schema activation focuses on students' comprehension of texts and helps them in understanding the purpose of texts.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

It is important to choose a group of participants which represents the general characteristics of the population. Researchers believed that this study needs a highly homogeneous sample, because the research want to compare a characteristic in two groups which are nearly similar to each other. So a total of 67 advanced students served as the participants of the study. The selection of participants was done very carefully to avoid the possibility of unsystematic variations. All the participants were native Persian speakers. On average, they have been studying English as a foreign language for four years. In addition to similarity in proficiency, all the participants shared the same culture, and native language. In order to make sure that the subjects are homogeneous, they took the Oxford Placement Test (OPT is a standardized test from Oxford University Press that can verify English level of students and helps to place them into the appropriate level class for language courses. It can also be used to measure the students' general language ability) and were categorized into two groups. One group of students ($n = 33$) served as the experimental and the other group ($n = 34$) was chosen as the control group.

3.2 Materials

3.2.1 Oxford Placement Test

To ensure that all the participants were homogeneous and at the same level, the Oxford Placement Test consisting of 60 multiple-choice items was administered to them. The Oxford Placement Test (OOPT) is a reliable and efficient means of grading and placing students into different levels from Oxford University Press. This test helps to place students into the appropriate level of English language. It can also be used as a quick measure of a student's general language ability.

3.2.2 Culturally loaded texts

For the purpose of this study, preparing and applying texts that are culturally loaded is necessary. This study applied three English texts regarding participants' interest. The first text was about the origin and customs of Easter (one of the most important festivals in the Christian calendar, celebrated throughout the world with great pomp and show) and contains 408 words. The second text was about Halloween (one of the world's oldest holidays and is still celebrated today in a number of countries such as Mexico, Ireland, Canada, the United States and other Latin American countries) and contains 433 words. The third text was about Hocktide Festival (one of the best known of all ancient English ceremonies still taking place in the twenty-first century) and contains 425 words.

3.2.3 Developed Reading Comprehension Tests

Other instruments of this study were three multiple-choice reading comprehension tests that were administered in independent sessions with specific time period between them. The first test was about the origin and customs of Easter (one of the most important festivals in the Christian calendar, celebrated throughout the world with great pomp and show). The second test was about Halloween (one of the world's oldest holidays and is still celebrated today in a number of countries such as Mexico, Ireland, Canada, the United States and other Latin American countries). The third test was about Hocktide Festival. All tests aimed at testing the participants' inferential reading comprehension of the cultural content of texts. Typical holidays and festivals and their related customs are culturally-loaded and are appropriate for researches in this field and it seems that comprehending this kind of texts is difficult for students from another cultural background.

As a pilot study, the tests were administered to a group of 10 students to achieve the indices of item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID). The reliability of the tests was computed by the KR-21 method as 0.70. The result showed that six items from the developed reading comprehension tests were inappropriate and had to be discarded and substituted by suitable items.

3.3 Procedure

First, a pilot study was conducted using ten advanced EFL learners from BA English students. The students involved in the pilot study did not participate in the main study and they were characteristically similar to the main participants. The pilot test was deemed important for

identifying any problems and omissions as well as checking time spent in responding. Following the analysis of the pilot study data, ambiguous or unclear items were either rephrased or removed.

The reading comprehension test was administered to both the experimental and control. They consist of 14 multiple choice questions in written form in order to find out the students' inferential reading comprehension with and without schema activation. Members of the experimental group are the ones who receive the treatment of the experiment. They were exposed to 3 training sessions of activating their schema through providing background knowledge.

The experiment was done over two months. A sample of Oxford placement test was conducted to ensure that the groups are homogeneous and at the same level of proficiency. All the tests and were conducted during eight weeks as follows:

Week 1	➔	Administering Oxford Placement Test
Week 3	➔	Treatment 1 (Halloween)
Week 5	➔	Treatment 2 (Easter)
Week 7	➔	Treatment 3 (Hocktide Festival)
Week 8	➔	Administering Rebecca Oxford Questionnaire

Homogeneous students were randomly put in two groups (Experimental group and Control group). Selected reading passages with cultural background knowledge were presented for the experimental group and later culture bound questions were conducted. The relevant and appropriate background knowledge was provided for the experimental group. For instance, if the cultural content of a reading text was about Halloween, the researcher provided the students with background knowledge of Halloween customs. The students in control group were provided with no pre-reading activities. Why such topics were chosen? An important point that should be mentioned here is that the research used texts about Halloween, Easter and Hocktide, because this kind of texts contain high load of cultural information.

Members of the experimental group were the ones who received the treatment of the experiment and while the experimental group was receiving the training sessions, the control group was receiving no particular treatment. The experimental group and the control group were separated from each other. Participants were asked to read each English text carefully and then the papers

were collected. After that the researcher administered the inferential comprehension tests. Finally, all the groups were asked to answer Rebecca Oxford's questionnaire to express their opinions and attitudes toward providing background knowledge for them. They were asked not to write their names on the comprehension tests and the questionnaire. In these ways the consent of the participants was obtained. Rebecca Oxford questionnaire is one of the most popular instrument constructed by an American psychologist Rebecca Oxford for measuring learning strategies, the so-called SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning), which was validated in numerous languages and cultures around the world.

The group was cautiously not taught explicitly the texts in the training sessions. While the experimental group was receiving the training sessions, the control group received no particular treatment. The post-test was administered after the training sessions to control any possible short-term memory effects.

3.3.1 Data Analysis Procedures

In this study, each participant had three scores for their performance on three independent inferential comprehension tests based on three culturally loaded texts. Then, in order to see if the treatment had any effect on their inferential comprehension, independent samples t-test (because there were two separate sets of independent samples) was used to analyze the data. In order to see if the treatment given to the experimental group had affected the students' inferential reading comprehension, the mean scores (post-tests) of the experimental group were compared to those of the control group in each test. Also, in order to know the participant' attitude toward providing cultural background knowledge for them, they were asked to fill up Rebecca Oxford questionnaire (SILL) which consisted of 50 items and an open-ended question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to see if the treatment given to the experimental group would have affected the students' inferential reading comprehension, the performance of the experimental group was compared to those of the control group. The research question of this study is:

1. Does cultural schema have any effect on inferential reading comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners?

It was transformed into the following null hypothesis:

H0 1. There is no significant difference in the performance of advanced EFL learners who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any background knowledge on inferential reading comprehension tests.

Table 1 is presented in order to show the distribution of data and their frequencies of the culturally-loaded texts in control and experimental groups. Independent-sample t test was used in this research to examine the differences between experimental and control groups regarding their familiarity with the cultural content of 3 texts. The mean scores of the experimental and control groups in text 1, text 2, and text 3 are given in Table 4.1.

As the data in Table 1 shows, the mean score of the experimental group on the first text was 5.00 and in the control group was 2.79.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics of Experimental and Control Group on Test1, 2, and 3*

	exp. cont	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Text 1 (Halloween)	experimental	34	3	6	5.00
	control	33	1	5	2.79
Text 2 (Easter)	experimental	34	4	7	5.50
	control	33	1	4	2.61
Text 3 (Hocktide)	experimental	34	4	7	5.68
	control	33	1	5	2.39

The first text was about Halloween which was a culturally-loaded text and included no pictures and definitions. The essential background knowledge was provided for the experimental group as the treatment but the control group received no background knowledge. In the experimental

group, the students' scores fell between 3 to 6 out of 7 and in the control group it fell between 1 to 5 for the first test.

The second text was about Easter which is a Christian holiday and next to Halloween, it is the biggest holiday for the sale of candy. For this text, in the experimental group, the students' scores fell between 4 to 7 out of 7 and in the control group the scores fell between 1 to 4. The mean score of the experimental group was 5.50, for the control group it was 2.61.

The third text was about Hocktide festival which is one of the best known of all ancient English ceremonies still taking place in the twenty-first century. According to the third test the students' mean score in the experimental group was 5.68 and their scores fell between 4 to 7 and between 1 to 4 out of 7 in the control group with the mean score of 2.39.

The first null hypothesis of this research aimed at investigating the difference between the mean scores of the test1 (text1), test2 (text2), and test3 (text3) of the experimental and control group to see whether the treatment of the research had any significant effect on the students' performance on inferential reading comprehension or not. To test this hypothesis, the index of t-test was computed.

This shows that the experimental group had a higher mean score than control group regarding text 1 (experimental mean = 5.00, SD = 0.92), (control mean = 2.79, SD = 0.99), text 2 (experimental mean = 5.50, SD = 0.96), (control mean = 2.61, SD = 1.12), text 3 (experimental mean = 5.68, SD = 0.94), (control mean = 2.39, SD = 1.12). This result provides an affirmative answer to the research question 1; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Results of t-test showed that students differ significantly in text 1 ($t = 0.1361$, $df = 31$, $p < .000$), text 2 ($t = 0.3576$, $df = 32$, $p < .000$), text 3 ($t = 1.7199$, $df = 32$, $p < .000$).

Therefore, Table 1 outlines that the participants in experimental group had higher scores in the three texts. The mean scores of the students in the experimental group showed a significant difference and thus it supports the claim that schema activation can enhance inferential reading comprehension ability of EFL learners.

Table 2: *The Distribution of Data and Their Frequencies of the Culturally-loaded Texts in Control and Experimental Groups*

	exp. cont	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
	experimental	34	5.00	0.92	0.16
Text 1	control	33	2.79	0.99	0.17
(Halloween)					
	experimental	34	5.50	0.96	0.16
Text 2	control	33	2.61	1.12	0.19
(Easter)					
	experimental	34	5.68	0.94	0.16
Text 3	control	33	2.39	1.12	0.19
(Hocktide)					

Table 2 outlines that the participants in the experimental group had significantly high scores in the tests. Therefore, because the significance was less than 0.05, the first null hypothesis of the study was rejected. It was exhibited that the means of experimental and control group on the three tests were significantly different and thus, it supports this claim that schema activation through providing background knowledge can enhance inferential reading comprehension ability of advanced EFL learners.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this section, first an important point about schema theory and then the outcome of the study is stated. According to the schema theory, reading comprehension is the activation of appropriate schema and its interaction with the content of the texts. In other words, reading comprehension is the formation of a connection between the reader's prior knowledge and the information of texts.

According to Carrell (1987), foreign language comprehension failure may be due to mismatches between the schema possessed by the reader and those in the text.

Although reading is a fast way of acquiring knowledge and it includes important parts of language learning like vocabulary and grammar, developing reading skills in most of the EFL classes is almost neglected. So this study deals with this issue and has focused on the role of cultural schemata in reading comprehension. Its aim is to increase foreign language teachers' awareness about the necessity of schema activation through giving background knowledge to students to enhance their understanding of reading passages. Examining the role of schema activation through providing prior knowledge to increase readers' comprehension is found to be significantly beneficial for them. This leads us to derive the conclusion that schema activation is an effective way in improving Iranian EFL students' comprehension in reading texts.

So providing appropriate background knowledge of a text is essential for EFL students in comprehending especially culturally-loaded texts. One implication of the study is for teachers to develop special programs and methods of schema activation before reading texts. Another one is that by providing background knowledge, students first, learn the synonym and definition of new vocabularies and then they become familiar with its usage in text.

According to above reports it can be stated that conducting readers' cross-cultural background knowledge is in fact a powerful instructional strategy to EFL reading comprehension. The familiar content of a text is an important criterion for material selection in teaching reading comprehension and significantly affects students' performance. All in all, no matter how well a reader may know a language, he or she cannot read in that language with good comprehension if the subject matter or the content of the text is one he or she knows absolutely nothing about.

Finally, however this study has focused on schema activation and its role in inferential reading comprehension of culturally-loaded texts, the results and implications of this study are equally applicable to other less culturally-bound materials. Proper background knowledge about a text is an important factor in comprehension, specifically while encountering scientific texts, news, stories, and other texts as it is for culture-specific texts.

The results of the study may be of great value for language teachers, writers, and program administrators. As the first implication, teachers should develop special programs and methods of schema activation before reading texts. It is important that teachers mention cultural words and concepts that will cause difficulties for most students.

“A teacher of reading might thus be viewed as a teacher of relevant information as well as a teacher of reading skill” (Stevens, 1980). Teachers need to be aware of the important role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. As a matter of fact, EFL teachers can help students in making relationships between their personal knowledge and experience and text.

As the second implication, administrators can use certain programs to train language teachers on the appropriate methods of activating students’ schema before reading cultural texts. Based on the research results providing programs for reading teachers to be familiarized with the target language as well as culture seems necessary. Reading teachers should be aware of the findings and implications of the studies on the role of schema activation on reading comprehension of EFL learners. This, will affect the teachers’ view about pre-reading activities.

It is really worthwhile to spend a specific amount of time on enabling activities. In this respect, teachers should activate two types of prior knowledge in the process of reading comprehension: subject knowledge and culture knowledge. Subject knowledge is related to the students’ prior knowledge of the subject. What students have learnt through their interactions with the world is called world knowledge. Both of them are crucial to facilitate students’ reading comprehension.

As a whole, activating learners’ schemata, especially when introducing new cultural material seems crucial.

As the third implication, the study proposed that increasing learners’ cultural understanding of the target language culture to make them aware of the life and thought of people who speak the target language is really necessary, since students eventually achieve better performance in reading comprehension

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