Zanjan University

Faculty of Humanities

English Language Department

Nativizing Cultural Elements of English Texts and Its Influence on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English Language
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching
English as a Foreign Language

Mina Haghighi

Supervisor:

Dr. Fariba Mobini

Advisor:

Dr. Seyed Hesamuddin Aliasin

Zanjan, Iran

February, 2013

Abstract

Understanding culturally-loaded texts depends on having sufficient cultural background knowledge about them. A common problem of non-native speakers in comprehending cultural aspects of some texts is directly related to their lack of familiarity with cultural topics. Text nativization is introduced as an effective solution for filling this gap. The present study aims specifically to examine the influence of text nativization on EFL learners' literal as well as inferential comprehension of short stories. One hundred sophomores majoring in English translation at Shiraz Azad University were selected as the sample based on the results of the first version of Oxford Quick Placement test. The participants were assigned to two groups, namely, experimental and control groups. To carry out the research, two culturally-loaded original short stories by American writers were chosen and deliberately nativized for facilitating learner's comprehension. The control and experimental groups received the original and nativized versions of stories, respectively. To find out the effect of nativization, the participants' comprehension was assessed through some literal and inferential multiple-choice questions based on the stories. The results of data analysis indicated that students who received the nativized versions did significantly better in their comprehension than those who received the original versions. In other words, nativization had a positive effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension, although such effect was significantly more remarkable on the inferential level as compared to the literal level.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, Nativization, literal comprehension, Inferential comprehension, Culture.

Acknowledgement

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

CHAPTER ONE

Preliminaries

1.1. Introduction

Over the years, reading comprehension received the special focus in foreign language learning (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p.273). Several studies considered reading as a major source of comprehensible input that many learners need to learn (Eskey, D. E., 2002). Background knowledge, cultural knowledge, schema theory, and more specifically, nativization are taken into account as factors affecting reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Erten, & Razi, 2009; Freimuth, 2008; Razi, 2004).This chapter presents the background related to the study. Then the statement of the problem, the significance of the study as well as research questions and hypotheses are discussed. The last part of the chapter deals with the limitations of the study.

1.2. Background

1.2.1. The importance of reading.

Reading as the most important academic language skill (Carrell, 1988a; Grabe & Stoller, 2001), can be defined loosely as the ability to make sense of written or printed symbols. According to Mitchell (1982, p. 1) "The reader uses the symbols to guide the recovery of information from his/her memory and subsequently uses this information to construct a plausible interpretation of the writer's message".

Researchers defined reading comprehension in many ways to support the idea that reading is a necessity for learning a language. Sultan (2003) believes that "reading is the main route to the command of language" (as cited in Eideh, 2010). Grabe and Stoller (2001) define reading as "the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately". Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 273) mentioned two reasons for the importance of reading in language teaching. First, "many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals". Second, "various pedagogical purposes served by written text help reading to receive this special focus". After decades of study researchers agreed that reading is a cognitive process of decoding meaning of a text. Snow (2002, p. 11) stated that comprehension includes three important elements that can be marked as "the reader who is doing the comprehending", "the text that is to be comprehend", and "the activity in which comprehension is a part". The interaction of these elements leads to full comprehension. The main purpose of reading is to get the true message of a text that the writer encoded in the printed page. Harmer (2001) believes that "a reader uses a variety of clues to understand what the writer is implying or suggesting, so that the reader can see beyond the literal meaning of the words" (as cited in Razi, 2004). Schema defined as the background knowledge that enables the reader to make predictions about the text plays a vital role in text interpretation. Accordingly, successful interpretation depends to a large extent on shared schemata.

For many years reading was considered to be a receptive process, while this skill is predominately conceived of as an interactive process. Perfetti (1985) states that "reading as an interactive process requires various mental operations to be concurrently performed or very

closely in time. When students read, they are likely to proceed from processing the text in smaller units of language to longer conceptual units" (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009).

Bottom-up processing and top-down processing are the basic techniques utilized in processing a text. In bottom-up processing the reader obtains the meaning from the letters and words of a text, whereas in top-down processing he/ she considers a text as a whole and connects the information of the text to his/her existing knowledge, thereby interpreting the text and getting the intended message. It is believed that true interaction of these two processes, i.e., the reader's text-based as well as knowledge-based process, leads to full comprehension of a text. According to Alptekin (2006, p. 494), "in processing texts, readers combine literal comprehension, based on lower-level cognitive processes of reading such as lexical access and syntactic parsing, with inferential comprehension, based on higher-level cognitive processes such as the text-base of comprehension (to understand what the text says) and the situation model of interpretation (to understand what it is about)".

Each of these processes requires a memory space. Readers spend much time and energy on micro-level linguistic features when read a text. As a result they are left with a limited capacity to engage with macro-level linguistic features, i.e., the textual analysis and activation of their prior knowledge. The cognitive load can be lessened by activation of the background knowledge that readers bring to the text (Carrell, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Nassaji, 2002; Pulido, 2004 as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009).

1.2.2. Background knowledge and schema theory.

Background knowledge is defined as one's previously acquired comprehensive knowledge as well as the particular information on a specific topic (Huang, 2009, p. 138). This leads to the recognition of the vital role background knowledge plays in reading process.

The same point is stressed by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) as well as Anderson (1999). They

believe that a reader's comprehension depends on his/her ability to relate the information

he/she gets from the text to the pre-existing background knowledge. The role of background

knowledge in reading comprehension can be discussed within schema theory (Bartleltt, 1932;

Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983 as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009, p. 61). An important issue about

schema is noted by Anderson and Pearson (1988, p. 255). They mentioned that "a reader's

schemata, or the knowledge already stored in memory, function in the process of interpreting

new information and allowing it to enter and become a part of knowledge store". Another

contention about schema theory is put forward by Nunan (1999, p. 201). He mentions that

schema is restructuring past experiences into mental frameworks that helps us make sense of

new experiences.

To shed light on the important role of background knowledge in reading

comprehension, Razi (2004) refers to the distinction made by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983),

Carrell (1987, 1988), and Alderson (2000) between schemata types. Formal as well as content

schema, and cultural, or abstract schema are the different types of schemata that readers need

in order to comprehend a text and get the writer's intended message. By formal schema, they

point to background knowledge related to the formal and rhetorical organizational structures

of different types of texts. Alptekin (2006, p. 495) believes that content schema is the reader's

background knowledge of the conceptual content of the text. This statement implies that

readers should bring some knowledge to the text when they read it. Brown (2001) as cited in

Razi (2004) believes that this knowledge can be about people, the world, culture and the

universe. Disregarding this fact will lead to focusing on reading the printed pages that are in

front of the readers without understanding anything about the gist of the text. Oller (1995), as

stated in Alptekin (2006) believes that comprehension, especially with respect to inference, is not solely confined to the activation of content and/or formal schemas. More powerful than either of these two, is the presence of a third trait, namely, an abstract or cultural schema, which is a logical and general embodiment of the two. The third type of schema, viz., cultural schema, is the core of this study. According to Oller (1995), cultural schema "involves cultural familiarity and helps readers to reconstruct the story line through referring to more personally and culturally relevant scripts" (as cited in Erten and Razi, 2009).

       1.2.3. Cultural knowledge and nativization.

       A highly influential aspect of schema theory relates to the effective role of cultural schema or cultural background knowledge on reading comprehension. Before looking at the effect of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension, the term "culture" has to be explained. Many researchers attempted to define the term of culture, however the definitions provided by Zeighan (2001), Chastain (1988), and Brown (2000) are among the mostly referred ones. Zeighan (2001) as cited in Freimuth (2008) believes that culture embodies the shared beliefs, values, and practices of a given group of people. Likewise, Chastain (1988), and Brown (2000) as mentioned in Razi (2004) define culture as "a way of life that characterizes a group of people in a given period of time according to their ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools". It is believed that language and culture are inseparable. Lamerand (1977, p.64) mentions that "for many language teachers and linguists, language is above all a vehicle of culture, and if language use does not express a culture, it is empty". In line with this, a quotation from Beaugrande (1980, p.30) points out that "the question of how people know what is going on in a text is a special case of the question of how people know what is going on in the world at all".

As mentioned before, the reader uses cultural schema to recreate the text and make it more relevant to his/her personal as well as cultural experiences. Cultural familiarity or nativization which is part and parcel of cultural schema can facilitate the process of reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Jalilifar, & Assi, 2008; Razi, 2004)

In their study, Jalilifar and Assi (2008, p. 62) referred to readers' problems in activating their cultural schema during reading. Failing to do may lead to so many degrees of lack of comprehension. Also Erten and Razi (2009) state that "when reading texts with unfamiliar cultural patterns, L2 readers will often revert to their own cultural norms in an attempt to interpret the text, which may result in unsuccessful comprehension". Ketchum (2006, p. 23) believes that while native readers already possess the necessary cultural background knowledge when approaching a written text, non-native readers must overcome an added challenge of cultural unfamiliarity when processing written communication.

 On the other hand, Mckay (2003) states "a lot of non-native speakers of English made it undesirable and unnecessary for EFL learners to learn the culture of native speaker" (as cited in Rokhsari, 2012, p. 47). Accordingly, nativization can be considered a promising technique help learners who are learning English as a denationalized language (Alptekin, 1981) or for special purposes (Rokhsari, 2012).

Nativization focuses on text modification. In other words, the writer replaces the unfamiliar words of the text directly related to the target culture, with some familiar words for the learners. The logic behind it is that this process would help readers to activate their cultural schema more easily. Nativization can also help younger learners to comprehend a text more comprehensively. In other words, as the learners have not adequate cultural knowledge they understand the original texts inadequately. Accordingly, replacing the cultural cues of the

original texts with the cues of learners' own language can have a facilitative effect on understanding and interpreting the texts. One of the basic assumptions is that universality and theme of the original texts would not be change.

This study focuses on the influence of nativization on EFL learners' reading, especially with respect to literal and inferential comprehension. The researcher believes that nativizing cultural elements of English texts into the readers' L1 language would enhance comprehension and can be utilized as a technique for teachers who tend to teach reading comprehension in EFL contexts.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

Reading is a necessary skill for the learners not only for learning the language but also for obtaining knowledge. Although many readers read fluently in the second language, there is the possibility for them of not being able to understand the message conveyed in the reading. Apart from the reader's low proficiency level, the problem might result from insufficient cultural or background knowledge about the text (Binti Ismail and Binti Fadzil, 2010, pp. 1-2).

According to Anderson (1999), readers, when actually engaged in reading, need to have some background knowledge about the text. The role of background knowledge in comprehension is discussed within schema theory. The pursuit of this study is identifying the role of cultural schema on reading comprehension. The assumption is that non-native readers' failure in full comprehension of target texts is the result of inappropriate handling of cultural schemata in reading. Most of the reading texts in EFL reading classes in Iran include cultural elements, and because of teachers' lack of awareness regarding schema's role in reading comprehension, the activation of learners' background knowledge is not adequately pursued

(Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). One solution to this problem is the text nativization. As Alptekin (2006) mentioned, "nativization refers to the process of the sociological, semantic, and pragmatic adaptation of the textual and contextual cues of the original story into the language learner's own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact" (p.497).

1.4. Significance of the Study

One of the basic skills in language teaching is reading. There are some variables that affect students' comprehension, viz., motivation, attitude, gender, background knowledge, pre-reading activities, and schema among others. Cultural schema and nativization are topics of recent enquiries (Alptekin, 2006; Eideh, 2010; Erten and Razi, 2009; Razi, 2004; Rokhsari, 2012). A major focus in this respect is on nativization and cultural schema on reading comprehension in ESL settings (Carrell, 1987; Sasaki, 2000).

However, most teachers in EFL settings are non-native speakers of English who are not totally familiar with the target culture. Moreover, many foreign language students have negative attitudes towards the target language. Accordingly the need to investigate the influence of nativization on reading comprehension in EFL settings led to the designation of this topic for a careful consideration.

The monotonous atmosphere of reading classes is another aspect of the problem, which leads to low pedagogical outcomes. The researcher intended to enrich the reading process in an EFL setting, i.e. Iran, by implementing nativization according to the definition presented by Alptekin (2006, p. 497). It is hopeful that the results of this study may lead to change in pedagogy of reading especially in EFL settings and make the target texts more enjoyable and comprehensible for the nonnative speakers.

1.5. Purpose of the Study

This study aimed at investigating the influence of text nativization on learners' reading comprehension. More specifically, the study was an attempt to explore the relationship between nativizing cultural elements of English texts and learners' literal as well as inferential comprehension. Therefore, the purpose was to compare learners' performance on original texts, as well as the nativized texts.

1.6. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study seeks to discover the influence of nativization on reading comprehension of EFL learners by examining the following research questions:

Q1: Does nativizing cultural elements of English texts facilitate L2 learners' reading comprehension?

Q2: Does nativizing cultural elements of English texts have an influence on L2 learners' literal comprehension in reading?

Q3: Does nativizing cultural elements of English texts affect L2 learners' inferential comprehension in reading?

Considering the above mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses have been proposed:

$H_0 1$: Nativizing cultural elements of English texts does not facilitate L2 learners' reading comprehension.

$H_0 2$: Nativizing cultural elements of English texts does not have an influence on L2 learners' literal comprehension in reading.

$H_0 3$: Nativizing cultural elements of English texts does not affect L2 learners' inferential comprehension in reading.