Hakim Sabzevari University
Faculty of Letters and Humanities
Department of English Language and Literature

The Effects of Cultural Familiarity on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts (M.A.) in Teaching English as a Foreign

Language (TEFL)

By:

Hoda Ramezani

Supervisor:

Dr. Mohammad Davoudi

December, 2012

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In the Name of God

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Dedication

To my dear husband and my parents who offered me unconditioned love and support throughout my life.

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Abstract

This study explores the role of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. On the basis of the Michigan test scores, 60 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) university students were divided into two roughly equivalent proficiency groups which included the high proficiency and low proficiency groups of both males and females, each comprising 30 students who constituted two intact classes. Both the experimental and the control groups received one of the three short stories, while the experimental groups also received the background knowledge passage of the administered short story. In order to assess reading comprehension, they were asked to write free recall protocols based on what they had read. Scoring of the recall-protocols was based on *propositional analysis*; according to which two stages of analysis, qualitative and quantitative, were undertaken in this study. The results show that familiarity with culture of target language facilitates reading comprehension significantly. In addition, findings indicate that females of both low and high proficiency groups outperform males in the free written recall procedure. The study also reveals that cultural familiarity and language ability have significant effects on the students' comprehension performance. This is evidenced by the fact that high proficiency groups have tended to comprehend and remember more propositional units in written recall protocols, compared to the low proficiency groups.

Keywords: cultural familiarity, cultural schemata, reading comprehension, background knowledge

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

Reading and decoding written words effectively is an essential part of life. In school, reading ability is vital for academic success because students read to learn and acquire new information (Alsheikh, 2011; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Reading represents the window through which the readers explore the world and know its secrets. It is a means of communication between the reader and the writer; therefore, through this open channel, a reader can interact with the writers and get their ideas, attitudes, opinions, and so forth in different fields of knowledge. This is the reason why researchers have argued that the most important and essential skill in second or foreign language learning is reading (Bernhardt, 2005; Upton & Lee-Thompson, 2001). Reading stands as one of the basic sources of information because of being one of the most efficient ways to knowledge, production and reproduction (Adams, 1980). According to Jayyusi et al. (1991), reading as a linguistic skill which leads to great enjoyment, pleasure and fulfillment is mostly required by the pupils for their further education and further career. Thus, "reading is considered an important goal in foreign language acquisition. Great care and attention should be given to the teaching of this skill" (p. 70).

Even though there are various kinds of definitions, Goodman (1967), as one of the most prominent researchers in the field, defines reading as "a psycholinguistic guessing game" through which the reader is exposed to a reading text, makes hypothesis about upcoming ideas or facts with the use of available minimal language cues, syntactic constraints and semantic constraints, while sampling the text in order to confirm or reject the hypothesis.

The componential view of reading in which reading is regarded as a receptive skill, a one-way communication from the writer to the reader, was challenged in the 1980s. Reading comprehension was newly defined as the "process in which readers construct a mental representation of the author's message, which includes both the information in the text and its

interpretation by the reader" (Radojevic, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, reading comprehension consists of both the information in the printed text and the interpretation by the readers when they relate new textual information to information already stored in their memories (Bernhardt, 1986; Grabe, 2009; Kim, 2010; Radojevic, 2006). Spiro (1980) asserted that "although text constrains the possible meaning, readers of different knowledge, interests and perspectives, or the same reader in different contexts, may construct quite different interpretations" (p. 32). In this regard, Badrawi (1995) states:

> Reading is more than receiving meaning in a literal sense. Reading involves ideas based on prior experiences stored in the memory. It involves bringing an individual's entire life of experience and all of individual's thinking power to bear in understanding what the writer has encoded. Situations depicted in words on a page stimulate memory of these experiences and bring meaning to reading. Thus, prior sensory experiences provide the basis for comprehending what is read. (pp. 232 -233)

These interactive theories draw heavily on schema theory which posits that meaning is to be found in the efficient interaction between text and readers' background knowledge, not from text itself. In other words, it is readers who ultimately bring meaning to text (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1977a; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977).

As a multifaceted process, reading requires students to access prior knowledge of the world and how it operates in order to extract meaning from a text. Karchmer (2004) refers to Piaget's beliefs that new knowledge is learned by relating it to our current knowledge base. Marzano (2004) stresses the importance of having background knowledge as well. He has found that scarce background knowledge causes lower achievement in learners.

The term schema was first introduced by Bartlett (1932) as an abstract textual structure that the comprehender makes use of to understand a given text. Several definitions have been proposed for schema. Rumelhart (1980) defines schema as "a data structure for representing

the generic concepts stored in memory" (p. 34). According to Omaggio (2001), schemata are "the previously acquired knowledge structures accessed in the comprehension process" (p. 147). Widdowson (1983) views schema as a cognitive construct by which we organize information in our long-term memory. Schemata "reflect the experiences, conceptual understanding, attitudes, values, skills, and strategies …[we] bring to a text situation" (Vacca & Vacca, 1999, p. 15). Goodman (1983) states that there is an unstated contract between readers and writers: From the writer's point of view, readers will want to understand and try to do so by actively attempting to make sense of text; and from the reader's point of view, writers will attempt to effectively use the forms and structures of written language to convey something meaningful in a meaningful manner. An effective text, then, must "be a full enough representation of the meaning to suit the needs, background, schemata, and interests of the readers" (Goodman, 1983, p. 1104).

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) clarify that there are two basic kinds of schemata used in understanding a message: content schemata and formal schemata. *Content schemata* are one's background knowledge and expectations about objects, events and situations, while *formal schemata* are one's knowledge of the rhetorical or discourse structures of different types of texts.

The focus of this study is on the content schemata, particularly the subset of it which is cultural schema. As Cook (2003) points out:

> The successful interpretation of language (spoken or written) in context depends upon the degree to which the participants share conventions and procedures, including those related to paralanguage. Such conventions and procedures, together with the values and beliefs behind them, are elements of cultural background knowledge. (p. 52)

Rumelhart and Ortony (1977) and Anderson et al., (1977) would support the idea that the knowledge of the world (schemata) is very important to the reader. Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979) give additional support:

> When a person reads a story, the schemata embodying his background knowledge provide the framework for understanding the setting, the mood, the characters, and the chain of events. It stands to reason that readers who bring to bear different schemata will give various interpretations to a story. In particular, an individual who reads a story that presupposes the schemata of a foreign culture will comprehend it quite differently from a native, and probably will make what a native would classify as mistakes. (p. 11)

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Non-comprehension of a reading text may be due to reader's failure to activate an appropriate schema (formal or content) during reading. There are two reasons for this failure to activate an appropriate schema. One of them is because of the writer's not having provided sufficient clues in the text for the reader to effectively utilize a bottom-up processing mode to activate schemata the reader may already possess. The other is due to the fact that the reader does not possess the appropriate schema anticipated by the author and thus fails to comprehend. In both instances, there is a discrepancy between what the writer anticipates the reader can do to extract meaning from the text and what the reader is actually able to do. The point is that the appropriate schemata must exist and must be activated during text processing.

"One of the most obvious reasons why a particular content schema may fail to exist for a reader is that the schema is culturally specific and is not part of a particular reader's cultural background" (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983, p. 560). Readers' cultures have an effect on everything from the way readers view reading itself, the content and formal schemata they hold, right down to their understanding of individual concepts. 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" (Ketchum, 2006, p. 23). In other words, the reader will struggle to the unfamiliar text in order to make sense of it which results in comprehension (Eskey, 1986).

The probability of encountering unfamiliar text is increases as learners advance in foreign language study. The majority of vocabularies and expressions of beginning and intermediate-level textbooks reflect day-to-day experiences but as students advance in language learning, formal and idiomatic expressions, topics related to cultural beliefs or social changes that currently take place in the target society, and also vocabularies that represent concepts that might be totally foreign to the readers of advanced-level textbooks gradually appear. They can affect the comprehension of the text by overwhelming second language readers.

Many researchers in the L2 field such as Steffensen, Joag-dev, and Anderson (1979), Taylor (1979), Carrell (1981), and Johnson (1981, 1982) have shown the effect of the implicit cultural content text on comprehension of readers. The interaction between these texts and the reader's own cultural background knowledge leads to making sense of texts whose content is based on one's own culture easier to read and understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent texts based on a less familiar, more distant culture. According to Kintsch and Greene (1978):

> If readers use the story schema to help them in comprehending the story or in reconstructing it, it follows that stories that are constructed according to a familiar schema should be easier to process than stories built according to an unfamiliar schema. The point that is important here is that story schemata are culture specific. (p. 1- 2)

1.3 Significance of the Study

Current reading research views reading as an interactive process in which readers build a personal understanding about the text, but unfamiliar cultural contents restrict readers' activation of their background knowledge. This study is an attempt to explore the role of cultural familiarity in comprehension of reading texts. More specifically, it investigates the issue in relation to Persian culture in students learning English as a foreign language. What is needed for genuine comprehension to take place is some sort of cultural membership which, as Fish (1980) indicates, leads to the development of 'interpretive communities', through which readers interpret the meaning of a text by virtually 'rewriting' it in their minds – based on shared values, customs, and assumptions.

Cultural instruction can be a significant need especially for the students of English as a foreign language (EFL) since these students learn English in their country of origin, and they lack exposure to the foreign culture.

Choosing proper materials would results in building students' background information which is not only beneficial for reading improvement but also for the students' academic work; since they get better in writing, reasoning and conducting research (Henry, 1990). One of the benefits of extensive reading is exposing students to various subject matters and text organizations which help them to improve their writing style. Lack of prior knowledge affects reading ability of students, especially it affects poor students writing since the writer uses his prior knowledge for rhetorical organization and plans the topic to be discussed accordingly (Flower and Hayes, 1981). According to Tierney and Leyes (1986), students who understood what they had read produced better organized, more coherent and higher content quality writing than the ones who realized less. In order to acquire this ability, they need to read more. Therefore, they can produce qualified writing, if they do not have difficulties in