

An Exploratory Study of Culturally Familiar or Unfamiliar Texts Contributing to Reading Comprehension in EFL Context

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Abstract—The current study examines the impact of culturally relevant background knowledge on second-year Saudi EFL learners' reading comprehension. The purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of culturally diverse texts and to enhance the teaching-learning process by utilizing the background knowledge of local learners. This qualitative study employed a think-aloud retrospective interview methodology to help readers express their in-depth thoughts, interpret, and reflect on familiar and unfamiliar cultural passages. Thematic analysis was used to classify think-aloud retrospective interview protocol on two passages, which were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for specified categories. The qualitative data were analyzed to examine if there was a link between EFL respondents' cultural background knowledge and the passages. A total of five English-major undergraduate respondents from Majmaah University took part in retrospective think-aloud interview protocols. The findings of this study revealed that EFL undergraduate respondents' cultural background knowledge had a favorable impact on a culturally relevant topic. The findings of this study revealed that culturally relevant topics differed significantly from culturally irrelevant topics.

Index Terms—cultural schemata, background knowledge, contextualization, reading comprehension, visualization

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a lingua franca that is essential for communication in this multicultural setting (Jenkins & Leung, 2014). EFL learners must gain English language skills to be self-sufficient and independent in their studies to meet the demands of the global workforce, job market economy, and academic competition (Mellahi & Wbod, 2001). Reading is therefore crucial for EFL students because it gives feedback on language comprehension, vocabulary, and cultural information. Reading is, without a doubt, one of the most essential, crucial, and central abilities for students to acquire new knowledge and information, and it may help them critically interpret, analyze, and synthesize texts (Yukselir, 2014; Rajab, 2013). Reading is a fundamental skill that can assist readers to enhance their vocabulary, fluency, speaking, and writing skills (Hung & Ngan, 2015). Similarly, reading promotes self-sufficiency and independence in learners, as well as resourceful communication at both the national and international levels. Reading English textbooks gives readers linguistic and cultural feedback on academic and educational accomplishments (Gulati, 2008) and as well as prioritizes and enhances learners' vocabulary, and linguistic knowledge.

EFL learners' English language skill, on the other hand, remains much below that of other Middle Eastern countries (Alhawsawi, 2014; Rajab, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009). The majority of EFL graduate students struggle due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge and cultural understanding, and as a result, they obtain low levels of English proficiency (Al-Qahtani, 2016). Their TOEFL scores corroborate their beliefs. According to statistics released in the third edition of the official TOEFL exam guide, Saudi Arabia's average TOEFL score is 57 out of 120, which is the second-lowest in the Middle East and among the world's lowest average TOEFL scores (Arabai, 2016).

However, EFL students have demonstrated poor English language performance due to a lack of interest in reading books (Arabai, 2014; Al-Khairi, 2013). The majority of EFL learners in the Saudi context find English textbooks difficult to read (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013; Elyas & Picard, 2010). Most EFL readers encounter a variety of sociocultural and linguistic challenges in reading comprehension (Alghamdi, 2018). In addition, he states that English courses are embedded with cultural components from American textbooks that may be at odds with target language learners' traditional values and cultural views (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). For example, Elaine Kirm's book *Interactions-1*, published by McGraw-Hill Higher Education in 2002, has been utilized with second-year EFL students and contains some unexpected cultural information. As a result, cultural context is regarded as an important construct in reading comprehension for a variety of reasons, including the following: a) cultural background knowledge may aid readers in distinguishing between what appears to be familiar and unfamiliar, and b) cultural

knowledge aids readers in connecting old and new information (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). As a result, by offering culturally appropriate materials, readers may be able to find the texts more readily (Alghamdi, 2018).

Students in the EFL environment have shown poor reading comprehension due to certain cultural and religious factors, which may be directly linked to background knowledge of Western culture and cross-cultural discussion as a cultural component (Alghamdi, 2018). They use Arabic as their first language for writing and communication in religious organizations, where they inherit conservative rules from their native Arabic, which may contradict the target cultural values (Alqahtani & Atwell, 2016). While reviewing, analyzing, and interpreting textbooks from Western culture, cultural background knowledge affects reading comprehension (Zhang & Ciravegna, 2011; Aebersold & Field, 1997). Reading has always served religious purposes in Arab culture, and it has been taught in religious institutions, such as memorizing Quranic texts (Alfahadi, 2012), as a result of which students have adopted an oral memorizing culture, and memorizing religious Holy Scriptures. Several studies have found that culturally irrelevant material in English textbooks causes EFL students to perform poorly (Tabor et al., 2004). Similarly, this approach to repetition and memory focuses on information reproduction rather than cultural knowledge transformation (Cummins, 1994), where learners can appraise textual material and synthesize it into meaningful concepts while taking their cultural background into account. Most importantly, it is common in Arab EFL culture for individuals to rarely read books for pleasure, which may result in low reading comprehension performance (Al-mahrooqi, 2016). Most Arabic-speaking people read books only sometimes before going to bed or traveling due to a lack of interest (Al-Nafisah & Al-Shorman, 2011). It has been argued, for example, that European reading culture is dominant, with the average European reading 35 books per year, but Arab reading habits account for a small percentage of the population (Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016). According to a 2008 United Nations poll, the average Arab citizen in the Arab world reads only a few pages of literature per year. If the reader's underlying knowledge is insufficient and inadequate, the material will be difficult to comprehend (Liu et al., 2012).

According to Alghamdi (2018), textbooks written by western writers that are entrenched and over-loaded with western cultural schemas may hamper EFL learners' reading comprehension due to unfamiliar cultural standards. However, studies exploring the effects of having distinct cultural schemata in the text and material in the EFL Saudi cultural setting are still scarce. To overcome these challenges and cultural hurdles, EFL students must have a good command of the English language as well as a deeper comprehension of western alien cultural literature. They must have a specified level of previous knowledge as well as linguistic proficiency to compete with exceptional readers of the English language in terms of understanding.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to comprehend Saudi undergraduate readers' reading of culturally diverse English texts and the challenges they face as EFL non-native learners, especially because it incorporates both preexisting linguistic and cultural information that supporting textual to form one's cultural schemata. Students from various cultural backgrounds have varying levels of background knowledge as a result of their religion, social conventions, social conduct, philosophy, and language. Hence, the purpose of this research is to see if there is a link between students' reading comprehension skills and the cultural content of a text.

The current study indicates that Saudi EFL learners find English textbooks hard to read due to overloaded irrelevant western cultural materials and ideologies which may lead to hampering textual understanding and interpretation. As result, research is needed to determine how EFL learners comprehend culturally overloaded literature in their second language when they have little or no cultural background knowledge. This research fills a gap in our understanding of how EFL students perceive familiar and unfamiliar texts in the light of their cultural backgrounds. The objective of this study is to answer the following question: Which culturally unique reading texts, such as "Taekwondo" or "Kabsa," can aid EFL respondents in improving their reading comprehension?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural schemas are examples of schemes that form a system of meaning for a particular cultural group (An, 2013). According to the cultural schema hypothesis, humans can classify and understand cultural diversity in written texts and add new data to existing knowledge based on topic familiarity (Nishida, 2005). Cultural schemata, according to anthropologist Palmer (1996), are associated with cultural rituals such as weddings, national holidays, and funerals. Background knowledge is necessary to understand a text. If students are unfamiliar with the content of the text, they will lack the motivation to read it. Reading knowledge requires background knowledge; the more one knows about a topic, the easier it is to read the text, understand it, and obtain information (Neuman et al., 2014). Motivation is the key to engagement in reading and as a result, students comprehend better when they are engaged and achieve stronger reading outcomes (Wigfield et al., 2004).

Critical thinking abilities and patterns are vital in problem-solving circumstances, which is an important goal of learners in the educational program, technique, skill, decision-making, and meaning-making process (Brenner & Parks, 2001). Because every text read by learners, including many words and phrases, is packed with cultural references, culture is vividly conveyed in language. Most western-oriented content does not fit the cultural and social values of EFL learners in problem-solving and decision making, since effective perception requires the ability to relate the text's content to one's cultural understanding (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Modern cognitive psychologists provide readers with a theoretical framework and models that allow them to define and grasp fundamental ideas and concepts in the text.

Cultural familiarity, similarly, affects the social motives of shared member groups, which helps learners organize their knowledge and improves their reading comprehension performance (Liu et al., 2012). The importance of schema as a cognitive process for language enhancement is emphasized by Piaget and Cook (1952). The interactive technique in text processing, such as schema theory, is reaffirmed.

Members of different cultures have different schematic knowledge due to different access to resources and knowledge systems (Sharifian, 2003). Because of their knowledge of schemata, members of the same cultures can communicate with one another without any problems (Yousefi & Mohammadi, 2016). According to Strauss and Quinn (1997), cultural schemes have the characteristics of stability, consistency, and modification that are embedded in socio-cultural festivals and rituals (Palmer, 1996). Sharifian (2003) explains that rituals, festivals, storytelling, art, and literature are dominated by cultural schemes. Yule (1996) argues that cultural schemes are closely related to life experience. Alptekin (2006) says that abstract schemes provide a conceptual cultural framework that requires cultural knowledge to make reading easier.

Sociocultural factors can influence learners' classroom perceptions, interactions, beliefs, and learning. Texts are integrated into learners' social, cultural, and historical experiences, which can help them in the meaning-making process (Aliva, 2000). In addition, readers can use learners' life experiences and prior information to better understand and shape the desired messages in the text.

Several researchers have explored the positive role of knowledge of the cultural context in their research and have argued that inappropriate background knowledge can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretations (Yousef et al., 2014). Furthermore, they have argued that background knowledge helps learners predict the meaning of the text, and reduces anxiety and burden during the reading process. According to Erten and Razi (2009), prior knowledge is useful if the content of the text is up to date. This will allow readers to easily analyze and interpret the text. In short, this study shows that cultural patterns or basic knowledge play an important role in understanding culturally diverse texts (Li et al., 2007).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Respondents and Materials of the Study

In this study, five second-year college-level students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in English major participated. When the study was conducted they moved to the second level of the study and aged between 19-21 years old with limited users of English language proficiency. They found English texts hard to read due to the irrelevant materials written by western writers that contradicted the local culture of the EFL readers. To understand English texts, the respondents needed to possess background knowledge. In this study, two texts were used for semi-structured interviews: taekwondo and kabsa. The texts (Kabsa and Taekwondo) had a readability index on the Flesch Reading Ease Score (Flesch-Kincaid Index) of 46 and 68, indicating that the language and content of the college-level texts were considered difficult and standard. Two inter-raters assessed the main themes of the interviews: recontextualization and visualization and both of them agreed upon the thematic gradation.

B. Procedure

Think-aloud interview protocol techniques were utilized in this study. The purpose of using the think-aloud method was to reveal how verbalizing thought and exploring in-depth information on texts may lead to supporting textual understanding of the respondents in semi-structured interviews on the respondents' cultural background knowledge. A qualitative approach based on a think-aloud protocol (TAP) was utilized to collect data from interviewees. Two weeks before the main study, two think-aloud sessions were held in a well-equipped lab in the College of Education at Majmaah University. According to the agreed schedule with the group, the researcher met with each respondent individually during the think-aloud session. During the training session, the researcher asked each individual to read the familiar text first followed by an unfamiliar one. Each individual practiced for 10 minutes while reading texts. During the session, the researcher asked them to read loudly. While reading loudly, the researcher would write the way they verbalized their thoughts. The data from the think-aloud protocol were recorded as well as heard. The research marked each text with a black-red spot after each sentence (Crain-Thoreson et al., 1997). The respondents' thoughts, visualization, clarity of images, retelling stories, and recontextualizing of personal and social experiences were observed and recorded (Chi, 2012). Following think-aloud protocol, on an agreed schedule with the respondents, semi-structured interviews took place. The purpose of the individual face-to-face interview was to collect in-depth information about cultural topics and explore how the respondents' background knowledge helped them in visualizing and contextualizing the content. To investigate the way to associate personal and cultural experiences with the text, respondents' background knowledge is believed to be a significant variable in reading comprehension of two culturally different texts. Respondents' think-aloud retrospective interview protocols were recorded using digital voice recorders. The interviews of the respondents were transcribed, graded, categorized, and assigned thematic coding according to Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic model. Open and close-ended questions were asked during the interview session.

IV. THINK-ALOUD SESSION

A total of five people took part in the think-aloud session. Two texts were delivered in the following ways: taekwondo and kabsa. This session was focused on the respondents' ability to communicate and visualize their thoughts on familiar and unfamiliar themes, as well as their background knowledge.

A. Respondent#1:

This respondent read familiar text, and verified and confirmed his understanding by using prior cultural knowledge to supplement his inadequate and low language skills, as shown in the Think Aloud Protocol. He was able to summarize long sentences using code-switching, to translate familiar and unfamiliar terminologies into his mother tongue to facilitate understanding (Kern, 1994). The following excerpt describes this type of phenomenon.

Text A

Unfamiliar Text A

Taekwondo is an empty-handed form of martial arts in which athletes must use all parts of their bodies in competition.

Code-switching to L1: Taekwondo (ودنوكيانتلا) is a sport played in our culture.

Text B

Familiar Text B

Kabsa originated in Yemen and is currently Saudi Arabia's most popular dish.

Translation: (al-kabsa) --- is our most culturally famous food. (Translation)

B. Respondents#2

This respondent read, reread, and paused at a specific location to better understand the text. His think-aloud protocol through two different texts showed that he was using active words, asking questions, translating information, and looking at pictures fluently. He reflected and memorized familiar textual information and associated them with background knowledge. He could handle his comprehension while reading, solved problems, made explanations, drew conclusions, and made predictions. During the previous process of thinking aloud, he took notes and maps of the mind. In the familiar text, he used fewer language skills than in unfamiliar text because of good proficiency and background knowledge. He wrote down the main points and stated them on paper, as shown in the following passage.

Text A

Unfamiliar Text A

Taekwondo is a self-defense discipline; The name is derived from the Korean words "tae", meaning kick, "Kwon", fist or another fist with hand or fist, and "do", which is a kind of operation.

Translation: *difae ean alnafs-- aindibad/ sound: tee , kwan*

Text B

Familiar Text B

Next, add the chicken pieces to the boiling water and mix with the rice. When the rice is boiling you can start to cook the chicken

Rereading: Now in the boiling water put the chicken cubes and mix them with rice...cooking chicken

Visual images & verbally summarizing: *baed dhalik , 'udifi mukaibat aldajaj 'iilaa alma' almaghlii wakhulitiha mae al'arza. qad targhab fi albad' fi tahy aldajaj 'athna' ghalayan al'arz*

C. Respondent#3

This respondent had a good command of the English language. He translated difficult terms into L1 and associated experiences with personal life. By guessing and contextual clues, he would deduce the meaning based on his prior knowledge.

Text B

Familiar Text B

We serve lemon juice and sometimes put black lemon in the corner. Majboos is best enjoyed with soft drinks such as Pepsi. Usually, we eat this dish almost every day.

Contextualization: *After kabsa is cooked, it is served to the people with lemons, and drinks. The people like and enjoy it very much.*

D. Respondent#4

Think-aloud demonstrated that this respondent had kept track of familiar text than unfamiliar ones. Found the unfamiliar text difficult to read due to its complex linguistic structure. He tried hard to visualize and translate difficult words from unfamiliar text B into his Arabic mother tongue by reading and rereading them. However, he linked his social and cultural experiences with the familiar text.

Text A

Unfamiliar Text A

Like judo, taekwondo was developed as a sport that represents moral norms. There, the principles of loyalty, loyalty, respect, and indomitable spirit maintenance are important parts of taekwondo training.
Less visualizing ability: jado—moral – part -- taekwondo

Text B

Familiar Text B

Although you can buy this dish in Erie at places like Habibis or Casablanca, my mom makes it better.
Contextualization: I can make kabsa with my friends outside--- I use chickens, meat.....use salad also...

E. Respondent#5

The respondent used his first language to verbalize his thoughts deeply. However, in Text A, his performance was slow in reading because the subject matter and contents of the text were unfamiliar. He could read the unfamiliar content but found difficulties in understanding it. It took him time to understand the text and summarize it. He would look at every individual word and sentence where he could pause to think over and solve the problem. He used prediction and guessing from the context to reach over meaning. During his reading process, he found text B easy although it included long sentences and difficult structures to comprehend. He acknowledged that translation helped him a lot in recalling information in memory for a long time. Also, translation contributed to his visualization.

Text A

Unfamiliar Text A

The principles of maintaining loyalty, loyalty, respect, and invincibility are an important part of Taekwondo training.
Translation: *tushakil mabadi alwala' wal'iikhlas walaihtiram walhifaz ealaa alruwh alati la taqhar jz'an mhman min tadrrib altaaykundu.*

Text B

Familiar Text A

Kabsa tastes excellent with a soft drink like Pepsi. This is a dish that we eat virtually every day.
Visualization: *Reminded me of the story of my mom how she cooked kabsa and presented it to us*

V. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

In this study, following the think-aloud protocol, semi-structured interviews were utilized. The qualitative data was collected from the respondents' perceptions and comments on two texts: *taekwondo* and *kabsa* using Braun and Clark's (2006) six steps model. This qualitative data analysis summarizes the respondents' interview's main themes regarding their background knowledge of how to contextualise and visualize English texts. Using background knowledge, respondents may be able to assimilate and recreate text information (Fisher & Frey, 2009). The following two major themes emerged from the respondents' qualitative interviews.

A. Visualization

According to the results of the interviews, visualization as a mental visual image played an important part in reading comprehension. Respondents did well on a familiar topic because of their prior knowledge, which helped them create visuals of the text, as evidenced in the theme excerpts below.

Excerpt 1: "Taekwondo' 'a man and a woman fighting, hands up, feet up, very dangerous."

This passage suggested that the responder struggled to comprehend the content. He found the unfamiliar text's structure difficult and demanding. There was a contradiction between his culture and the culture of the other. This demonstrated that he was unable to visualize the text due to a lack of necessary background knowledge. The respondent's position on taekwondo demonstrated that he clashed his cultural values with unfamiliar cultural norms. As a result, the image he conjured up in his mind was not vivid, clear, or intelligible.

Excerpt 2: "guns, sticks used to save ourselves"

In this excerpt, the respondent mixed the concept of relevant culture with irrelevant culture in the second excerpt. The respondent struggled to construct distinct and vivid imagery, as evidenced by the dictions in the above extract. This means that the respondent lacked confidence and struggled hard to visualize the text's imagery.

B. Contextualization

Contextualization is closely related to personal and social experiences which may indicate a better understanding of the text. The development of EFL respondents' comprehension of an English text is linked to their prior knowledge. It's crucial to investigate the role of background information in reading comprehension. The excerpt below shows how respondents assimilate personal experiences with the text.

Excerpt3: "my mom cooks rice every day. Last night, ah, I watched a movie. People come to the restaurant. the waiter brings a big kabsa, ahhh"

The theme of this excerpt showed that the respondent performed better on the familiar topic “kabsa” because it was close to her culture. She contextualised the story of her mother and indicated that the text was easy and that she was confident in it.

Excerpt 4: “TAKUNDO-taekwondo, is fighting-ahhh, people use short clothes- open -. kicking and hitting”.

The language of the respondent showed that she is less confident and possesses less information about taekwondo. She spoke broken English using the wrong pronunciation of the word taekwondo. The excerpt showed that she struggled hard to understand the topic. However, due to a lack of background knowledge, she hardly associated her personal experiences with the topic.

VI. FINDINGS

The findings of the study reveal that respondents found unfamiliar text hard to read. The respondents encountered two major problems while reading two texts; a) visualization, and b) contextualization. The data analysis collected from the interviews indicated that respondents comprehended familiar content more easily than unfamiliar ones. The analysis showed that background knowledge supported respondents in visualizing and contextualizing their personal and social experiences. Respondents recontextualised and visualized the familiar text with fewer efforts than the unfamiliar one. The familiar linguistic structures and phrases in the text helped the respondents visualize clear images to understand the text. Both tools: think-aloud and interviews supported respondents in recontextualizing and visualizing familiar contexts using cultural background knowledge. This could lead the respondents to create images, pictures, and associate experiences.

VII. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this study was to determine the role of background knowledge in reading texts generally familiar and unfamiliar to EFL Saudi respondents. Based on the findings, cultural schemata are crucial to promoting students' reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2006). To some extent, this statement supports Brock (1990) who emphasizes that prior knowledge helps students contextualize texts according to their own experiences. The majority of the respondents expressed their point of view more freely on familiar text than an unfamiliar one. They shared their experiences with the familiar text due to the relevant cultural materials. The main obstacles in reading unfamiliar text were complex linguistic structures, difficult vocabulary, unfamiliar cultural context, and lack of background knowledge of the respondents. On the other hand, the complex linguistic structure and difficult vocabulary of familiar text were not so challenging to the respondents. Because each word in the familiar text had a connotative meaning associated with cultural context facilitated them in understanding the text. The finding of this study is consistent with the study in that culturally specific prior knowledge plays a pivotal role in enabling EFL students to make a comprehensive understanding of a text. A sentence seems difficult to process due to a complex socio-cultural context. Because the way a reader looks at reality may be different from the way other readers look at it. This contradictory view creates misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the text. Hence, to overcome these challenges, background knowledge of the text as well as the structures may help the readers to understand the text. However, familiar words and phrases helped the majority of the respondents in creating images in their minds. Similarly, this study indicated that respondents' think-aloud interview protocol resembled their interview findings showing that prior knowledge may lead to facilitating learners in associating, translating, visualizing, and contextualizing experiences (Lin, 2004). EFL readers should be conscious of employing knowledge to grasp culturally complex texts packed with culturally irrelevant contents and complicated linguistic patterns, according to the findings of this study. The findings indicated that the respondent visualized, contextualized, and had clear images of the familiar contents (Chi, 2006). Also, relevant materials facilitated the respondent to retell and reflect on the stories easily (Alghamdi, 2018). Furthermore, it should be emphasized that culturally familiar content contributes to enhancing EFL learners' reading performance. In terms of pedagogical implications, it is suggested that instructors and curriculum designers should focus on selecting appropriate teaching materials related to the students' cultural experiences and improving their reading comprehension.

In conclusion, the current study supports the schema theory, according to which a person's background knowledge influences the comprehension and interpretation of a text. In addition to schema, due to culturally embedded irrelevant materials, the type of text also plays an important role in reading comprehension.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

An obvious limitation of this study was the students' academic schedule and long protocol hours which could interfere with the survey. Many of the students usually refused to participate in the study due to their full class busy schedules. However, to ease respondents' mental fatigue, the study was conducted during their free time. They were provided snacks and juice for refreshment to strengthen data collection. Another limitation of the study was presenting two texts such as familiar and unfamiliar topics and the limited sampling size.

IX. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this qualitative study showed that cultural background knowledge had the advantage on texts which were familiar to the readers over unfamiliar topics to enhance their reading comprehension. In the pursuit of higher academic studies, reading is the most important skill (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). The results of this study support a reading comprehensive pedagogical strategy that may concentrate on textual materials to be taught to EFL college-level students. This strategy is strongly recommended on certain grounds. First, according to Alghamdi (2018), EFL English textbooks are overloaded with odd cultural contents and irrelevant materials. These textbooks do not reflect the local cultural norms and values of Saudi EFL learners due to the distinct English cultural ideologies of western authors. Alghamdi further says that EFL learners belong to a diverse EFL culture which seems to be difficult to link with western ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to concentrate on promoting teaching practices in the classrooms to adapt and nativize teaching materials that may represent the local cultural values. This strategy would be beneficial in helping students to assess their strengths and weaknesses (Carrell, 1998). Second, this strategy would develop cultural awareness in the students to become self-regulated and independent in their learning too.

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