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Exploring the Effectiveness of Cultural Familiarity, Cultural Schemata and a Combination of Both

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ABSTRACT

The present study tries to test the effectiveness of cultural familiarity and cultural schemata in enhancing comprehension of culturally loaded texts especially short stories. In doing so, 129 Iranian EFL learners between 9 to 11 years of age were chosen. After ensuring that they are homogeneous, the participants were divided into three groups. In the first group, participants read the nativized version of the short story. In the second one, they read the original version and background knowledge was provided for them and in the third one, they read the nativized version while background knowledge has been provided for them. Then the students were asked to answer multiple choice questions that tested their comprehension. Results revealed that the treatment of group three was the most facilitative one. It is concluded that applying a method which is a mixture of both cultural familiarity and cultural schemata facilitates learners' comprehension skill best.

1. Introduction

Over the years, many researchers have emphasized the significant role of reading comprehension skill in foreign language learning (Richards & Renandya, 2002). It is one of the most practical areas of language teaching and learning and the ability to draw meaning from the texts is an essential skill for language learners (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Harrison, 2003; Jackson, 2005; Samuels & Kamil, 1988; Stanovich, 2000, Grabe & Stoller, 2013).

It is indicated that the reader brings knowledge, information, feeling, culture and finally meaning to the text (Frazier & Brown, 2001). Research has also revealed that reading is considered a visual skill and the reader is the one who contribute information to the text (Clark & Silberstein, 1977). Therefore, it is essential for the students to improve their reading skill for obtaining knowledge from texts and also fluency. Memory capacity, education, age, and especially background knowledge and cultural familiarity are taken into account as factors that affect text comprehension. Previous studies showed the effectiveness of cultural familiarity and cultural schemata, each in separate and independent studies, but which one is a better facilitator of text comprehension? This study aims to answer the following questions: Which one is a better activator of comprehension? Cultural familiarity or cultural schemata? Is it effective to apply a combination of cultural familiarity or cultural schemata in teaching culturally loaded texts?

1.1 The Metacognitive view and Reading Comprehension

Metacognition is the control readers execute on their ability to understand a text (Block, 1992). It involves considering the processes of the mind while one is reading. Klein (1991) believes that high level readers try to find the purpose of the reading before starting to read. Then they identify the type of the text. After that, they try to project the writer's purpose of writing the text and scan the text to identify the details. And finally, inferencing or making predictions about the next happenings, based on prior knowledge is what readers do during reading comprehension process.

1.2 Cultural Familiarity

Observing some familiar words and concepts will give motivation to the EFL (English as a foreign language) learners and also will give them the power to continue reading if the they think they cannot

comprehend the text especially those with low level of proficiency. Therefore familiarity and especially cultural familiarity affects positively on the learners' comprehension skill.

Studies in this area provides evidence of the positive effects of cultural familiarity on the readers' comprehension skill (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Alderson, 2000; Alptekin, 2006; Carrell, 1991; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; Erten & Razi, 2009; Ketchum, 2006; Oller, 1995; Parry, 1996; Pulido, 2003; Sasaki, 2000; Steffensen et al., 1979). It is revealed that cultural familiarity facilitate the reading comprehension process (Alptekin, 2006). The impacts of the unfamiliar cultural background of on the learners' reading comprehension was also discovered (Johnson, 1981).

The impact of familiar words and concepts on learner's reading comprehension supports this statement that learner's reading comprehension of various texts to a great extent depends on the amount of previous knowledge of the reader about the topic and mainly gist of that specific text and the capability to connect the knowledge to the text. Thus, it is important to provide familiar texts for learners.

1.3 Schemata

Readers use different types of background knowledge during their reading process (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Nassaji, 2002; Oller,1995). The most controversial are formal and content. Content schemata is defined as our information about culture, the world, and people and formal schemata contains the of discourse structure (Frazier & Brown, 2001). A formal schema refers to cultural schema is the third type of schema and is related to the topic more than other types. It is also known as abstract schema (Nassaji, 2002; Oller, 1995). It is also called story schema. It is suggested that cultural schema is a culture-particular extension of content schema because it is related to the cultural membership that is needed for comprehension the text completely (Ketchum, 2006).

1.4 Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is what the reader already knows about a subject matter (Steven, 1982). 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).

Background knowledge is the knowledge that is or is not related to the content of a specific text, and subject matter knowledge is related to both topic and content of the text (Alderson, 2000; Carreli & Eisterhold, 1983). Reading comprehension is an interactive process and should be necessarily accomplished by background knowledge and also syntactic knowledge (Al-Shumaimeri's 2006; August et al., 2006; Burgoyne et al., 2013. Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi, 2017). The real information and massage of texts is contributed by the readers with interaction between the printed texts and knowledge of the topic, vocabulary, and structure. In activating the previous knowledge, the reader is linking his information to what he is reading. It is stated that texts do not by themselves carry meaning; it is the reader who brings information and culture to the printed texts (Frazier & Brown, 2001).

One of the learners' obvious problems in reading comprehension is because of insufficient background knowledge and also low vocabulary knowledge (Carrell, 1988). However, as further pointed out by the same author, some learners have sufficient schemata, but are not aware of it and it is not activated so they become cannot comprehend the text appropriately. "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. 80).

For solving this problem nativization is suggested. It was indicated that "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" (Alptekin, 2006)

2. Review of Related Literature

The effect of both cultural familiarity and cultural schema on learners' text comprehension have been mentioned by several researchers (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Alptekin, 2006; Carrell, 1983; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Erten & Razi 2009; Huang 2009; Johnson, 1982; Langer, 1984; Lee, 1986; Chihara, Sakurai, & Oller, 1989.; Parry, 1996; Sasaki, 2000).

Background knowledge and cultural familiarity in the reading process lie in the center of schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Schema is defined as the

background knowledge that makes the reader able to predict while reading the text and this process plays a vital role in text interpretation. Therefore a successful comprehension depends on shared schemata and schema theory is defined as the reader's ability to use previous knowledge to learn from text and comprehend it. It was indicated that schema theory deals with stored knowledge structures or predispose individuals to think and search in their mind and the reader's ability to make connections between their prior knowledge and the text (Alderson, 2000; Alptekin, 2006; Carrell, 1983; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Johnson, 1981, 1982; Ketchum, 2006; Murtagh, 1989).

The fundamental basic of this theory conveys that written texts do not carry meaning by themselves and it is the reader who gives meaning to texts with the prior knowledge in the mind. This is the readers' previous knowledge or background knowledge and the preexisting knowledge structures are called schemata (Barrlett, 1932). According to a research (Aebersold & Field, 1997) if the learner does not have any prior knowledge or experience about the topic the text become like an unknown sea for them and they become wandered swimmers.

2.1 The Present Study

The present study aims at investigating the effectiveness of cultural familiarity and cultural schemata in enhancing comprehension of culturally loaded texts, especially short stories.

2.2 Research Questions

Therefore, the study compared the text comprehension of Iranian elementary students over an 8-week semester in an institute. The research questions of this study are:

Which one is a better facilitator of elementary EFL learners' comprehension of short stories, cultural familiarity or cultural schemata?

Can teachers use a method which is mixture of cultural familiarity or cultural schemata to enhance elementary EFL learners' comprehension?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 129 Iranian elementary students who learn English as a foreign language. As the researcher looked for a homogeneous sample, she selected the sample randomly from 156 learners and from all intact classes. Their age ranged from 9 to 11. Because of

factors such as limited time and energy it was not possible to conduct this study with a larger population but the researcher tried to choose a highly homogeneous and representative group. Therefore, Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT) was administered and the ones with appropriate scores were chosen from 156 students. All the participants' native language was Persian, and they had the same culture and background knowledge in English.

3.2 Instruments

First, the researcher wanted to ensure that all the participants are homogeneous, so Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT) was administered. For conducting the treatment of the study, three American short stories (the researcher has simplified one of them) were used. The short stories were *A Tale for Halloween* by Loretta Ellen Brady, *The Girls in Their Summer Dresses* by Irwin Shaw, and *Jimmy Scarecrow's Christmas* by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. The short stories had the same level and the researcher has simplified some parts if necessary.

After each of these short stories a multiple choice comprehension test consisted of 23 questions were prepared and used. As a pilot study, the tests were administered to a group of 17 students with the same age and level to achieve the indices of item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID). The students' proficiency was determined to be similar to that of the participants.

3.3 Procedure

This study has three groups of participants and were conducted during an 8-week semester. The treatments were done carefully and in three separate and independent groups of participants simultaneously. The first group, read the nativized version of a short story named *Jimmy Scarecrow's Christmas* by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (See Appendix A). This short story was nativized for the purpose of the research. The nativization process provided characters, places and special names that students had previous knowledge about them and were culturally familiar with them. In the nativiztion, the names of the places, streets, and characters were changed to Iranian names in order to activate the participants' knowledge. Furthermore, the sequence of actions had to conform to the original story.

For the second group, appropriate background knowledge was provided. In this group, first, the teacher has given enough background knowledge according to the

short story and then the students begin to read the original version of the short story. The short story named *A Tale for Halloween* by Loretta Ellen Brady (See Appendix B).

In the third group, a mixture of the previous treatments were used. In this group, background knowledge based on the short story was provided for the students and the short story was nativized, too. The short story was *The Girls in Their Summer Dresses* by Irwin Shaw (See Appendix C). After each short story a multiple choice test with 23 questions that tested the EFL learners' comprehension was given to the students. The questions aimed at measuring the text comprehension of the students.

First, the comprehension test was given to a similar group with the same age and level in order to be piloted. Thus, the questions that were too difficult or too easy questions were identified. It was showed that 3 items in test one (first section), 4 items in test two (second section) and 2 items in test three (third section) were too difficult for the students so they were replaced by three appropriate items. Participants were asked to read the short story carefully in 15 to 20 minutes and then the papers of short story were collected. After that they were asked to answer the multiple choice comprehension questions for checking their comprehension in 30 minutes. The scores are carefully tabulated and the results are exhibited below.

4. Results and Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of cultural familiarity, cultural schemata and a mixture of them on text comprehension of elementary EFL learners. To reach this aim, the three teaching methods have been applied in three classes (three separate and independent groups). In the first group, the short story was nativized. By nativization, the learners made a connection between their previous knowledge and what the writer has said. This helped them to have a more activated mind for comprehension.

It was stated that readers combined the information in the text with what they have experienced to construct meaning (Alderson, 2000; Chastain, 1988; Eskey, 1988; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Nassaji, 2002; Nuttall, 1998; Wallace, 2001). So, this process can improve students' comprehension of texts, especially culturally loaded texts. In the second group, appropriate background knowledge was provided and therefore the comprehension process began before they read the short

story. In the third group, background knowledge based on the short story was provided and also the short story was nativized. This teaching method was the most effective one in this research and by applying this one; the students' mind was activated more than the other two groups.

According to table 1, the mean score of the students in the first group (nativized version of the short story) is 14.2093 and their scores ranged from 13 to 17. The mean score in the second group that is related to the section in which background knowledge was provided for them is 15.8604. The minimum score is 13 and the maximum one is 19. In the third group, the students' mean score is 19.5116 and their scores ranged from 16 to 23.

The maximum score of the first group is lower than the maximum score of the second group. And the maximum score of the third group is the highest one. So the treatment of the third group is more facilitative for students than the treatments of other groups. The highest score of the first group is 17 and it is approximately the same as the lowest score of the third group and the highest score of the second group is 19, that is lower than the highest score of the third group. It shows that the treatment of the third group was more facilitative.

This difference between the mean scores of the three groups exhibited that the learners who read the nativized versions of the short stories and the background knowledge was also provided for them had the best performance and this treatment was really helpful for them. The mean scores of the learners in this group is significantly different from those in other groups.

Comparison of the scores of students in group one and in group two revealed that students who received background knowledge had a better performance than the students who read the nativised version of the short story.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of short stories

Group	N	Mean	SD	Maximum	Minimum
One (nativized text)	43	14.2093	1.6643	17	13
Two (background knowledge)	43	15.8604	1.9239	19	13
Three (mixture)	43	19.5116	2.2759	23	16

In the table 2, we can observe the standard error of difference, t, p, and df. Again, this table shows a notable improvement in the performance of students in the third group.

There is a significant statistical difference between the scores of participants

in the third group and the other tests. It can be seen that students experienced a great improvement after activating their background knowledge and giving them the nativized version of the short story (t=56.2178, p<0.001).

Table 2: T statistics of different sections

Group	t	df	P	Standard error of difference
One (nativized text)	55.9855	42	<0.000	0.254
Two (background knowledge)	54.0587	42	<0.000	0.293
Three (mixture)	56.2178	42	<0.000	0.347

5. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to test the effectiveness of cultural familiarity and cultural schemata and a combination of both of them in enhancing comprehension of short stories. In the first group, the nativization of the short stories has activated the participants' mind and also has prepared their mind to go beyond the texts' information. In the second group, providing appropriate and enough background knowledge helped students to start their interaction with the text before reading it. In the third group, there was really a great experience for all the students because they have experienced an obvious improvement in their comprehension.

Therefore it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between cultural familiarity, cultural schema, and text comprehension of elementary EFL learners. Thus, applying a method that is a mixture of making students culturally familiar and providing background knowledge for them is beneficial for them.

The findings of the study are useful for both teachers and teacher trainers. It is suggested that putting cultural warm up activities (such as giving background knowledge) that are related to texts, and also making the texts familiar and simplified before reading the text will be beneficial for the readers. Teachers should be aware of the usefulness of methods that increase learners' text comprehension and emphasize on programs that train foreign language teachers on methods of prior knowledge activation and text nativization before beginning reading texts.

Teachers should also be cautious of the characteristics of the text and students' needs and then choose the most suitable strategy that fits students' needs.

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Appendix A : Sample from short story one: *Jimmy Scarecrow's Christmas* by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

Original short story	Nativized short story
Aunt Hannah put on her hood and shawl, and drew some blue yarn stockings on over her shoes, and set out through the snow to carry a slice of plum-pudding to her sister Susan, who lived down the road. Half an hour after Aunt Hannah had gone Betsey put her little red plaid shawl over her head, and ran across the field to Jimmy Scarecrow. She carried her new doll-baby smuggled up under her shawl.	Aunt Leila put on her manto and scarf, and drew some blue yarn stockings on over her shoes, and set out through the snow to carry a slice of plum cake to her sister Laleh, who lived down the road. Half an hour after Aunt Leila had gone Sahar put her little red plaid scarf over her head, and ran across the field to Jimmy Scarecrow. She carried her new doll-baby smuggled up under her scarf

Appendix B: Sample from short story two: *A Tale for Halloween* by Loretta Ellen Brady

Original short story	Some parts of background knowledge
Now it happened one night in the season of Halloween that Antone sat carving jack-o'-lanterns to sell in the village. Babette, who was rocking her dolly to sleep, sat watching him. Being but six, she knew nothing about the fun which comes with Halloween, and so she listened round-eyed with wonder to Antone, who knew all things about jack-o'-lanterns. When she heard that boys and girls dressed like goblins and witches frolicked in the village streets, Babette made up her mind to frolic too. "How fine it must be!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Halloween must be quite like Christmas!" "Not quite so fine as Christmas, Babette," answered Antone, as he carved the teeth in the last jack-o'-lantern, "but Halloween is very fine nevertheless. It is comical to see the jack-o'-lanterns bobbing up and down with their faces grinning in the candle light. And on Halloween the boys and girls play pranks on their elders that they would be well switched for at any other time; but every one laughs and is gay on that night."	Halloween is the evening before the Christian holy days of All Hallows' Day (also known as All Saints' or Hallowmas) on 1 November and All Souls' Day on 2 November, thus giving the holiday on 31 October the full name of All Hallows' Eve (meaning the evening before All Hallows' Day). Halloween is the season for little ghosts and goblins to take to the streets, asking for candy and scaring one another silly. Spooky stories are told around fires, scary movies appear in theaters and pumpkins are expertly (and not-so-expertly) carved into jack-o'-lanterns. In Ireland, where Halloween originated, the day is still celebrated much as it is in the United States.

Appendix C: The sample of the short story three: *The Girls in Their Summer Dresses* by Irwin Shaw

Original short story	Nativized short story
FIFTH AVENUE WAS shining in the sun when they left the Brevoort. The sun was warm, even though it was February, and everything looked like Sunday morning—the buses and the well-dressed people walking slowly in couples and the quiet buildings with the windows closed.	MEHRZAD AVENUE WAS shining in the sun when they left their neighborhood. The sun was warm, even though it was the end of winter, and everything looked like Friday morning—the buses and the well-dressed people walking slowly with their families and the quiet buildings with the windows closed.
Michael held Frances' arm tightly as they walked toward Washington Square in the sunlight. They walked lightly, almost smiling, because they had slept late and had a good breakfast and it was Sunday. Michael unbuttoned his coat and let it flap around him in the mild wind.	Reza and Mina walked toward Azadi Square in the sunlight. They walked lightly, almost smiling, because they had slept late and had a good breakfast and it was Friday. Reza unbuttoned his coat and let it flap around him in the mild wind.
"Look out," Frances said as they crossed Eighth Street. "You'll break your neck." Michael laughed and Frances laughed with him.	"Look out," Mina said as they crossed Enghelab Street. "You'll break your neck." Reza laughed and Mina laughed with him.
"Guess again," Michael said. "Guess again. I'm older now. I'm a man getting near middle age, putting on a little fat, and I still love to walk along Fifth Avenue at three o'clock on the east side of the street between Fiftieth and Fifty-seventh Streets. They're all out then, shopping, in their furs and their crazy hats, everything all concentrated from all over the world into seven blocks— the best furs, the best clothes, the handsomest women, out to spend money and feeling good about it.	"Guess again," Reza said. "Guess again. I'm older now, I'm a man getting near middle age, putting on a little fat and I still love to walk along Mehrzad Avenue at three o'clock on the east side of the street between Mehrzad and Naseri streets. They're all out then, making believe they're shopping, in their furs and their crazy hats, everything all concentrated from all over the world into eight blocks, the best furs, the best clothes, the happy women, out to spend money and feeling good about it.