

## The Perception of Cultural Familiarity and Background Knowledge on Reading Comprehension for Intermediate EFL Students

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### Abstract

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This study aims to explore Taiwanese students' English learning in reading comprehension, with an emphasis on factors of cultural familiarity and background knowledge. The function of this study is to explore the influences of first and target language cultural materials on reading comprehension. The subjects of this research were 50 Taiwanese junior college students who enrolled in the required English course in southern Taiwan. The homogeneity of their English proficiency level was established according to the administration of the Joint College Entrance Exam. The researcher applied a questionnaire utilizing the five point Likert Scale to see how cultural familiarity and prior background knowledge affect reading comprehension. The results of this study revealed that EFL students thought that they had better possess prior cultural knowledge to be able to understand English contents easily. It also suggests that cultural familiarity and background knowledge had significant effects on promoting reading comprehension of intermediate EFL learners.

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**Keywords:** cultural familiarity, background knowledge, reading comprehension, EFL learners

### 1. Introduction

Among all the language skills, reading is the crucial one that has always been considered essential to academic success (Maher Salah, 2008; Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996). Incorporating target culture teaching into English language classrooms is a common goal for many EFL teachers in Taiwan. However, factors such as teachers' lack of foreign culture knowledge, lack of skill in teaching culture, insufficient teaching experience, and limited class time make this goal a challenging one to achieve. Abu-Rabia (1996) illustrated that "readers' experiences influence the kinds of background knowledge structures, or schemata, that are activated when a story is being interpreted" (p. 589). At the same time, if cultural familiarity and prior background knowledge affect students' reading comprehension, we need to thoroughly understand those factors and adjust our teaching curricula accordingly.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Definition of Culture

Culture increasingly has been considered to be an important component in language classrooms, especially in EFL classrooms (Tsou, 2005). Incorporating culture into language teaching means integrating diverse cultural concepts from students' varying aesthetic, social, semantic, and pragmatic viewpoints. The use of cultural concepts involves a learning process for both students and teachers, where all must define their own cultural identities, as well as learn to recognize and respect others. The definition of one's culture is, among other things, dependent upon "age, gender, ethnic background, and social class" (McKay, 2002, p. 83). Also, Alptekin (1993) claims that systemic knowledge involves certain characteristics of language, including semantic and syntactic factors. At the same time, schematic knowledge is learned both socially and culturally. When learning one's native language, "the child's systemic and schematic knowledge develop concurrently" (p. 136).

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Therefore, we can conclude that learners depend upon their established schematic knowledge to provide a firm foundation and scaffold knowledge they may use to help them comprehend new systemic knowledge gained through foreign language instruction. As a consequence, we suggest that teachers move from familiar to unfamiliar subjects, step by step, to avoid interfering with their students' reading comprehension performance.

## 2.2 Background Knowledge

Schema theory has been proposed by numerous researchers and it has been suggested that it positively affects EFL learners' reading comprehension instruction (Abu-Rabia, 1996; Bensoussan, 1998). Schema theory is based upon the notion that reading comprehension is affected by readers' prior learning experiences that, in turn, affect their background knowledge structures. The role that this theory plays in reading comprehension is tied to cultural relevance. For students, culture has a particularly significant impact on their reading ability and overall reading comprehension when learning English. From Abu-Rabia and Bensoussan's studies, we see that students who read familiar stories generally receive higher scores in reading comprehension than students who read unfamiliar stories. One can conclude, then, that students comprehend culturally familiar materials at a higher level than culturally unfamiliar materials, a conclusion that represents the influence of students' cultural backgrounds on their reading comprehension. As it has been noted, language curricula are easier to comprehend when the contents are relevant to the readers' lives and cultural backgrounds. Droop and Verhoeven (1998) and Lin (2002) have also declared the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension, arguing that cultural familiarity and prior knowledge both have substantial influence on reading comprehension. Additionally, a student's relationship to their culture affects their reading efficiency and their degree of comprehension. If readers have a limited vocabulary and background knowledge of the reading material, such deficiencies obstruct their reading procedures. Moreover, they suggested that prior learning experience is more influential with regards to comprehension than the meanings of particular words or the sentence complexity of the stories. Therefore, reading curricula should emphasize practice in providing descriptive summaries of the texts, supplying background information to students so that they may contextualize the subject matter of their texts, and interpretation of intricate vocabulary and phrases to facilitate students' linking their prior learning to their current reading. Studies have shown that students are capable of using prior knowledge to predict comprehension clues available from stories previously unknown to them. In summary, readers who read material containing culturally familiar references show an increased reading proficiency and superior level of content comprehension.

Curricula should include culturally relevant material and also correspond to students' respective levels of linguistic complexity. In further support of this conclusion, McCullough (2002) has examined whether culturally-bound prior knowledge affects students' reading processes and overall comprehension. The outcome of that research supported our notion that culturally-related reading material helps students' overall reading ability because such material helps students to form conceptual scaffolds. Consequently, it is fundamental that cultural familiarity with reading material be used to support reading procedures, in an effort to achieve greater levels of accomplishment. Tseng (2002) provides important perspectives on culture. First, culture produces diversity. Next, culture is not a collection of truths but a series of learning procedures. Finally, culture can and should be discussed in multilingual and multicultural environments. Educators need to know how properly to embed cultural materials into their curricula and classrooms in order to expand students' global perspectives. Moreover, educators must know how to activate students' prior linguistic and cultural backgrounds to improve their reading comprehension. Guest (2002) agrees that incorporating cultural differences and cultural knowledge into the classroom is beneficial for both teaching and learning. His research offers several insights to aid teachers in bringing about a balanced sense of cultural awareness to their EFL classrooms in an effort to improve their students' levels of reading proficiency.

## 2.3 Reading Comprehension

Reading ability has always been regarded as crucial to academic success (Levine, Ferenz, & Reves, 2000; McNamara, 2004). In order to reach academic success, reading comprehension is considered to be a fundamental element of EFL/ESL learning. Reading comprehension is a complex and mental process between readers and the texts, referring to readers' language competence and topic knowledge. The interactive process can be divided into different levels, which appear synchronously (McNamara). Based on Sweet and Snow (2002), constructing meanings from the contexts is the key goal of reading comprehension. Therefore, reading comprehension combines meaning making procedure and readers' prior background knowledge. Researchers claim that it is necessary for readers to utilize several strategies in reading comprehension when encountering reading difficulties (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The subjects of the study were fifty Taiwanese EFL students enrolled in a required English conversation class in Southern Taiwan. It was the homogeneous group that comprised of students in their fifth year of junior college. They were between the ages of 22 and 23, all of whom began learning English when they were middle school students. These students were examined during the fall semester, and the majority was found to study English for two hours per week. Their assigned textbook was *English Conversation in Taiwan*.

#### 3.2 Procedures

This study supports teaching strategies and levels of quality, especially in terms of target-language cultural materials applied within EFL classrooms. The researcher selected this particular group of students because she has also used *English Conversation in Taiwan* as a textbook, and has taught English language classes at this school. The researcher developed the twenty-five questions used in the questionnaire to help determine how target culture and background knowledge impact reading comprehension. The questionnaire used a Likert scale that collected respondents' feedbacks and illustrated the number of agreements and disagreements in the subjects' responses. The questionnaire was comprised of questions regarding three factors: (1) cultural familiarity, (2) background knowledge, and (3) reading comprehension. These three factors are considered from the perspectives provided in previous research conducted by Abu-Rabia (1996), Bensoussan (1998), Droop and Verhoeven (1998), and Lin (2002). The questions were written in Chinese because the subjects' first language is Chinese and, therefore, this ensured the subjects' understanding of the questions. The students were allowed to choose from five responses: "strongly disagree," "disagree," "neutral," "agree," and "strongly agree," and each answer received from one point to five points. In order to understand the three factors mentioned above, the researcher asked previous students to fill out the questionnaire in class.

### 4. Results

Question 1 (Are you afraid of learning English?) has moderate correlations with Q2 (Learning English is to pass the Joint University Entrance Exam), Q5 (enjoy the textbook *English Conversation in Taiwan*), Q11 (complicated syntactic structures), Q12 (unfamiliar topics with foreign cultures), and Q13 (linguistic complexity of the article). The result has a significant difference and is meaningful. Taking Q1 and Q2 as examples, it can be seen that these two questions support the assumption, because when students encounter unfamiliar foreign cultures they may not understand the contents. This factor causes such students to fear reading related English articles. Nevertheless, Q1 versus Q6 (easier to comprehend English textbook relevant to Taiwan) and Q16 (Do you know Israeli culture well?) are significant. At the same time, students enjoy using *English Conversation in Taiwan* as their textbook. In fact, this book compares L1 and L2 cultures in a fashion that lends itself to students' higher reading efficiencies. We can conclude that this question is positive, and students agree with this concept. On the other hand, it can be seen that the two lower mean scores containing Q16 (Do you know the Israeli culture?) and Q18 (Is Australian culture familiar to you?), meaning that most students chose disfavor responses (either "disagree" or "strongly disagree"). This result manifests that students are unfamiliar with the Israeli culture as well as the Australian culture, to the extent that their lack of familiarity makes it difficult for them easily to comprehend the contents of the reading. The means of Q24 (Having heard stories from family or teachers will catch the meaning faster) and Q25 (Efficient reading strategies are important) are higher than mean score four, referring that most students answered that they agreed or strongly agreed. This information presents that students have some background knowledge or at least have heard of the target culture before; hence, these students have higher reading competencies.—Furthermore, Q16 (Israeli culture), Q17 (British culture), and Q18 (Australian culture) have negative results because students almost entirely showed disfavor (selecting response 1 or 2). Each question, respectively, reveals that Israeli, British, and Australian cultures are not well known to them, and therefore these students may not fully understand these articles. We can conclude that most questions received positive answers because the mean scores were higher than point three, and the standard deviations were close to each other.

## 5. Reflection & Recommendation

This study suggests that the influence of cultural familiarity and background knowledge on reading comprehension is significant. Consequently, we have some suggestions for further study. First, future researchers could employ other types of questionnaire by using open-ended questions, allowing participants to contribute more opinions to the research. Next, the results will be more reliable if there are a larger number of subjects, equally distributed between males and females. Also, it would be useful if students from other non-native English-speaking countries could include in this study. Finally, with the popularity of the related technology, researching through the Internet could supply teachers with bountiful resources regarding topics addressing the daily lives of the target culture. Teachers would not need to worry about lacking the experiences relevant to the target culture (Tsou, 2005). On the whole, this paper justifies a great amount of significant information for the readers, and offers some perspectives on foreign language learning.

## 6. Discussion & Conclusion

The question the researcher attempted to answer was whether cultural familiarity and background knowledge affected reading comprehension. The outcome indicated that students' comprehension was significantly better when the cultural content of the text was familiar, based on the average mean score with more than point three. From Q9 (unfamiliar vocabulary affects your reading comprehension), Q10 (limited vocabulary affects your understanding of the contents), Q22 (reading habits in your childhood are helpful in learning a foreign language), Q23 (reading habits reinforce your reading speed), Q24 (Having heard stories from family or teachers will catch the meaning faster), and Q25 (Efficient reading strategies are important), it can be seen that most students chose responses of "agree" or "strongly agree." Therefore, it can be concluded that students agree that if topics are associated with their native culture, they will find it easier to connect with the articles. Likewise, if students have heard or read related target-culture stories previously, those students will be able to predict vocabulary and even better understand the meaning of the contents. On the other hand, Q16 (Israeli culture), Q17 (British culture), and Q18 (Australian culture) indicated that students are not familiar with these cultures to the extent that it is difficult for students to read the relevant articles. Additionally, the results of Q5 surprised the researcher the most, because the researcher expected the textbook *English Conversation in Taiwan* to be culturally sensitive to the subject students. Most students responded neutrally to the question: "Do you enjoy the textbook *English Conversation in Taiwan* that you are currently using?" The reasons for this result may be that the level of the textbook may be too advanced for these students, that the students are afraid of learning English, are not interested in learning English at all, or that the teachers' pedagogical techniques may not be suitable for these students. This information gave the researcher precious feedbacks regarding how to improve the quality of English language instruction in reading comprehension for intermediate EFL students.

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## Appendix I

Attitude Questionnaire (adapted from Lin, 2002)

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. This questionnaire is not associated with grades, and is relevant to the impact of cultural familiarity and background knowledge on reading comprehension for EFL intermediate Taiwanese students. The purpose of this questionnaire is to understand difficulties students face in learning a foreign language, in order to better educate teachers and further improve their overall teaching quality. Please take a few minutes to answer the questions below. Circle the appropriate answer to each of the question using the following scale:

1. Are you afraid of learning English?
2. Are you learning English in order to pass the Joint University Entrance Exam?
3. Do you agree that communicating with foreigners is the main purpose of learning English?
4. Are you interested in the current required English conversation class?
5. Do you enjoy the textbook *English Conversation in Taiwan* that you are currently using?
6. If your English textbook contained relevant references to Taiwanese food, festivals, and tourist attractions, do you feel it would be easier for you to comprehend the contents?
7. Continuing on from the sixth question, even if you do not know the vocabulary, could you still guess the contents?
8. When reading English articles that are related to your daily life, do you feel you have better comprehension than when the articles are unrelated to your life?
9. When reading an article, will unfamiliar vocabulary affect your reading comprehension?
10. If you only have a limited vocabulary, will it affect your understanding of the contents?
11. If there are complicated syntactic structures, do you find that it is difficult for you to read the articles?
12. Can you understand the meaning of the articles even if you are unfamiliar with topics related to the foreign cultures?
13. Do you think that the linguistic complexity of an article affects your reading ability?
14. If you have background knowledge of a foreign culture, do you find that you face fewer problems with your reading comprehension?
15. When you read English language articles, do you often translate them into Chinese?
16. Do you know the Israeli culture well?
17. Are you familiar with the British culture?
18. Is Australian culture familiar to you?
19. Do you know American culture very well?
20. When you read an article concerning unfamiliar foreign countries, do you feel that the article is difficult to understand?
21. Do you agree that you will grasp the contents of an article more easily when you are familiar with a foreign culture?
22. Do you think that the reading habits you cultivated in your childhood are helpful in learning a foreign language?
23. Do you think that these reading habits reinforce your reading speed?
24. If you have heard stories from your parents, teachers, or news reports, will you catch that same meaning expressed in an article faster?
25. Do you think efficient reading strategies are important?