

THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL FAMILIARITY ON THE IRANIAN LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE AND USE OF COGNITIVE AND METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES IN READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

As an academic endeavor in the field of reading comprehension and strategy research in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, this study intended to investigate first whether a culturally familiar content had any facilitating effect on the readers' comprehension, and second whether the participants receiving either culturally familiar or unfamiliar content differed in terms of their cognitive and metacognitive strategy deployment. To these ends, 73 participants, being divided into control and experimental groups, provided the necessary data. Each group was given either a culturally familiar or unfamiliar story and subsequently received reading comprehension tests followed by a cognitive-metacognitive questionnaire. Data analysis revealed that first, the culturally familiar content had some facilitating effects on the participants' reading comprehension; and second, the participants who received the culturally familiar story employed lower degrees of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The study's findings have some implications for language teachers choosing the most suitable textbooks among culturally familiar and unfamiliar materials as well as curriculum and textbook developers taking into account the promising effects of culturally familiar contents on learners' comprehension.

KEYWORDS: cultural familiarity, cognitive strategy, metacognitive strategy, reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Reading skill is one of the most researched areas in language learning and teaching field partly due to its key role in our everyday life. Having been defined as one's ability to draw meaning from the printed page and to interpret this information appropriately (e.g. Aebbersold & Field, 1997; Goodman, 1988; Gough, 1999; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Harrison, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Samuels & Kamil, 1988; Stanovich, 2000), reading skill has been approached and investigated from different perspectives ranging from behaviorist ones that consider the reader as a passive decoder (Chastain, 1988; Nuttall, 1996) to the cognitivist ones that see the reader as an active constructor of meaning (Aebbersold & Field, 1997; Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Also, in attempts to define reading skill, researchers have always emphasized on the role of both background knowledge and strategies in the reading comprehension process (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Carrell, 1983; Keshavarz & Atai, 2007; Landry, 2002; Levine & Haus, 1985; Moy Yin, 1985). Background knowledge or culture schema, defined as a mental structure which is abstract and organized around the past experiences (Carrell 1987; Chastain 1988; Nuttall 1996), has been showed to play a vital role in reading comprehension and it has been reported that readers must retrieve some background information to come to the intended text meaning (Grabe, 1991; Nuttall, 1996). Furthermore, strategies defined as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or technique” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 63) have been reported to be employed by the effective readers in efficient ways to enhance their reading comprehension (Coiro & Dobler, 2007). Among the language learning strategies, cognitive or “operations and steps in learning or problem solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 99) and metacognitive ones or “actions which go beyond purely cognitive devices, and which provide a way for learners to coordinate their own learning process” (Oxford, 1990, p. 136) are utilized more frequently in the reading process.

Taking into account what said above and reviewing the related literature show that so far, a number of studies have explored the effect of background knowledge on learners’ reading comprehension (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Alptekin, 2006; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Erten & Razi 2009; Huang 2009; Johnson, 1982; Langer, 1984; Lee, 1986; Oller, Chihara & Sakurai, 1989; Parry, 1996; Sasaki, 2000). However, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, studies specifically investigating the effect of culture on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in foreign language reading comprehension are quite scarce. Since native materials have always received priority over non-native ones in EFL contexts owing to their being native and few studies have been done on their effects on the readers’ comprehension process, this research aimed at bridging this lacuna by following a two-fold purpose: Investigating the possible effects of culturally (un)familiar content on both the readers’ comprehension and use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the process of reading comprehension.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decisive relation between language and culture has been repeatedly emphasized in language-related literature (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Atkinson, 1999; Brown, 1994; Carrell, 1991; Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, Kuehn, 1990; Chamot, 2004; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; El-Dib, 2004; Erten & Razi, 2009; Fiorito, 2000; Fuhong, 2004; Genc & Bada, 2005; Hansen-Strain, 1989; Jiang, 2000; Kachru & Smith, 2008; Kaikkonen, 1997; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Oller *et al.*, 1988; Parry, 1996; Pritchard, 1990; Sasaki, 2000; Sowden, 2007; Tsou, 2005; Van Oord, 2005). Also, it has been shown that those texts that are based on the learners’ native culture facilitate the process of reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2006). To answer how this facilitating effect works, different scholars have adopted different approaches. Some have investigated the type of reading strategies that EFL or ESL readers use while reading a text and others have run research studies to answer the question that how reading strategies differ across different cultural groups.

In one of the earliest experimental studies on the effect of culture on reading comprehension, Oller *et al.* (1988), comparing the comprehension of a number of Japanese students using two original texts one of which had been modified according to the research study context, found that the changes in textual elements would result in a significantly better performance of those participants who received the modified text. In the same vein, Sasaki (2000) ran a study, investigating how schemata activated by culturally familiar words might have influenced students' cloze test-taking processes. The data analysis demonstrated that those who read the culturally familiar cloze text tried to solve more items and generally comprehended the text better than those who read the original text with culturally unfamiliar words.

Abu-Rabia (1998) and Fuhong (2004) also came to similar results. Abu-Rabia (1998), running a study on the relationship between cultural background of Arab students in Israel and their reading comprehension of stories based on Jewish and Arab cultures, came to the conclusion that students receiving texts from their own cultural setting scored higher on tasks of reading comprehension compared with those who performed on culturally unfamiliar texts. And Fuhong (2004), conducting a study on a group of Muslim Arabs and Catholic Hispanic language learners who received two texts (Muslim- and Catholic-oriented content), noticed that participants comprehended and remembered better those passages that were similar in some ways to their native cultures or more familiar to them.

Regarding the deployment of strategies by different cultural groups, there are a limited number of studies that have examined this issue. In one of these studies by Pritchard (1990) using think-aloud protocols, he found that U.S. and Palauan readers used quite different strategies for dealing with parallel problems that they encountered when reading in their first language. Similarly, Davis and Bistodeau (1993) found different patterns of strategy use in U.S. and French students' reading of English and French texts.

Also, Parry (1996) came to the same conclusion that cultural background was an important factor in the formation of individual reading strategies. By choosing two groups of subjects from Nigeria and China, he found that the strategies used by the two groups of participants were strikingly different; whereas the Nigerian students showed a marked preference for top-down methods of solving comprehension problems, the Chinese ones reported a strong tendency to use bottom-up methods. Moreover, in one of the most recent studies, Erten and Razi (2009) investigated whether cultural familiarity influences comprehension of short stories. The analysis of variance indicated a better comprehension of those participants working with the culturally familiar story.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As noted in the literature review section, to date, most of the studies in this field have almost exclusively focused on reading strategies as a whole; yet studies investigating the effect of cultural schema on strategy subtypes (especially cognitive and metacognitive ones) used in reading comprehension are really scarce. To bridge this gap, this study aimed at investigating the following research questions:

1. Does the nativization of an original American short story have any effects on the reading performance of EFL readers?

2. Does the nativization of an original American short story have any effects on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies used by EFL readers?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 81 BA junior students studying English literature at Tehran's Payame Noor University. It was supposed that their familiarity with the English language could help them respond more accurately to the data elicitation instruments. Among these participants, 73 students (29 males and 44 females) aged 19 to 23 provided the necessary data (N=73). The reason for the mismatch between the original and the participant groups was due to attrition factor. Using an ex-post facto design, they were divided into control (N=35) and experimental (N=38) groups, with the control group receiving the native text and the experimental group receiving the nativized text. As it was necessary for the participants to have equal command of the English language, a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test (structure and reading comprehension sections) was employed. The scores derived from this test revealed that the proficiency level of participants in both control and experimental groups was relatively equal and the difference in their command of language was insignificant ($t_{(71)} = .03$, $p \geq .05$; See Table 1).

Table 1: The t-test mean difference on the TOEFL

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig (2 tailed)
Control	35	68.97	10.15	-.031	71	.975
Experimental	38	69.04	9.39			

Instrumentation

For the purpose of the study, the following data elicitation instruments were utilized:

A) **A Likert scale cognitive-metacognitive questionnaire:** The 35 five-point Likert items questionnaire used in this study was the one designed by Phakiti (2003 b; 2008) which seemed to be suitable for the purpose of this study because, first, it directly investigated reading skill and second, the wording of this questionnaire was more appropriate for the present participants than the other scales. According to Phakiti (2008),

the items were chosen based on the theory of human information processing which postulates (1) a structural component of sensory receptors, working and long-term memory arrays and (2) a functional component of information processing that describes the operations of comprehending, memory, retrieval and control processes at different specific stages. (p.248)

B) Reading comprehension texts: Two reading texts were selected from ‘Chicken Soup for the Soul’ series (1993; 2002). The rationale for selecting these stories was due to their universally comprehensible theme on one hand and having some culturally unfamiliar social contexts which lent them to adaptation to Iranian culture on the other. It was hypothesized that the adaptation process would help Iranian students to demonstrate better performance in the reading test.

The above original short stories underwent a nativization process. According to Alptekin (2006) nativization refers to “the sociological, semantic and pragmatic adaptation of the textual and contextual clues of the original story into the language learner’s own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact” (p. 499). Therefore, the selected stories underwent both a textually and contextually adaptation process. At the textual adaptation phase, the data dealing with settings and locations on one hand and characters and occupations on the other were nativized. Also, nativizing contextual clues involved the adaptation of some culture-specific words. According to Adaskou *et al.* (as cited in Alptekin, 2006), the nativization process can be done at three levels of culture: sociological (i.e. nativizing specific contextual clues such as religious words), semantic (i.e. adapting the culture-specific notions and structures), and pragmatic (i.e. the substitutions of target cultural values for original cultural ones).

What follows are some examples of what the researcher did to operationalize the above-mentioned adaptation levels. For the first level, the phrase ‘reading Scripture’ in the original story was replaced by ‘reciting Holy Quran’. Or more interestingly, ‘working at a night club as an emcee’ was replaced by ‘working at a Ramadan program as a director’. For the second level, the ‘cold, aloof, and uncaring people’ in the original story was replaced by the ‘warm, hospitable, and caring people’ in the nativized version. More interestingly, the phrase ‘ladies and gentlemen’ in the original story was replaced by ‘fellow brothers and sisters’. And finally, for the pragmatic level, the phrase ‘girl football players’ was replaced by ‘boy football players’ or ‘occasional whistles from the men’ in the original story was replaced by ‘occasional stares from the people’ in the nativized version (See Appendix A for further information).

C) Reading comprehension test: To measure the comprehension of the participants, a total numbers of 20 multiple-choice items were constructed out of each native and nativized texts. Reading comprehension and vocabulary questions were used in these tests.

Procedure

Pilot study

The reading comprehension tests were piloted with a small sample (N=31) whose proficiency using TOEFL test was determined to be similar to that of the participants. Then, the data collected at this phase were used to identify too easy or difficult tests items. The results showed that the tests items’ difficulty level was appropriate with the sample. Furthermore, to be assured of the reliability coefficient of the two tests, alpha Cronbach was run and the results revealed acceptable alpha values for both test based on the native text ($\alpha = .85$) and test based on the nativized text ($\alpha = .82$).

Main Study

Prior to administering the tests and the questionnaire among the participants, the teachers whose classes were chosen for conducting the research were given a sample of both instruments and informed of the purpose of the study so that they could facilitate the research process. Subsequently, a package comprising of texts (either native or nativized), tests based on the type of the text, and the cognitive-metacognitive questionnaire was administered individually to the participants who were asked first to answer the reading test and then the questionnaire based on their performance in the reading phase. The participants were not allowed to use dictionary or other resources so that their reading ability could be demonstrated accurately. Having received the package, the researcher started scoring both the reading comprehension tests and the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, independent sample t-test was conducted to evaluate whether the control and experimental groups' comprehension differed across the texts with different cultural orientations. Also, repeated-measure ANOVA was run to evaluate whether the control and experimental groups' use of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies differed across these text types. To further analyze the effect of the independent variable or the strength of association between variables, the effect size measure (η^2) was run.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

As the aim of the first research question was to examine the effect of nativization process on the participants' reading comprehension, the t-test results confirmed the hypothesis that the more culturally familiar a text is to the readers, the better their performance will be in a reading comprehension test ($t_{(71)} = 2.46$, $p < .05$). As it is clear from the descriptive statistics, the mean score of the experimental group ($\bar{x} = 16.82$, $SD = 1.70$) is higher than that of the control group ($\bar{x} = 15.80$, $SD = 2.20$). That is, the culturally familiar content had a facilitating effect on the reading comprehension process (See Table 2).

Table 2: The t-test mean difference on the native and nativized stories

Group		N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig (2 tailed)
Short story	Control	35	15.80	2.20	-2.46	71	.01
	Experimental	38	16.82	1.70			

As noted earlier, the second research question aimed at investigating whether nativizing a short story had any effects on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies used by EFL readers. The hypothesis was that those participants reading the nativized story would use lower degree of these strategy types because they would confront less comprehension problems. The results of ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for both cognitive and metacognitive strategies ($F_{(1, 71)} = 126.80$, $p < .05$). In addition, the interaction between the group (control or experimental) and the strategy type used by the participants was found to be insignificant ($F_{(1, 71)} = .33$, $p > .05$). To

further analyze, the eta squared measure (η^2) showed that the strategies (cognitive and metacognitive) accounted for 59 percent of the variability of both control and experimental groups' test performance.

Analyzing the descriptive data confirmed the aforementioned hypothesis. The participants who received the nativized story used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies less than those who received the original one (See Table 3). This finding reaffirms the facilitating effect of the nativizing an original story on the reading comprehension. This is due to the fact that when the cultural context of a reading text is unfamiliar to the reader, s/he should utilize a repertoire of strategies (both cognitive and metacognitive) to compensate for the comprehension breakdowns stemmed from the given context. But the obverse is true for the reader who is engaged with a culturally familiar reading text. That is, facing a culturally familiar content, one should dwell more on the other types of schemata such as formal and linguistic ones to make mind of the reading text.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the control and experimental groups' use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies

Strategy Type	Group	N	Mean	SD
Cognitive	Control	35	53.56	8.57
	Experimental	38	41.96	9.76
Metacognitive	Control	35	61.73	10.10
	Experimental	38	51.02	10.21

Discussion

Generally, the above presented results emphasize the fact that familiarizing the cultural content of a reading text has a facilitating effect on the readers' comprehension process. This facilitating effect can be seen in the readers' use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies in native and nativized reading texts. As it is clear from the literature, strategy generally has a compensatory role in the process of comprehension and production (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). This compensatory role is quite evident in the data elicited from the participants. As described earlier, the control group who received the native reading text used both cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than the experimental group who received the nativized story.

The native story with its culturally unfamiliar content requires the reader to employ the cognitive strategies more than the nativized story which represents a culturally familiar content. This finding is quite in line with the role that has been assumed for cognitive strategies. According to the definitions of cognitive strategies and reading process in the literature, the reader who has to make mind of a reading text with unfamiliar textual, sociological, semantic, and pragmatic information must rely extensively on the cognitive strategies to overcome various comprehension problems faced in the process of reading (Phakiti, 2003a).

Regarding the effect of nativization process on the use of metacognitive strategies, it was revealed that the control group outweighed the experimental group in terms of using these strategies. This can be explained by the nature of the reading texts that these two groups received. The control group who received an original short story had to employ metacognitive strategies

more frequently to check and re-check the constructed meaning. Therefore, metacognition or “cognition of cognition” (Carrel, Pharis & Liberto, 1989) played an executive role in the process of comprehension. According to Oxford (1990), “metacognitive means beyond, beside or with the cognitive” (p. 136). Furthermore, the more cognitive strategies are used by the EFL reader, the more metacognitive strategies should be recruited to check the recreated meaning. Then, these two types of strategy categories work in concordance with each other to help the reader derive meaning from the printed language.

The aforementioned discussion of results shows that the nativization of an original reading text can have some effects on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies by L2 readers. Accordingly, it seems that using a nativized reading text can have a facilitating effect on the reading comprehension performance of L2 readers. This was demonstrated in the mean score differences between control and experimental groups. This finding is in line with some studies that emphasize the positive effect of culturally familiar content on the participants’ performance in a reading comprehension test (Abu-Rabia, 1998; Carrell, 1991; Carson *et al.*, 1990; Chamot, 2004; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; El-Dib, 2004; Erten & Razi, 2009; Fuhong, 2004; Hansen-Strain, 1989; Oller *et al.*, 1989; Parry, 1996; Pritchard, 1990; Sasaki, 2000). Based on these findings, it is suggested that more nativized reading texts be integrated in the classroom teaching programs so that the foreign language learners who are mainly unfamiliar with the bulk of target culture can demonstrate the highest level of their abilities.

CONCLUSION

As it was noted earlier, the current study was a contribution to the field of applied linguistics by examining the possible effects of nativizing an original American short story on a number of EFL language learners’ reading comprehension and their use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the process of reading. It was supposed that such a study would be helpful for all those practitioners (including language teachers, curriculum and material developers) to pay more attention to such effects. The analysis of collected data indicated that:

- a. the nativization process had facilitating effects on the participants’ reading performance;
- b. those participants who received the native short story employed cognitive and metacognitive strategies compared more frequently than those who received the nativized one.

The aforementioned findings have some implications. First, curriculum and material developers should take into account the effects native and nativized materials can have on the language learners’ performance and comprehension. Second, language teachers as those who are in direct contact with language learners should be aware that despite their seducing advantages, native textbooks should be used with caution due to their effects on EFL language learners’ reading comprehension.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that the findings and implications of the present study should be interpreted with caution because of two limitations. First, the participants were all studying English literature at the BA level. Their major has certainly familiarized them with some

elements of American culture. This prior familiarity with a foreign culture may have a conflating effect on the outcome of the study. Therefore, the study needs to be replicated using different participants from other majors who have been in less contact with the target culture. Another limitation of this study was that it did not take into account the participants' gender. According to the previous studies, there are some differences between male and female test-takers in terms of cognitive and metacognitive strategies use (Phakiti, 2003a, 2003b). It is recommended that the future research studies scrutinize the possible effects of gender on the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in either native or nativized reading texts.

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Appendix A. Sample section from the original text

I've lived in New York City for all of my seventeen years and can't imagine living anywhere else. It's an amazing city full of sights and smells and sounds unlike anywhere else on earth. Its being a city with a population of more than 8 millions adds to its excitement, as well as to the mistaken belief that it's filled with cold, aloof, and uncaring people. Taken as a total number, it's hard to imagine connecting with all its citizens, but when you deal with one person at a time something different happens.

It was a cold November day, and New York City was still reeling from the devastation of September 11. All the members of my soccer team were glad to have an excuse to get out of school. It was a first game of the year and we had suffered a horrible defeat; we were just excited to be starting the new season. We were twenty high-school girls walking and laughing through

the streets of the Bronx, ignoring the occasional whistles from the men we passed. We got to the subway station just as our train was coming in. Piling onto the D Train, we glanced around the car, finding it full of blank stares and vacuous expressions. As the train started moving, twenty boisterous voices erupted once, discussing everything from the attitudes of the girls on the opposing team to our plans later that night.

Nativized version from the same section

I've lived in Tehran for all of my twenty years and can't imagine living anywhere else. It's an amazing city full of sights and smells and sounds unlike anywhere else on earth. Its being a city with a population of more than 10 millions adds to its excitement, as well as to the mistaken belief that it's filled with warm, hospitable and caring people. Taken as a total number, it's hard to imagine connecting with all its citizens, but when you deal with one person at a time something different happens.

It was a warm Khordad day, and Tehran city was still reeling from the devastation of aftermath Presidency Election disturbances. All the members of my football team were glad to have an excuse to get out of university. It was a first game of the year and we had suffered a horrible defeat; we were just excited to be starting the new season. We were twenty university boys walking and laughing through the streets of the Sadeghyieh, ignoring the occasional stares from the people we passed. We got to the metro station just as our train was coming in. Piling onto the line 2 Train, we glanced around the car, finding it full of questioning stares and criticizing expressions. As the train started moving, twenty boisterous voices erupted once, discussing everything from the attitudes of the boys on the opposing team to our plans later that night.