

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL SCHEMA IN STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION IN ESL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The present study is designed to investigate the role of cultural schema in ESL context at Higher Secondary level in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It aims to investigate students' comprehension of a short story The Blanket by Floyed Dellin their textbooks. The investigation is however exclusive of content and language schemata. To examine students' reading comprehension qualitatively, this study uses the tool of 'content familiarity questionnaire' for primary data collection from a sample of 200 participants selected via convenient sampling technique. Analysis includes schemata identification of culturally unfamiliar context, norms, rituals and customs by the students while interpreting the selected lesson. Findings reveal a significant mismatch and misperception between students derived understanding and encoded text from less comprehension to the degree of total miscomprehension. It was found that students either wrongly identified the foreign culture phenomena with their own culture, or their constructed schemata neither match the target nor their cultural schema. Thus, the study stands beneficial to ESL students' reading skill as it draws attention to the development of cultural schema and suggests means of improving students' reading comprehension of such lessons in ESL context.

Keywords: Cultural schema, Reading Comprehension, Cultural Familiarity, Misperception

STUDY BACKGROUND

The integration of Discourse Analysis theories, particularly 'Schema Theory' have offered a deep insight into various aspects of foreign language teaching, such as reading comprehension. Schema Theory combines approaches in the studies of culture, language and cognition. Schemata are data structures, representing stereotypical patterns, which are retrieved from memory and implied in the understanding of text. Cultural schema is the extension of formal schema, which according to Bernhardt (1993), includes ritualistic knowledge as well as culture-historic knowledge. As Asmari and Javid (2018) observes, attention is often paid to the widely accepted content and language schemata at school and college levels, the third type, formal schema is scarcely focused. Students' comprehension of text in ESL classes also suffers when they make false assumptions about schemata of the target culture- as misjudgments and mismatches of schemata are mostly evident when encoder (author) and decoder (reader) interact across cultures and across languages (Cook, 2011).

Schema theory provides a meeting place for the studies of language, culture and cognitive anthropology. In linguistics, it overlaps discourse Analysis, Language Teaching and Sociolinguistics. Schemata are data structures, representing stereotypical patterns, which are retrieved from memory and implied in the understanding of text. "Schemata are abstract structures that one holds to be generally true about the world" (Schallert & Tierney, 1980). Schema or schemata are representations of generic concepts distributed among cultural members.

Schema is divided into three major types: linguistic schemata, formal schemata and content Schemata. Linguistic Schema is readers existing language proficiency in vocabulary, grammar and idioms. Formal schema is defined as organizational forms and rhetorical structures of a written text. Content schema can be classified into its different sub-types. One which has attracted growing interest is the culture specific content schema. Information about the topic, cultural familiarity and readers' previous knowledge related to the field builds the basis of formal schemata.

Cultural schema is the extension of formal schema that includes ritualistic knowledge as well as culture-historic knowledge. It is derived from social structure, salient rituals and a host of other cultural phenomena. It can be found in various cultural artifacts, such as painting, rituals, narratives, Idioms, proverbs, or popular sayings. It also includes rituals, events such as weddings, funerals, and national holidays, as well as invited dinner parties.

Reading was accepted as a passive skill in early accounts, then the role of the reader changed and was typically described as extracting meaning from a text. Lately, reading has started to be described as interactive rather than simply being active. Reading can best be defined as a process which involves the reader, the text, and the interaction between reader and text (Goodman, 1996).

A growing mass of research has revealed that formal schema has a strong positive relationship with reading comprehension as compared to content or linguistic schemata. On the other hand, the over-representation of foreign culture(s) in English syllabi in Pakistan is a source of difficulty in reading comprehension for students. It has also caused identity issues and undermined the worth of native culture as compared to foreign culture (Mansoor, 2002). To emphasize the importance of cultural schema in reading comprehension of lessons rooted in foreign culture in Pakistani context, Pashto L1 ESL learners' understanding of a short story taken from their English book was examined by the researchers that required knowledge of American culture to interpret.

As Asmari and Javid (2018) observe, attention is often paid to the widely accepted linguistic and content schemata at school and college levels, the third type, formal schema, with its sub-type cultural schema, is scarcely focused. Students' comprehension of text in ESL classes also suffers when they make false assumptions about schemata of the target culture- as misjudgments and mismatches of schemata are mostly evident when encoder (author) and decoder (reader) interact across cultures and across languages (Cook, 2011). Students' lack of familiarity or total unawareness about the various phenomena of target culture, and no particular focus paid to the proper explanation of these culturally unfamiliar concepts by teachers are a great source of difficulty in reading comprehension and text interpretation of such lessons that are rooted in target culture, included in their textbook. The English Textbooks in Pakistani context contain lessons that are rooted in foreign culture, with no units on foreign cultural knowledge. Pertaining to this fact, the study focuses government Higher Secondary schools students' understanding of such lessons.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does lack of target (English) cultural knowledge of norms, rituals and conduct etc. causes misperception and miscomprehension in readers' understanding of target culture based text?
- To which extent the students may wrongly employ native culture concepts in their comprehension of unfamiliar target culture based text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language plays an important role in permeating culture and thoughts (Sheraz, Kazemian & Mahar, 2015). There exists a strong, positive relationship between the performance of the learners in the target language and their cultural familiarity AT school level (Sabtain & Ibrahim, 2013). EFL students use local, bottom-up processing (data-driven) in reading. With no proper emphasis on

appropriate reading strategy, they spend most of the time on translation, vocabulary and grammar analysis while reading both culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts (Dehgan & Sadighi, 2011).

Developing cultural schema helps learners in re-call gist, improving reading speed, and its absence hinders reading comprehension (Dimassi, 2006). Linking the text based on target culture to students' social and cultural experiences significantly enhances reading comprehension (Al-Asmari & Javid, 2018). The closer the match between students' schema and the text, the better comprehension occurs (Khanam, Zahid & Mondol, 2014). Considering the importance of the frequent use of the slang and taboo words in the target (English) culture, Kang (2019) suggests to even license EFL teachers to highlight the issue of English slang in the classroom from a pedagogical perspectives.

The over-representation of foreign culture in Pakistani English textbooks is not only the source of difficulty in reading comprehension for students. It has also caused identity issues and undermined the worth of native culture as compared to foreign culture (Mansoor, 2002). Mahabadi (2013) recommends the 'localization' (to teach the target language with respect to the learner's own culture) of materials taught in EFL/ESL classroom. In her view, localization of the materials makes it familiar to the students which in turn help reading comprehension. Thus, in her opinion, it would be useful to localize the material in the target language to source culture up to some extent. Similarly, following Erten and Razi (2009), Asif, Ghani and Querishi (2016) favor 'indigenization' or 'nativization' of authentic text in an experimental study. According to them, they minimized the difficulty encountered by Intermediate level Pakistani EFL students in comprehending the stories rooted in the target culture by replacing some textual and contextual cues of the original stories to the textual and contextual cues from Pakistani culture. Thus, they established a positive relation between nativization of text and better reading comprehension. Mansoor (2002) however supports the independent inclusion of locally produced material in textbooks.

Another experimental study, very similar in context to the present one, was conducted by Rahman and Umer (2019) at school level in Peshawar, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. They stress the development of intercultural pragmatics among EFL students. Unlike Mansoor (2003), they favor the combination of both local and target culture based material in textbooks. According to them, "If the culture (source and target cultures) will be ignored or excluded in the second/foreign language pedagogy, it will be difficult to become highly proficient in the target language". The brief survey of the relevant literature shows the scarcity of research into the role of cultural schema in developing EFL students' reading comprehension. Very few studies e.g. (Mansoor, 2003; Rahman & Umer, 2019; Asif, Ghani and Querishi, 2016) deal with this area in Pakistani context. However, the mentioned few studies have been conducted in a different contexts. The present study contributes to this area by identifying Pashto L1 EFL students' wrong suppositions about target culture in the genre of short story in the English textbook at Intermediate level (1st year) in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

The concept of 'cultural schema' was taken as an independent variable; its impact was examined upon participants' reading comprehension of text based on target culture. Sample size included 200 Pashto L1 EFL students enrolled in 1st year of intermediate program (boys and girls in equal proportion) in the present study. Using convenience sampling, this sample size was taken from four different higher secondary institutions readily accessible to researchers. Participants' inclusion was made on the basis of their availability and willingness. A lesson (short story) from English textbook Intermediate Part I, designed by the Textbook Board Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan was chosen for analysis. While collecting primary data, participants were given a 'Content Familiarity Questionnaire' containing open-ended questions based on the chosen lesson in their textbook. The questionnaire was designed to elicit participants' detailed responses. The researchers used participants' native language (Pashto), along with English, to mitigate the impact of linguistic schemata as intervening variable. It was ensured that none of the participants faced difficulty of a word or expression in the text. Students' responses in the form of entries were recorded in the first

phase. The volume of entries belonging to correct interpretation of the lesson were scrutinized in the first step. A thorough thematic analysis of students' incorrect assumptions, understanding and interpretations of the culturally unfamiliar phenomena was carried out and all the incorrect entries were categorized and analyzed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the first type of incorrect entries concern the notion of sending the old-aged persons to old house which is the central theme of the story. Though this practice is quite common and accustomed to American culture, this is entirely an unfamiliar concept to Pashtuns. Their assumptions to this strange phenomenon varies from slightly different assumption to totally wrong interpretation. Thus they made the following partially and totally wrong suppositions concerning the practice of sending the granddad (a character in the story) to old house:

Table. 1

Perception of granddad's sending to old house	Percentage
1) He was too old, and was suffering from backaches and pains, therefore required special medical care which was not possible at home	17%
2) Granddad wanted the company of old fellows like him and the best of everything (eating and drinking)	12%
3) There might be space issue or the problems of accommodation	14%
4) He was intolerant to babies and their noise because of his infirmities	16%
5) Peter's father could not feed more than two persons due to poverty, so he was sending his father to adjust his new wife at home	13%
6) He hated Peter's father and the girl Peter's father was going to marry	11%
7) He was leaving for religious reasons and wanted to join the new house/place for worship at his old age.	10%
8) Correct response	03%
9) No response	04%

In the first place, the above responses indicate that some of the students were not clear whether granddad was leaving for old age upon his choice or that he was being forced to go there. Some of the reasons mentioned by students were the product of their inference derived from the slight hints present in the story. For instance, there are direct mentions made in the text to 'backaches and pains', 'the best of everything', and 'babies in future' which indicates that (1), (2) and (4) in the above given table were the wrong interpretations based on textual cues in the story.

Pertaining to these findings, the study postulates that approximately every second reader with weaker or no knowledge of foreign culture may wrongly relate the textual cues to foreign cultural concepts in reading text rooted in target culture.

Another 16% participants based their interpretations upon some of the indirect clues in the story. Examples of this sort are 'the unpleasant attitude of the lady to granddad' as a reason of granddad's hate for her and his consequent departure. At the same time, 'Peter and granddad's act of washing dishes' suggests poverty as one of the reasons why the granddad's was being sent to the old House. Thus, interpretation made by each 6th participant based on indirect hints in text is subject to errors in comprehension.

The final reason enlisted above is however neither based on direct nor indirect hints. Participants wrongly identified this practice with their own culture. In their view, the old-aged people in their culture prefer devotion to worship by restricting their worldly activities. Therefore, they regarded worship as the sole reason for granddad's departure from his home. Hence, the wrong identification of one's own cultural practices with target culture may be made by each 10th reader in circumstances similar to this.

Participants' Suppositions about the young girl's stay at Peter's house before her marriage with Peters' father

The next phenomenon which is contradictory with subjects' culture is the stay of a girl with a male/ her bachelor friend in a house. Majority of them were not aware that it's permissible in American culture unlike their own. It was found that 3.5% even didn't share their response to this practice at all. This tendency of the subjects could be assigned to the fact that holding discussion and commenting upon this practice is unethical and a taboo in their culture. Other offered the following explanations:

Perception of a young girl's stay at Peter's house before her marriage to Peter's father	Percentage
She was their relative	21%
She was there to manage the matters related to the up-coming wedding	17%
She might have eloped from her home	16%
She was staying to make good ties with Peter and convince him that she would be a good mother irrespective of being step one	14%
She had come to see off granddad	15%
Correct response	13.5%
No response	3.5%

The first supposition made by few participants was that the girl was Peter's father relative because her stay implies her family relationship with Peter's father. This is because a girl can stay only in her relatives' home in their (participants) culture. This assumption of participants is due to their unfamiliarity with such sorts of affairs in foreign culture. Their understanding of such phenomenon is either missing or poor.

The second explanation offered by participants about the girl's stay in Peter's home in the story is their false identification of culturally unfamiliar ritual of wedding with the familiar ones in their own culture. According to them, wedding involves lots of preparations and arrangements. Any wedding can only be accomplished by the active involvement of women- a common practice in the subjects' culture. Since there is no mention of other women or girls in Peter's home, it suggested them that the girl is there to manage all the affairs of wedding herself. Her stay is therefore the result of a compulsion.

Participants' assumption of the girl's elopement from her home is again the result of the wrong extension of their cultural schema to target culture. A girl cannot have the liberty of staying in her in-laws' home just before her wedding in subjects' culture. If she is not already their relative, her stay implies that she has eloped from her home to marry Peter's father. In participants' view, her love for Peter's father and elopement left her with no choice except to stay there.

On the whole, it may be inferred on the basis of these findings that the phenomenon of relation and social proximity in the target culture may be misinterpreted by more than half of the participants belonging to the level and background similar to this study's participants. Their explanation may however be different from one another.

The last two suppositions of participants are somehow suitable to the text. Though these two assumptions are not adequate, they are based on the wrong interpretation of textual cues present in the story. Participants interpreted the girl's word she spoke to Peter: "She would try to be a good mother to him and all that" as the sole reason of the girl's stay in Peter's home. Similarly, other participants took her utterance addressed to granddad: "I'll not be seeing you in the morning, so I came over to say good-bye" as her pretext of her stay.

Thus, slightly lesser than one-third students offered a related but wrong explanations of this culturally unfamiliar nature of relation. Yet, this textual misinterpretation, made by 29% participants, could be avoided if their cultural schema is properly developed. They may not go for such elucidations once they are made aware of such culturally outlandish concepts.

PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTION OF OLD HOUSE

The old house was an entirely strange concept to the subjects. Similar to the nature of relations, rituals and practices, social institutions of the target culture, the concept of old house in the story requires a proper orientation to target culture so that they could correctly interpret the text. The concept of old house has been taken as given knowledge and very little information exists about it in text. Consequently, following suppositions were made about old house and its functions:

Perception of Old house	Percentage
1) It offers accommodation for homeless old-aged persons	43%
2) It is meant for males only	29%
3) It is a sort of prison because a mention is made in the story that granddad and Peter would never see one another again	18%
4) It is a house where old age people live.	10%

Besides rituals, norms and practices, participants' concept of the target cultural institutions that are missing in their own culture can be a great source of misinterpretation of text. This fact was also observed by investigating participants' perception of old house mentioned in the story. Excluding the correct views about old house presented by 10% participants, the false suppositions made by other participants are presented below.

The mostly recurring theme in participants' responses given first in the list above is incorrect. In their view, old houses in American culture offer accommodation to homeless, aged persons. They identified old house with shelter house because they might have some idea of the latter. Thus, they were unaware of the role and function of old house which is common in American culture. This is because the concept of old house and its related ideas are completely missing in participants' native culture.

The next assumption the participants formed about old house is that it is meant for males only. They believed that only males that are old are sent to it. This false supposition of participants can be assigned to the fact that no direct or indirect reference is made about the old house and its function in the story. Pertaining to the fact that only males –whether old or young—can reside in such places in participants' culture, they have derived this assumption that only aged males are sent to old house.

The final explanation offered by some participants about old house is that it is prison. This is again based on the misinterpretation of some textual cues in the story. Few participants considered old house as a prison because of the statements: "It was the last night they would have together", and "He would never hear Granddad play again". Thus, they associated ideas like strict rules, imprisonment, and harsh treatment with old house. The missing of the proper notion of old house caused these misperceptions and misinterpretations in participants' mind. It can be therefore inferred from the obtained figures that 09 out of 10 participants may construct wrong notion of target cultural institutions mentioned in text if they are not properly introduced and elaborated.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the role of participants' cultural schema in reading text rooted in target culture. It suggests that a story which has a setting in foreign/target language culture could pose a lot of problems for its readers because of the differences between the native and target language cultures schemata. Participants' insufficient or poor cultural schema of norms, values, customs and social institutions of the target culture results in difficulty in reading comprehension and

misinterpretation of text based on foreign cultural understanding. These misinterpretations are somehow related with target culture but range from partially wrong to totally false. This was evident when participants had no difficulty in words meaning and structure but they were troubled while interpreting the culturally unfamiliar phenomena in the story.

Most of the participants in this study could not offer adequate and correct explanations of the foreign cultural practices, relations, rituals, norms and institutions. They wrongly associate various phenomena of foreign culture to their own culture in majority cases. In fewer instances, their constructed schemata neither match the target nor their cultural schema. Poor cultural schema also causes misinterpretation of textual cues present in the text. The vital cultural concepts central to text comprehension are taken as given knowledge that causes little or no understanding of target culture among participants. Resultantly, they make suppositions that are partially correct or totally false based on the direct and indirect textual cues in lessons rooted in foreign culture. The extent of miscomprehension, misinterpretation and false supposition was found to be substantially great. Excluding the partially and totally incorrect explanations, the average of correct responses of participants in the three categories was recorded to be 9%. The study anticipates that this average may increase if cultural schemas are coupled with things like the readers' know of the language structure, style, background knowledge etc in other cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

It was found that lessons in the English Intermediate part (I) textbook contained meaning of each difficult words at the end. The study recommends that such lessons/stories should also be supplemented with glossaries and explanations of concepts associated with foreign/target culture. Poor comprehension, false suppositions, misinterpretation and shallow understanding of such text can significantly be reduced or avoided at all by developing participants' target cultural schema. Participants' cultural schema can be developed or activated through such pre-reading tasks that are designed to impart knowledge required for proper understanding of foreign cultural norms, customs, values, lifestyle, rituals and institutions. There appears a vital need of investigation into the factors which can develop participants' cultural schema at Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels. Besides the selected short story, the researchers found a number of essays, poems and dramas in the Intermediate English textbooks that are purely based on cultures other than participants' own culture. Even there are texts that require religious knowledge on the part of the participants for comprehension. Further research can investigate the role of cultural schema by a comparison drawn among different genres. Finally, examining the relative importance of each type of schemata for reading comprehension and establishing the negative/positive relation among these types is a wide area for further research.

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