The effect of cultural familiarity on the reading comprehension of L2 learners and what this means for UGRU

Hilda Freimuth

Introduction

This research on the effect of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension stems from observations made within UAE University's classrooms and from the IELTS testing of these students. Informal observations indicate that students have very little background knowledge to apply to their English language studies. Lack of background knowledge is evident throughout the students’ work at all levels. A specific example would be one student's reference in an essay to President Bush's marriage to Princess Diana and their three children.

This indicates a need for teachers to increase learners’ background knowledge as a whole. However, since this will take some time, the existing exam material used at UAE University is of concern as some of the topics may be unfamiliar to learners. Various research has shown a clear link between the amount of background knowledge on a topic and one's reading comprehension. If this is indeed the case, then giving our learners culturally unfamiliar readings in test situations could be detrimental to their performance.

Definition of Cultural Familiarity

Before we look at the concept of cultural familiarity, it is best to define the term ‘culture’ first. Various definitions abound for this term and the meaning itself has changed in the past 25 years and continues to evolve to this day. According to Zieghan (2001), the simplest definition of culture embodies the shared beliefs, values, and practices of a given group of people. Of course, individually these may vary slightly within a culture, but overall the group’s worldview would be the same. She goes on to say that there are some key differences between cultures. One is whether a society is individualistic or collectivist – meaning does the society value the individual more than the whole or vice versa. Other possibly conflicting dimensions are the concept of time, active or passive orientation, and social structure/hierarchy.
Unbeknownst to many, teachers as well as students are cultural beings and tend to reflect their value system in the classroom. A teacher’s way of instructing is in- and-of itself steeped in cultural values (Zieghan, 2001). For example, a North American teacher may encourage more individualistic learning and projects than a Middle-Eastern one would. The North American teacher may put more emphasis on the product as well since action and results are an important part of western culture. If culture refers to the worldview of a group of people (values, belief systems etc.), then what is meant by the term ‘cultural familiarity’?

Cultural familiarity may refer to a person’s familiarity with a variety of different cultural aspects. Existing research shows various examples of this. For instance, Pulido (2004) used script-based narratives on familiar and unfamiliar activities and scenarios in students’ lives as the cultural component in her study. Brantmeier (2003) did her study on the familiarity of the topics in passages from short stories.

Lazar (1993) gives numerous examples of cultural aspects in texts. In her list, she included objects or products unique to a society. An example of this would be a Native Canadian ‘Talking Stick’. Social structures in society- like the role of men and women – is included in the list as well. Understandably, customs and traditions fall into this category too. Proverbs and idioms can also be found on the list because they often reveal cultural values. The background of a story or poem can also feature as ‘cultural’ due to possible political or historical settings. Superstitions, beliefs, taboos and humour can all fall under the category of cultural aspects as well.

**Definition of Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension has been defined in many ways over the years. Nutall (1996) suggests that the overriding purpose to reading is to get the correct message from a text – the message the writer intended for the reader to receive. Day and Park (2005) state that the idea of reading has changed and moved from what was considered a receptive process to what is now an interactive process.
Reading can be done using a number of processes that can be divided into two main categories: bottom-up processing and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing refers to the reader obtaining meaning from the letters and words of a text and reconstructing the intended message that way. Top-down processing refers to the reader’s ability to look at a text as a whole and to connect and relate it to his existing knowledge base. Both processes are needed to obtain a message from a text.

**Literature Review**

**Background Knowledge**

Research in the area of background knowledge and its effect on reading comprehension is numerous. Reading is considered to be a multifaceted process which requires students to access prior knowledge of the world and how it operates in order to extract meaning from a text. Karchmer (2004) refers to Piaget's beliefs that new knowledge is learned by relating it to our current knowledge base. This concept is not new and is –in fact – reinforced by numerous sources.

Marzano (2004) stresses the importance of having background knowledge as well. He has found that scarce background knowledge causes lower achievement in learners. Hirsch (2003) concurs with this as well, but on a different level – his comments are related to the speed of reading. He states that prior knowledge about a topic can improve the speed of reading.

Chandler (1989) did not look at reading speed but rather investigated the idea of reader perspective. The results in his study on adult readers revealed that readers with topic familiarity "showed a higher incidence of reader perspective" (p.1). Tierney (1983) corroborates this connection between topic familiarity and comprehension as well. He discovered that when readers were familiar with the topic they were better able to recall information and think critically. Peter Freebody's (1981) work with 6th graders also indicated that topic familiarity influenced information recall. Other studies like Raphael’s (1980) research showed similar findings in comprehension performance. He found a link between comprehension and topic familiarity as well. Winograd’s (1985) study also showed that there was a strong effect of topic specific knowledge on reading comprehension. His study was done on
a mix of 8th graders and adults. Peter Afflerbach conducted a study in 1987 on the influence of prior knowledge on expert readers' main idea construction processes. He found a correlation between the familiarity of a text topic and the type of main idea construction processes used as well.

Pulido (as cited in Pulido 2004) points to research done by Barry & Lazarte (1998), Carrell (1987), Chen & Donin (1997) and Hudson (1982) to show empirical support for the importance of a reader's prior knowledge of the topic and L2 text comprehension.

While all of these references pertain to topical background knowledge, there are also many more studies available on the cultural aspect of topical background knowledge.

**Cultural knowledge**

Studies have shown that cultural knowledge – which is part and parcel of background and topic knowledge - also has an effect on reading comprehension. A number of varied studies have taken place in this specific area. Some of these studies were conducted on L1 and L2 learners, on L1 learners or L2 learners only, or on bilingual students.

For the L1 and L2 learner category there are the studies done by Dolan (1994), Sasaki (1991), Steffensen + Joag-Dev in 1984 (as cited in Singhal, n.d.), Pritchard (1988) and Johnson in 1981 (as cited in Brantmeier 2003). In a study of Hong Kong and British children, Dolan (1994) discovered that students reading stories from their own cultural background had better recall on those than on readings to do with unfamiliar cultural background. This study was done on L1 and L2 children.

Sasaki (1991) did a study on the cultural familiarity of a text on native-English speakers in America as compared to native Japanese students. These were all attending a university in the United States. The results showed students had greater reading comprehension when the text was culturally familiar to them. This study was done on L1 and L2 adults.
Steffensen also conducted research with Joag-Dev in 1984 (as cited in Singhal, n.d.) to determine if learners comprehended descriptive readings about their own culture more accurately. This study was done with L1 (American) and L2 (Indian) students. The results showed a definite correlation between comprehension and cultural familiarity.

Pritchard’s findings (1988) on the influence of cultural schemata show positive results as well. In Pritchard’s study, 11th graders – all proficient in English-half of which were American and half of which were Palauan, were tested using the topic of funeral rites in each others’ cultures. The results indicate there is a positive influence of cultural schemata on the processing strategies of students as well as on the level of comprehension obtained. This study was done on L1 and L2 proficient teenagers.

Johnson in 1981 (as cited in Brantmeier, 2003) also conducted a study on university students. The study consisted of two groups: 19 proficient Americans and 46 Iranians with intermediate-advanced levels of English. Both groups read folklore from Iran and America. The results revealed that the cultural origin of the pieces the students were reading had a greater effect on reading comprehension than syntactic or semantic difficulty. This study was done using L1 and L2 adults.

Other studies focused purely on L1 or L2 learners. A significant L1 learner study was done by Reynold, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey and Anderson (1982). They found that cultural schemata can influence the way prose is interpreted in English. This study, however, was conducted on L1 grade 8 students, not adults.

There are numerous L2 studies relevant to teachers at UGRU as well. Pulido (2004), Malik (1990), Brantmeier (2003), Carrell in 1987 (as cited in Brantmeier 2003), Chan (2003), Kang in 1992 (as cited in Singhal, n.d.), Park (2004), and Poissant (1990) are among these.

Pulido (2004) did a study on university students: high intermediate L2 learners of Spanish only and focused on incidental vocabulary acquisition and the cultural familiarity of a text. She, too, found a positive co-relation between the two.
Malik (1990) also conducted a study on L2 learners, except this was on proficient L2 students from Iran. The results showed there was a definite influence of cultural schemata on reading comprehension.

A study of Intermediate Spanish language students done by Brantmeier (2003) also showed there to be a positive effect of subject matter familiarity (of which culture is a part) on L2 reading comprehension.

An important study done by Carrell in 1987 (as cited in Brantmeier 2003) focused on L2 university students. Carrell’s study included students of high-intermediate level of English and compared Muslim Arabs with Catholic Hispanics. Results showed that both groups better comprehended reading passages to do with their native culture.

Chan (2003) found that there was a strong cultural effect on the reading comprehension of L2 students as well. She used 2 groups of university students: one from mainland China and one from Hong Kong. Students read two texts – one was culture free and the other culturally familiar and answered a cloze test. She did not find a correlation with post-intermediate students only intermediate students.

Kang in 1992 (as cited in Singhal, n.d.) discovered that L2 readers filter information through cultural background knowledge. She used Korean graduate students with advanced English skills in her study. This study was completes solely on L2 adults.

Gatbonton and Tucker in 1971 (as cited in Floyd and Carrell, 1968) conducted a study on L2 Filipino high school students which showed that incorrect assumptions made in reading unfamiliar texts were due to the misunderstanding of cultural content.

Besides all the L2 adult studies in this field, there is also an interesting study Rosowsky (2000) did with bilingual teenagers. From his study, he concluded that cultural determinants also affect reading comprehension.
Conclusion

As is evident by the literature review, the majority of the research existing in the field of reading and cultural familiarity suggests a positive relationship between reading comprehension and a student’s cultural knowledge. In fact, the only studies I found that contradicted this claim are from Park (2004) and Poissant (1990). Park examined L2 listening and L2 reading comprehension and found that there was a significant effect of cultural familiarity on L2 listening but only a moderate effect on L2 reading. This was done on L2 adults. Poissant in her 1990 study of L1 and L2 adults found no differences between her control group and her experimental group with regards to making delayed recognition judgments in culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts.

To date, there has been a good amount of evidence indicating that cultural familiarity improves many components of reading comprehension such as the speed of reading, reader perspective, recall of information, critical thinking, main idea construction processes as well as other reading processes. With all this overwhelming evidence for a positive link between reading comprehension and cultural familiarity, should we at UGRU not then focus all of our reading comprehension on culturally familiar material?

Although this makes good sense, the argument can be made for the opposite as well. Since students need to be able to process any topic of reading once they exit UGRU, they will need the skills to cope with a variety of unfamiliar content as well.

So what is the solution?

My suggestion would be to use a mix of unfamiliar and familiar material in class with only culturally familiar material used on tests. In class teachers can focus on the teaching of world knowledge – of which topic knowledge and cultural knowledge is only a small part – in order to prepare the students for their academic lives beyond UGRU. Teachers can also encourage students to visit the ILCs where there is a corner dedicated to world knowledge. This combination of classroom teaching and testing would give our learners the much-needed background knowledge that they so lack as well as the upper hand on the exams.
References


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