

DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION AMONGST EFL/ESL LEARNERS THROUGH CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEXTS

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SUMMARY

Reading comprehension is one of the most important information processing skills for building up learners' language competence and performance. Many researches have been conducted on reading comprehension in order to find ways in developing learners' language acquisitions. With the same purpose, this paper explores the role of culturally relevant texts on EFL/ESL learners' reading comprehension ability on the basis of previous researches in this field, also promotes using culturally relevant texts as materials for reading comprehension programs (intensively and extensively), suggesting that they have advantages over the more traditional approach. The paper clarifies some definitions of reading comprehension, explains the influence of background knowledge on learners' reading competence and provides the criteria which can be used to evaluate the cultural relevance of the texts towards learners.

Key words: *reading comprehension, background knowledge, culturally relevant texts, extensive reading, intensive reading.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is recognized as critical for EFL/ESL learners, and reading comprehension is one of the most important information processing skills for building up learners' language competence and performance.

Many language researchers and experts hold the view which considers reading comprehension as a process in which the reader plays an active role when recognizing written symbols and understanding the intended messages and the whole discourse [7]. Such a process surmises that readers should have some background knowledge about the topic of the reading text. Accordingly, meaning of the texts does not clearly exist on the printed pages but is derived from them by various mental operations of the readers through an interactive reading process [6]. In other words, a text by itself does not carry meaning, but rather guides readers in retrieving meaning based on their own prior knowledge. Therefore, reader may differ in the meaning that each associates with a given word. In

addition, it is easier for readers to understand the meaning of a text which contains recognizable components because their background knowledge helps them make predictions and inferences about the story [9]. Fredricks (2012) [8], while teaching EFL in Tajikistan, realized that his students were likely to read more texts about other countries which historically and linguistically linked to their country and eager to make the comparison between the contexts of those texts with their own social and political contexts. The same situation also was recognized by Freeman (2004) [9] when she conducted a research with students in Arizona; that higher quality miscues were made and better retellings were produced when students worked with the culturally relevant stories which draw on readers' background and culture.

The aim of this paper is first to describe what reading comprehension primarily is and then to look at the role of culturally relevant texts in a reading comprehension program.

METHODS

Secondary research was chosen as an appropriate approach to do this paper due to

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the limitation of time (6 weeks). The author collected and studied a wide range of previous studies relating to the research topic thoroughly, most of which were retrieved from the Internet source by reason of restriction in term of published/printed materials which were available on the subject. Of 11 referred articles, 7 came from worldwide acclaimed journals specializing in language teaching or second/foreign language acquisition namely Cambridge University Press, The Reading Matrix, Reading Horizons, The Talking Point, Learning in a Foreign Language and TESL Reporter; with famous experts in such field such as Neil Alderson [1], Yvonne Freeman [9], David Freeman [9], Kevin Stuart [10], Ann Ebe [6], etc. In addition, these articles were conducted in diverse teaching and learning contexts of different countries from The United States of America, China to Egypt and Iran, etc. with participants at various age groups. This contributes to the diversity and reliability of the materials which are the main source of the research paper.

RESULTS

The findings of this paper are presented in the context of this research question: "Does ESL/ESL learners' familiarity with the cultural content of reading texts help them develop their reading comprehension?"

Reading comprehension

According to a definition provided by Bamford and Day (1998, p.12) [2], reading is "the construction of meaning from a printed or written message. Construction of meaning involves the reader connecting information from the written message with previous knowledge to arrive at a meaning – at an understanding". In this construction process, with the widely accepted role of active readers, they construct the meaning of the texts by directing their own cognitive resources and prior knowledge to relate to the reading passages.

Goodman (as cited in [7]) used the term "a psycholinguistic guessing game" to refer to the reading process through which the reader uncovers a reading text, makes prediction about later ideas or matters with the use of available minimal language cues, syntactic constraints and semantic constraints, while sampling the text so as to confirm or reject the prediction. In this process of reading, readers can interact with various sources, such as the content and the background of a text or the pragmatic context and then draw the meaning from the information in the reading [11]. More information is contributed by the readers than by the print on the page. That is, readers comprehend the information in the reading text because they are able to take the motivation further than the written symbols and allocate them to an appropriate group of notions that have been already stored in their minds [7]. Erten and Razi (2009) [7] also found that when readers bring their relevant background knowledge to their reading process, they can assign more attention for analyzing and interpreting textual meaning.

Background knowledge and Reading comprehension

In recent years, there have been an increasing amount of literature on the term "schema theory" [3] [6] [11] reporting that our knowledge and experiences of the world around us also influence how a text is read or processed. Competence readers have an idea of what is normal (linguistically and conceptually) and of how the world works, therefore when reading they make use of existing background knowledge and then adjust them with any new information [3]. The existing background knowledge, combined with the ability to make linguistic anticipations, determines the prospects the reader will expand when reading.

Davoudi and Ramezani (2014) [5] draws on an extensive range of sources to find that the

competent interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world have big influence on reading skills. According to Alderson (2000) [1], the knowledge of the world refers to every particular person's world which differs from others for the reason that every individual has unique personal history, feelings, ideas, interests and experiences which are not necessarily experienced or processed by others. However, people can share their knowledge of the world with other people in a community or nation.

Kramersch (as cited in Davoudi & Ramezani, 2014) [5] believes that understanding a language includes understanding a culture within which it is used; in other words, since culture affects all aspects of life, it certainly has a major impact on all elements of reading [7]; therefore, learners can grasp a new language only when they have a probable understanding of the cultural context of that language. As a result, a reader is most likely to fail to understand a text if his/her cultural knowledge is different from the one proposed by the text [5].

Another research developed by Chang (2007) [4] also states that there is a high degree of connection between readers' prior background knowledge and the reading texts. According to Chang's research, ESL/EFL learners' reading comprehension not only depends on the difficulty level of the texts but is more due to the level of learners' recollection from their culturally relevant background knowledge and from the proper evidences about the cultural foundations.

Culturally relevant texts

Culturally relevant texts are then literary texts that depict aspects of learner's culture such as ways of life, way of dressing, food, artifacts and others, which are unique to the learners' culture and are familiar to them [5]. In their research, Davoudi and Ramezani (2014) [5] cited Brock's explanation that culturally

relevant texts are texts that includes subject matters, contexts, cultural assumptions, circumstances, characters, language, and historical references that are recognizable to the second language readers. In simple words, culturally relevant texts are those that readers can connect to [9] and can draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning [7].

Many researchers while studying this field find the problem in text selection [6] that texts that are used to assess the reading proficiency of EFL/ESL learners are not culturally relevant for the students who read them. Often a writer will assume that the target reader has the relevant background knowledge to read and make meaning out of the text; therefore, the writer will leave certain facts out or unstated. However, this creates problems when the writer and reader do not share the same relevant background knowledge [3]. This problem is found in many nations where ESL/EFL holds an important place in education. One example takes place in Taiwan, where most English texts that Taiwanese students read are narrative or expository passages; thus, many students cannot interact with the context and they cannot learn the whole picture of the reading passages [11].

The same situation happens in China where reading courses are intended to develop general reading skills, the ability to read quickly and an ability to grasp main meaning. As a result, many students cope with distasteful job assignments in which little knowledge of English is actually required, and quickly lose their interest in English [10]. Another example, Ebe (2010) [6] in her research told her story when working in New York that her students, who came from the flat deserts of Northern Mexico, had to struggle to read texts about children climbing mountains and finding caves with waterfalls. She also gave the familiar situation of her

college in Hong Kong that the students had difficulties to read the texts not only because they are not proficient in English, but also because they lack the background knowledge to connect to the reading texts.

Roles of culturally relevant texts on reading comprehension

A strong influence of the culturally relevant texts on learners' reading comprehension has been reported in literature. Many researchers implemented culturally relevant texts on his reading classroom with different methodology and found that culturally relevant texts have good impacts on developing reading comprehension ability of students at different levels and ages.

Fredricks (2012) [8] initiated critical literature circles, a program which drew from critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy, on his adult students in Tajikistan. In this program, students worked together in small, peer-led discussion groups whose members had chosen to read the same reading texts about their own historical, cultural and social issues and then shared opinions about what they had read in an educational setting. The program came up with excellent outcome in which readers developed personal responses to literature, could express their views on texts in relation to their own life experiences, beliefs and values, and had an opportunity for enjoyable L2 reading experiences. "Many members reported enjoying reading texts they have chosen rather than those that they were forced to read for course" [8].

The interaction between culturally relevant texts and language proficiency level in EFL learner's reading comprehension was investigated through a quantitative method conducted by Weng (2012) [11]. Four reading tests, in which four reading texts of different backgrounds were chosen, were designed to examine the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension. The participants,

who came from six classes of university freshmen in Taiwan, had to read four different texts and then answered 20 follow-up questions. The results indicated that participants got higher grades in their topic familiar readings than topic unfamiliar readings and topic familiarity was more important in participants at lower language proficiency levels.

Another method in this field was conducted with participants coming from an urban elementary school in the United States of America by Ebe (2010) [6]. Each participant was asked to read and retell two third grade stories. After analyzing the results, the researcher found that students were more proficient in their reading of the story they identified as being more culturally relevant.

The connections seen in these studies between the culturally relevant texts and reading proficiency indicate that teachers can help support the reading development of their EFL/ESL learners by considering cultural relevance when selecting texts as reading materials [6].

Criteria to select culturally relevant reading texts

While there are many researches support the influence of culturally relevant texts on learners' reading comprehension ability, the question many teachers may ask is: "what makes a text culturally relevant?" [6]. Although a wide range of books is available, determining cultural relevance should go beyond the nationality or ethnicity of the main character and include a number of other factors [9]. There was a set of factors to evaluate a book, which was first developed by Goodman (as cited in Ebe, 2010 [6] and Freeman, 2004 [9]) and refined into a rubric [6] [9] which contains a list of questions focusing on ways the characters and events in the book match up with the lives of the students in the class. Teachers and students

can rate each questions in the rubric using a four point Likert scale, from "1" meaning "no connection" to "4" – very close connection. The questions in the lists are as follows:

Are the characters in the story like you and your family?

Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the story?

Could this story take place this year?

How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?

Does the story have main characters who are boys (for boy readers) or girls (for girl readers)?

Do the characters talk like you and your family?

How often do you read stories like this one?

Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?

DISCUSSION

The paper is an attempt to shed a light on whether culturally relevant texts have any significant influence on EFL/ESL learners' reading comprehension ability. In conclusion, the results from the previous researches expose the natural impact of background knowledge in culturally relevant texts on second language reading comprehension. Background knowledge has been exactly instrumental in connecting the contextual meanings with EFL/ESL readers' comprehension. It is important to note that different books are culturally relevant for different readers and identifying texts that are relevant for a reader for all eight factors is a difficult work. However, finding texts with some cultural relevance for the reader is supportive. In other words, not every text is necessarily relevant to readers' cultural background knowledge but at least some of the texts EFL/ESL learners are provided should be culturally relevant.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATION

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, this study was based on a small number of previous researches due to the limitation of time. Although the chosen researches varied in diverse contexts, most of them were conducted with small groups of participants. The paper would have been more reliable with the findings from a wider range of previous studies which were conducted on more expanded groups in order to include the effects of culturally relevant texts on components of reading comprehension such as the speed of reading, reader perspective, critical thinking, main ideas construction process as well as other reading processes. Further, this study was not designed to measure the effectiveness of individual reading activities using culturally relevant texts. Instead, the use of reading activities was applied in previous researches' methodology as an instrument in examining the influence of cultural background on reading comprehension. Future research may wish to consider these limitations in an attempt to promote better reading comprehension ability amongst EFL/ESL learners through culturally relevant texts.

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TÓM TẮT PHÁT TRIỂN KHẢ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU TIẾNG ANH CHO SINH VIÊN NGOẠI NGỮ THÔNG QUA CÁC BÀI ĐỌC CÓ NỘI DUNG BAO HÀM YẾU TỐ VĂN HÓA PHÙ HỢP

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Khả năng đọc hiểu là một trong những kỹ năng quan trọng nhất trong việc trau dồi và phát triển khả năng ngôn ngữ của sinh viên. Rất nhiều nghiên cứu về khả năng đọc hiểu đã được thực hiện nhằm phát triển năng lực ngôn ngữ cho sinh viên. Cùng với mục đích này, bài báo sau đây nghiên cứu về vai trò của những bài đọc có nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa phù hợp trong việc nâng cao khả năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên, dựa trên những nghiên cứu trước đây trong cùng lĩnh vực. Đồng thời, bài báo khuyến khích việc sử dụng các bài đọc này vào các chương trình đọc hiểu (đọc mở rộng và đọc tăng cường) và cho rằng chúng có nhiều lợi ích hơn các bài đọc thông thường. Bài báo này giải thích các định nghĩa về khả năng đọc hiểu, giải thích sự ảnh hưởng của hệ thống kiến thức nền vào quá trình đọc hiểu và đưa ra những tiêu chí đánh giá mức độ phù hợp về nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa của các bài đọc đối với sinh viên.

Từ khóa: khả năng đọc hiểu, kiến thức nền, bài đọc có nội dung bao hàm yếu tố văn hóa, chương trình đọc mở rộng, đọc tăng cường.

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