

Full Length Research Paper

The effect of teaching culturally-based texts on the Persian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' motivation and reading performance

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The paper served as an attempt to investigate whether teaching the culturally-loaded texts to Persian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners bear any influence on their performance on reading comprehension tests. The paper, in addition, explores the any interrelationship between the teaching of culture-oriented texts and the motivation level of language learners. To achieve such objectives, 102 Persian EFL learners (belonging to two classes) were sampled, using convenient procedure of sampling. The experimental group was given the treatment (teaching culture-loaded texts). They were also given a motivation questionnaire. Analyzing the gathered data, the results revealed that teaching culture elements of target language can have a remarkable impact on the performance of language learners on reading comprehension tests. The study also showed that culture teaching has a great role in improving the motivation level of language learners. The study also bore some implications recounted at the end of the study.

Key words: Culturally-based texts, reading comprehension test, motivation level.

INTRODUCTION

It is a widely agreed comment that teaching culture is an important factor in foreign language instructions. The teaching of culture, as Chastain (1988) also believes, is an integral component of the course content. Chastain further adds that in an ideal language class the basic aspects of that language cultural knowledge are included, students know that these pieces of knowledge are among the most important goals of the course, they also know that they will be tested on these types of knowledge, and on the whole, they know that they are expected to both learn about a people (culture) and a language.

In line with the preceding point, it is axiomatic that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis, but also certain features and characteristics of its culture. Therefore, foreign

language learning and teaching does not incorporate just the grammatical, linguistic, and communicative competencies, rather; it also includes cultural competency that is, knowledge about the beliefs, ceremonies, conventions, etc. of the foreign language speakers. Some researchers mention different aspects of teaching and learning culture as a basis of learning a language and maintain that these cultural aspects should be taken into consideration while teaching a foreign language in order to motivate their students (Chastain, 1988; Krasner, 1999; Rivers, 1981). Besides, the culture associations that are part of language, as well as the socio-cultural background of the participants in teaching and learning environments, ultimately affect how well the language is learnt.

Moreover, the objects, conditions or characteristics that a society considers important (its cultural values) can shape its members' attitudes, priorities, and ultimately their behaviors (Schwartz and Ros, 1995). Several large-

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scale international studies have examined the links between adult cultural values and behaviors (Hofstede, 2001; Smith et al., 2002), but few such studies have examined the links between cultural values and adolescent behaviors (Schwartz and Ros, 1995). Adolescent learning motivation and achievement might differ across cultures. Everyday exposure to a country's customs and practices informally socializes adolescents to a country's cultural values. Adolescents who acquire these societal values also acquire beliefs and behaviors which in turn might affect their motivation and achievement. In addition, adolescent exposure to art and cultural activities at home, for example, paintings, poetry discussions, etc., provides cultural knowledge, skills, education, and advantages namely, cultural capital - that can help them succeed in the educational system (Bourdieu cited in Chiu and Chow, 2010). This study also takes a step toward filling this gap in cultural values and learners research by examining how cultural values and family cultural capital could increase the motivation of learners in reading performance.

Background to the study

As yet sundry studies have been achieved with regard to the concept of culture and its seminal role in language teaching. Brown (2007) defines culture as a way of life. He believes that culture is the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others and it is our continent, and our collective identity. He states that, it is apparent that culture, as an ingrained set of behaviors and modes of perception, become highly important in the learning of a second language. Brown (2007; 193) emphasizes "because learning a second language implies some degree of learning, it is important to understand what we mean by the process of culture learning". Chastain (1988) also defines culture as a way of life that characterizes a group of people in a given period of time according to their ideas, custom, skills, arts, and tools. Chastain (1988) then states a number of problems in teaching culture:

- (1) It is not easy to provide the culture information that the students need.
- (2) Language teachers lack of knowledge about the second culture. They need the help of experts, commercial publishers, and colleges and universities.
- (3) Second culture should be presented in a way that the students can understand it then relate to the information.
- (4) Finding enough time to teach culture in a limited class period is questionable.

Besides, Bedir (1992) studied and tried to define the relationship between culture and language. His experimental group was trained through television, role-play, pictures, simulation games and a native speaker

while the control group received their regular curriculum. According to the result of the post-test, the experimental group performed much better than they did in pre-test. That might be because of the use of cultural background. The participants who were trained with cultural aspects were more successful than the others who were traditionally trained. The result also indicates that cultural schemata are inevitable for successful reading comprehension (Bedir, 1992). He concluded that students' reading comprehension could be improved through helping them build background knowledge besides, being defined as socially acquired knowledge by Yule (2006), culture is reflected through the language. Yule argues that studies of world cultures make it clear that different groups of people have different languages and these people differ in their cultures because of their different worldviews. Culture is also accepted as an under examined concept in TESOL and schema is believed to play a central role in socio-cognitive approaches to culture (Atkinson, 1999). Schemata are thought to be flexible notions and Atkinson (1999) states that: schemas and networks of connections, including but not limited to culture in the head (that is, socially shared and disciplined schemas and networks), interact with worldly phenomena, including, but not limited to "culture in the world" (that is social practices, products, and tools).

It was also found out, during some studies, that the cultural background of the reader may affect the type of information remembered. Bügel and Buunk (1996) for instance demonstrated that the text topics of a foreign-language reading comprehension examination gave an advantage to boys, because the topics of the texts were of more interest to boys than girls. Lipson (1983) compared the reading comprehension of children in relation to their religious affiliation and found an effect of religious affiliation on reading comprehension when children read texts about a topic dealing with aspects of their familiar or unfamiliar religion. Pritchard (1990) examined the role of cultural schemata on the reading comprehension processes of proficient 11th-grade readers with an American or a Palauan background. Both groups read two letters in their native language, which dealt with funeral ceremonies in the two countries. The students were asked to give verbal reports of their reading strategies as they were reading and to retell the passage after reading. From the verbal reports, Pritchard concluded that cultural schemata influence the processing strategies as well as the level of comprehension.

Chastain (1988), however, discusses the possible problems that readers may face in authentic texts since they are unfamiliar with the culture. The idea of teaching culture with language seems sensible at first. However, the number of English speaking countries makes this sensible proposal questionable. In this respect, one might come to the point (Icoz, 1992) that if the readers are to

read a text belonging to British culture, teach British culture; if American culture, teach American culture; if Australian culture, teach Australian culture, etc. Alptekin (2003) states the necessity of teaching culture for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. He proposes that if it was not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. The language of Bulgarian belongs to Bulgarian, the language of Dutch belongs to the Netherlands; but the language of English does not belong to Britain any more. It is a global language. It has more non-native speakers than it has native ones. Alptekin concludes that teaching English culture is not possible since whose culture is going to be taught is not clear. 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. 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 (Erten and Razi, 2009).

Kang (1992), cited in Singhal (1998), 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 conducted solely on L2 adults. Several studies have also reported positive effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Steffensen et al., 1979) and vocabulary learning (Pulido, 2003, 2004). Steffensen et al. (1979), for instance, demonstrated that when students are familiar with cultural norms, they make a better interpretation of the text than when they are not. Further, in cases of unfamiliar cultural norms, students tend to refer to their own cultural properties, which results in poor interpretations of the text. Finally, while discussing the impact of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension, McKay (1987) defines schema theory as a learning theory that asserts that language comprehension involves an interactive process between the learner's background knowledge and the text. Similarly, Cook (1997) believes that schema theory enables the reader understand new experiences by activating relevant schemata. In this view, the new experience is thought to conform to the schematic representation and then, quick and economical interpretation of new experiences start. Besides, many reading researchers have dealt with the terms

background knowledge or schema in their studies; but not all of them have intended to subcategorize these terms. For instance, although Johnson (1981,1982), Perkins (1983), Perkins and Jones (1985), Gebhard (1987), Badrawi (1992), Cook (1997), Anderson (1999) and Sullivan (2002) dealt with these terms in their studies, none of them mentioned subcategorization of these terms.

Finally, the role of culture in language learning and teaching was investigated by Genc and Bada (2005). This study was conducted with the participation of the students of the ELT department of Cukurova University in Turkey. As a result of the study a significant similarity between the students' views and the theoretical benefits of a culture class as argued by some experts in the field was observed. Regarding the benefits of learning about culture, attending the culture class had raised cultural awareness in ELT students concerning both native and target societies. This study illustrates how arguments of language teaching experts in favor of a culture class in language learning and teaching are justified by some sound evidence provided by the participants of this study. All in all, considering the aforementioned studies, the present paper addresses the following research questions:

- (a) Do the cultural-oriented texts bear any effect on the participants' reading performance?
- (b) Is there any relationship between the culturally-oriented texts and the learners' motivation level?

Considering such issues contribute effectively to the more telling language teaching and learning. Besides, reading skill plays a very important goal in EFL contexts which are referred to as poor-input contexts. In fact, language learners in such contexts receive exposure to language mainly through reading materials and if these materials are culturally-oriented they will be more interesting for the students and, as a result, students will become more motivated to learn the language.

METHODS

Participants

Altogether 102 Persian EFL language learners, 54 females and 48 male with the average age of 23, were the participants of the study. They were all undergraduate students majoring in English Translation in Azad and State Shahrekord Universities, Iran. The participants were divided into two groups, the experimental group (N = 56) and the control group (N = 46).

Instruments

For the purpose of carrying out the study, at first some reading materials which were heavily culturally-loaded were extracted from the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) reading passages and other authentic sources such as New Interchange

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the reading pre-test.

	Codes	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Reading pretest	Control	46	10.71	2.27	0.41
	Experiment	56	11.06	2.18	0.38

Table 2. Independent sample test of the reading pre-test.

	T	Df	Significant (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
						Lower	Upper
G1 and G2 pre-test reading	-0.61	70	0.51	-0.32	0.56	-1.46	0.80

series. These texts which contained cultural information about different cultural aspects related to English such as holidays, customs, traditional celebrations and festivals, American meals, American family values, American beliefs were used in the experimental group. Then, two parallel tests of reading comprehension focusing on some cultural aspects of English mentioned earlier were prepared. The tests contained some reading comprehension passages accompanied by their respective items extracted from some TOEFL sample tests. Besides, some items were also constructed by the researcher for the texts which were not originally followed by such items. The quality of the items prepared was also checked by some professors of the afore-cited universities (Shahrekord Islamic and State Universities). The reading test consisted of 40 multiple-choice items. By the way, the reliability index obtained for the reading test, using KR-21 formula turned out to be 0.73. In addition, a motivation questionnaire which consisted of 30 Likert-scaled items adapted from the Dörnyei (2006) was employed to examine the impact of teaching culturally-based texts on learners' reading motivation and reading comprehension ability. The reliability of this data collection instrument was also determined using Alpha Cronbach coefficient and the index obtained was 0.80.

Data collection

At the outset of the study, the first reading comprehension parallel test focusing on some cultural aspects of English such as holidays, customs, traditional celebrations and festivals were given to both groups as a pretest to determine their equality in reading and listening comprehension ability. The findings of the pre-test are brought up in the result section of the study. In the meantime, the intended questionnaire was also given to the experimental group in order to determine their motivations toward reading through cultural materials. Then, in the treatment group the students were exposed to a variety of reading comprehension materials on different cultural issues related to English language. At the end of the treatment, the students in both groups received the other parallel test as a posttest to determine whether they would show any difference in their reading comprehension performance. The students in the experimental group also received the motivation questionnaire again to determine any possible relationship between their being exposed to culturally-focused materials and their motivation for learning English.

Data analysis

After gathering the required data and in order to see if the treatment

given to the experimental group would have affected their reading comprehension performance compared to those of the control group, one independent sample t-test was run. In addition, in order to determine whether there was any relationship between the experimental group's reading ability and their motivation in learning English, a correlation analysis was run. And also in order to determine whether teaching cultural materials changed the motivation of students for learning English, a paired t-test was conducted on the scores obtained from the administration of the questionnaire before and after treatment in the experimental group. Further, two pair t-tests were also run to make a comparison between the pre and post tests performances of each of the two groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Now in this study, the results of the study are presented in detail. To do so, the research questions cited previously are brought in one by one and then the related results are mentioned.

(1) Do the cultural-oriented texts bear any effect on the participants' reading performance?

The first research question addresses the point whether the culturally-based texts influence the performance of language learners on reading tests. The independent t-test results can answer this question. First of all, in order to make sure that the two groups were homogeneous enough in reading performance prior to the study, a pre-test was administered to both control and experimental groups. The descriptive statistics of this test appears in Table 1. Based on Table 1, the mean of the experimental group ($M=11.06$) in the reading pre-test is a bit higher than the mean of the control group ($M=10.71$) but the difference is not remarkable. Then, to see if the two groups performed significantly different on the reading pre-test or not an independent t-test was run whose results are shown in Table 2. As it is conspicuous from it, a significant difference was observed on the reading pre-test ($p = 0.51 > 0.05$). After the treatment, in order to see if the two groups performed statistically different on the two tests, an independent t-test. Table 3 shows the

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the reading post-test.

	codes	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Reading	Control	30	13.27	3.58	0.46
	Experiment	32	26.03	2.84	0.68

Table 4. Independent sample test of the reading post-test.

	T	Df	Significant (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
						Lower	Upper
G1 and G2 reading post-test	-19.85	70	0.000	-17.36	0.73	-19.33	-10.99

Table 5. Paired t-test on experimental group's reading.

	Mean		Standard deviation		T	Df	Significant
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test			
Experimental group	12.06	27.03	2.27	3.84	-21.10	31	0.000

Table 6. Paired t-test on control group's reading.

	Mean		Standard deviation		T	Df	Significant
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test			
Control group	11.73	12.36	2.18	2.53	-1.23	29	0.066

descriptive statistics of the reading post-test.

According to Table 3, the mean of the experimental group ($M=26.03$) in the reading post-test is higher than the mean of the control group ($M = 13.27$). Table 4, then, shows that the difference between the control and experimental group performance on the reading post-test is significant ($p = 0.00 < 0.001$). Therefore, it can be stated that teaching cultural materials in the class promoted students' performance on reading comprehension. However, to make a comparison between the performance of each of the groups in terms of pre and post test, two paired t-tests were also run. Table 5 represents the findings of the test for experimental group. As the table indicates, there is a statistically significant difference between the experimental group's performance in reading in the pre-test and the post-test ($t = -21.10, p < 0.001$). Therefore, the experimental group improved their reading performance after the treatment. As to the same test for control group, Table 6 reveals that there is a difference between the control group's performance on the pre-test and the post-test showing that there has been an improvement on their reading ability from the beginning to the end of the term, this improvement has been very

marginal and, in fact, there is no statistically significant difference between the control group's performance in reading in the pre-test and the post-test ($t = -1.23, p > 0.05$). (2) Is there any relationship between the culturally-oriented texts and the learners' motivation level?

To answer the second research question, first to ascertain if the motivation of the students in the experimental group had augmented during the treatment, the raw scores obtained from the administration of the questionnaire before and after the treatment were subjected to a paired sample t-test. Table 7 shows the results of this test. According to the table, the mean of the scores obtained from the administration of motivation questionnaire in the experimental group ($M=129.72$) is higher than that before the treatment ($M=77.75$) meaning that the treatment given to the experimental group had caused a significant increase in the motivation in this group ($p = 0.00 < 0.001$). Finally, in order to see if there is any interrelationship between the two variables of the study that is, motivation and reading ability, a correlation was run. Table 8 reveals the descriptive statistics of the variables Table 9, finally, represents the Pearson correlation coefficient along with the p-value. As it can be seen from the table, the correlation coefficient is 0.88 and

Table 7. Paired t-test on the motivation questionnaire in the experimental group.

	Mean		Standard deviation		T	Df	Significant
	Pre-motivation	Post-motivation	Pre-motivation	Post-motivation			
Experimental group	77.75	129.72	12.28	10.11	11.86	31	0.000

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of reading and motivation correlation.

	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Reading scores	29.13	6.70	56
Motivation scores	123.75	18.06	56

Table 9. Correlation of reading and motivation.

	N	Significant (2-tailed)	Correlation coefficient
Reading and motivation	32	0.000	0.88

the p-value is 0.000. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between the participants' reading performance and their motivation.

Conclusion

The study served, in fact, as an attempt to shed light on the point that whether teaching culturally-oriented texts to the Persian EFL learners bear any significant impact on their reading comprehension ability. In addition, the study also examined the any correlation between the culture teaching and the motivation improvement of the participants. As it was discussed in the preceding section of the study, the study findings indicated that: Culture and language are inexorably linked and as such cannot be separated. Numerous authors (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1997; Harmer, 2001) have highlighted the impossibility of teaching a language without teaching its receptive culture. Savignon and Sysoyev (2002) emphasizing the necessity of teaching culture for EFL learners propose that if it were not English but any other language in the world, then it would be possible to teach the culture with the language; but that is not the same for English as it is a global language. Whether culture is consciously or unconsciously part of teachers' pedagogic aims, the transmission of culture is unavoidable. The content of what we teach will always be in some way linked to culture, as Tseng (2002) points out every lesson is about something and that something is culture. Exposing language learners to texts loaded with different cultural elements including wedding ceremony, native speakers' traditions, rituals, etc. can be a great help to them to perform much better on the reading comprehension tests.

Reviewing the related literature some pertaining studies can be spot. Straub (1999) for instance recounts that considering the cultural competence of the target language can lead not only to the more comprehensive learning of that language but the language learners learn that they should respect and show empathy to other cultures. Straub further mentions that it can also leads to the objectivity promotion and cultural perspicacity. In addition, it goes without saying that linguistic competence is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Language learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways for addressing people, greeting, expressing needs, and agree or disagree with someone. These results are also in line with those of the studies conducted by Mueller (1980), O'Malley and Chamot (1989), Long (1990), Sadighi and Zare (2002), which found that cultural background knowledge plays an important role in interpreting meaning, as this forms a foundation for listeners to connect new information to their existing knowledge. Culture teaching leads to a sizeable improvement in the degree of the motivation of language learners in their more efficient performance on reading comprehension tests. The same effect has been proved by experts like Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1965, and 1972). They all agreed on the point that in achieving high motivation, classes involving culturally-based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, doing research on countries and people, etc. do have a great effect. Culturally-loaded reading activities can contribute to the receptive skill of reading since they allow readers to get the cultural text's message through skimming and specific information about the text through scanning.

In the end, as to the implication of the study, probably

the most noticeable finding of the study is that teaching cultural materials and texts helps students achieve better comprehension and provides them with more motivation in order to perform better on the receptive skills. If, as teachers, the aim is to make texts more comprehensible and also to make language learners more motivated, then foreign culture or target culture-embedded texts should be provided. This is in line with teaching English as an international language (McKay, 2003).

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