

**THE ROLE OF CULTURAL FAMILIARITY TOWARD READING
COMPREHENSION AND MOTIVATION
AMONG IRANIAN STUDENTS**

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Completion of the dissertation in such an in-depth and sophisticated study over a period of one year deserves being dedicated to my family that always supported and encouraged me.

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ABSTRACT

Familiarity with cultural perspective of reading text is one of the significant issues in language learning classrooms. The lack of sufficient knowledge of learners regarding the target culture of language costs them some difficulties to comprehend the target reading text. For this reason, learner's motivation would be decreased to acquire the new language. This study has attempted to discover the importance of cultural background knowledge toward reading comprehension and also participants motivation. Hence, quantitative method was conducted and 30 Iranian students who joined IEC classes in University Technology of Malaysia participated in this study. For the purpose of identify the role of background study, the original and nativised texts were given to participants. They also expressed their motivation toward cultural perspective through a 5-point Likert Scale survey questionnaire. The results indicated that cultural background knowledge enhances the comprehension of reading text as well as motivation toward learning the new language. The pedagogical implications of the findings imply the significant role of cultural background knowledge in the English language learning classroom. Hence, the integration of cultural perspective with language instruction in the foreign language learning classroom was recommended in this study.

ABSTRAK

Pengetahuan tentang perspektif budaya ketika membaca teks adalah salah satu daripada isu-isu penting di dalam kelas bahasa. Kekurangan pengetahuan yang mencukupi mengenai sesebuah budaya menyebabkan mereka berhadapan dengan beberapa kesukaran untuk memahami teks bacaan yang berkaitan dengan budaya tersebut. Atas sebab ini, motivasi pelajar untuk mempelajari bahasa baru akan menurun. Kajian ini telah menemui kesan penting bagi pengetahuan latar belakang budaya ke arah kefahaman bacaan dan juga motivasi peserta. Oleh itu, kaedah kuantitatif telah dijalankan dan 30 pelajar Iran yang menyertai kelas IEC di Universiti Teknologi Malaysia telah terlibat dalam kajian ini. Untuk menjelaskan peranan kajian latar belakang, teks asal dalam bahasa ibunda mereka telah diberikan kepada peserta. Mereka juga menyatakan tahap motivasi mereka ke arah perspektif budaya melalui soal selidik '5-point Linker Skala'. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa pengetahuan latar belakang budaya dapat meningkatkan pemahaman membaca teks pelajar serta motivasi mereka terhadap pembelajaran bahasa baru. Peranan latar belakang budaya adalah penting dalam bilik darjah bagi pembelajaran bahasa. Oleh itu, integrasi perspektif budaya dengan pengajaran bahasa di bilik darjah bagi pembelajaran bahasa asing telah disyorkan dalam kajian ini.

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LIST OF ABBRIVATIONS

EFL	English as Foreign Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
IEC	Intensive English Classroom

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

English language is considered as an international language of world because of its significance especially in academic field. For this reason, many learners attempt to study English language and master all the four skills which are reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Reading plays a vital role in English learning process. In fact, learners need to have sufficient knowledge about this skill in educational area. Due to this fact, appropriate methods to teach reading skill is crucial to aid learners develop their reading English.

The important role of cultural awareness in reading comprehension has lately been recognized especially in foreign language classroom. Reading skill in academic education is significant and the majority of the learners face some difficulties in this area. Different cultural background is one of the reasons. Due to these difficulties, learners usually lose their motivation toward learning new language. Motivation is also a crucial issue in learning new language. In order to improve the learners'

motivation toward learning new language and make the reading appealing, cultural perspective of target language should be considered in the classroom.

According to Hakki and Razi (2009), Rashidi (2011) having a good command of cultural background knowledge can provide the learners the ability to improve reading comprehension as well as motivation in Iran. This research attempts to investigate whether familiarity with target language can affect the Iranian learners' motivation and their reading comprehension.

Despite of the fact that many Iranian learners face some problems related to learning English, only few studies have been conducted regarding the role of cultural background in reading comprehension and also learners' motivation in Iran. This study attempts to prove teaching cultural perspective of target language in classroom can help to improve learners' reading comprehension as well as motivation toward the new language.

This chapter presents an overview of the main components which are included in the current study. It consists of background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, objectives of the study, research questions, research hypothesis, and significance of the study, scope of the study, conceptual framework, and operational definition of the terms.

1.2 Background of Study

Many researches have been conducted regarding the role of cultural background knowledge in reading comprehension. However, only few studies have been carried out about the statement problem of this area and learners' motivation. In this part, the role of background knowledge of cultural perspective in reading comprehension and motivation will be explored.

Despite of the fact that English is taught from elementary school till university in Iran, still learners have serious problem about learning English (Vaezi, 2008). In fact, English is a foreign language for all learners and learners in Iran, for this reason, many learners face difficulties in acquiring English, because it is not applied in their daily lives hence, both target culture and language are not familiar for learners.

In Iran, English is taught both in guidance and high schools. Basic vocabularies and grammar English are thought in guidance school for four years while it is introduced to the learners the concept of language, regarding vocabulary, grammar, language functions and phonetics. In general, English in high schools use the traditional method and it helps learners to prepare for University Entrance Examination where the questions are concerning grammar, vocabulary and language knowledge in multiple-choice format.

All reading texts during the school time are written by Iranian writers which do not include native English culture. Consequently, the concentration of teaching is mostly on Iranian culture and grammar which is taught in the form of pattern-drills (Audio-Lingual Method), vocabularies which are taught in context and short reading texts. Teachers attempt to teach vocabularies through repetition without any introduction of the concept of cultural perspective of target language (Vaezi, 2008).

Moreover, at the tertiary level in Iran all the subjects are taught in official language (Persian) and Iranian learners only have to attend the English classes (2 credits) in accordance with their field in order to gain extra knowledge and specific terminologies.

Reading is one of the most important skills in the academic education. Rashidi (2011) considered reading as the most significant skill regarding to the needs of Iranian learners. Consequently, teaching the reading skill has a vital role to aid Iranian learners in order to solve their reading problems and enhance their comprehension of target reading texts.

Unfortunately reading English texts is taught to learners in Iran without stress on the culture of target language (Soureshjandi and Rashidi, 2011). Due to this fact, many learners do not have sufficient background knowledge about the target culture; it causes them to face difficulty in comprehending a reading text. Hence, the output is decreasing and they become de-motivated toward language learning (Rashidi, 2011). According to Edwards (1965) one of the problems of teaching reading skill in Iran is adapting Western principles of language in their classroom.

Presently, some researchers such as Rashidi and Soroushjani (2011) conducted studies regarding the problem of reading English texts among Iranian learners. They discovered that one of the problems in teaching the reading skill is ignoring the culture of target language. They also explored that this ignorance of cultural perspective of target language causes decreasing of learners' motivation and reading comprehension.

Traditional method is the way of teaching reading skill in Iran. Most of the time, cultural perspective of target language is not considered in the classroom and

even cultural material is not used regularly (Ebrahimi, 2012). Culture of target language is mentioned in many reading texts but not explained. Thus, without background cultural knowledge, learners are not able to comprehend these texts.

Teaching cultural perspective of target language should be considered in language learning classroom (Maleki and Zangani, 2007). Many high school and university learners have limitation in using target language and are not motivated toward learning language. Henceforth, learners just take some courses and pass them. Iranian English Foreign Language (EFL) learners in general seem not to be motivated and qualified in language use (Rashidi, 2011).

Steffense (1979) studied the role of cultural background on the reading comprehension. In this study two letters in their native language were given to two groups and the report of letters was requested from them. According to the report, the impact of cultural background was obvious impact on comprehension of reading text. Alptekin (2006), Steffense (1979), Pulido (2003), stated regarding the positive effect of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Steffensen (1979) proved that when learners are familiar with cultural elements, they can comprehend texts better than when they are not. Gence and Bada (2005) found out the positive effect of cultural background on learning language.

Rashidi and Heidari (2011) conducted the study regarding the influence of cultural background in Iran. The paper attempted to explore whether teaching the culturally-loaded texts to a foreign language (EFL) learners have any influence on their performance on reading comprehension tests. The paper, additionally, explored the interrelationship between the teaching of culture-oriented texts and the motivation level of language learners. 102 Persian EFL learners belonging to two classes were sampled and convenient procedure of sampling was carried out in this study. The experimental group had been assigned to receive treatment (teaching culture-loaded texts). They were also given a motivation questionnaire. The result

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 cultural teaching has a great role in improving the motivation level of language learners.

1.3 Statement of Problem

A significant problem for ESL learners in reading texts is that their cultural background knowledge is different from their own. When there is a lack of cultural background knowledge, reading can become a complicated, time-consuming and boring activity (Carrell, 1983, Anderson 1979). The lack of the cognitive structure and background knowledge during reading procedure influences the comprehension of grammatical structure (Steffensen, 1988).

Reading Comprehension problems occur when learners fails to understand the content of texts. These problems appear when learners are not familiar with those vocabularies as well as the content itself, this is because of the different cultures presented in the text. It mostly occurs to ESL learners. These learners face difficulties in reading text of the target language when the culture of the language is unknown for them.

Unfortunately reading is taught to learners in Iran without noticing the culture of target language. For this reason, many learners are not aware of cultural perspective of target language; this means they find trouble in respect of comprehension reading texts. Thus, learners' motivation is decreased and it affects the performance of the learning process. One of the teaching reading skill problems in Iran is adapting Western principles of language in their classroom (Ebrahimi, 2012 and Rashidi, 2011).

Many Iranian learners find it difficult to read English texts. One reason can be teachers' method instruction toward reading texts in the classroom. Iranian teachers do not usually teach the cultural perspective of target language in classes. Hence, when learners do not have sufficient cultural knowledge regarding the language which is learning, it might face them difficulties toward comprehension of reading texts.

Due to different background cultural knowledge of learners and text, when learners discover reading process as a laborious and unsatisfactory activity, they become de-motivated (Rashidi and Heidari, 2011). When comprehension of text does not occur, the reading procedure becomes boring. Hence, learners lose their motivation toward learning new language.

Due to lack of cultural background knowledge among Iranian learners, comprehension of texts is difficult thus it is making learners de-motivated (Rashidi, 2011). Presently, culture of target language is a part of reading texts, in order to make it more appealing for learners. Thus, it is a huge challenge for many Iranian learners to comprehend the reading texts of target language. De-motivation problem among Iranian learners prevents their improvement and also the willingness to learn new language.

Iranian learners have problem in reading English text presently, since some researches have been carried out regarding this area in Iran. Rashidi and Ebrahimi (2011) carried out some studies concerning Iranian learners' problems toward reading English texts. They discovered that instruction of cultural perspective of target language is ignored during the classroom. They also explored that this ignorance cause to lessen learners' motivation and reading comprehension.

In this study, reading comprehension and motivation of learners toward target language are considered. In fact, the cultural awareness of learners helps them to understand the content. For this reason, when the culture of context is different from reader, it is quite complicated for learners to comprehend the reading text.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

Teaching foreign language in the classroom should be attractive and fascinating. Most of the time, learners are curious about various cultures especially the one which is learning the language. When learners have better knowledge about the cultural perspective of target language then they can engage more in the target language.

The purpose of this study is to determine if cultural background knowledge and motivational level could enhance the reading comprehension of learners. In addition, it also determined to find out teaching the cultural perspective of target language in the classroom could attract learners toward learning target language.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

To recognize the variety types of culture has been always one of the interesting topics in many various fields of study. Learners usually acquire the language to communicate with the native speakers and to identify more about that country. Presently, among learners of Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), culture of target language is an attractive subject for all learners. In this study, culture of target language is combined with reading texts in the classroom in

order to improve learners' motivation and their comprehension toward target language. In other words, the objectives of this study are to determine:

1. If familiarity with cultural perspective of target language could enhance reading comprehension.
2. If familiarity with cultural perspective through reading of target language could enhance learners' motivation toward learning target language.

1.6.1 Research Questions

- 1- Does familiarity with cultural perspective of target language enhance reading comprehension of learners?
- 2- Does familiarity with cultural perspective of the target language enhance motivation of learners toward learning target language?

1.7 Significance of Study

Iranian learners face difficulties with comprehending of English texts and it makes them de-motivated toward learning English, thus whether this study will be proven, it can be helpful for Iranian learners and teachers in language learning area.

English teachers will realize the influence of informing cultural perspectives of target language on learners' motivation. They will notice whether developing cultural awareness in English language among learners can enhance their comprehension or not. They will understand to what extent comprehension of cultural elements implied in the text reading will facilitate learning for foreign language learners. The teaching will become attractive as they do not limit themselves to merely teaching language skills.

In fact, the result of this research shows that Iranian educational system should change the method of English teaching in the language learning classroom. Presently, cultural perspective of target language is not instructed in English classroom, this ignorance should be modified. The modification does not only aid learners in comprehending English reading texts but also has a vital role toward learner's motivation.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The participants of this study were thirty postgraduate Iranian learners who just joined the Intensive English Classroom in University Technology of Malaysia located in Johor Bahru in southern Malaysia. All of them were selected from various faculties except faculty of education. They had the same level and background

knowledge. These learners had been living in Malaysia for two months. This research was carried out in University Technology Malaysia (UTM). Two different questions were distributed among them: comprehension reading texts including original and nativized texts in order to evaluate their reading comprehension. Second questionnaire used the five Likert-scale type to assess learners' motivation toward learning the target language through reading.

1.9 Conceptual Frameworks

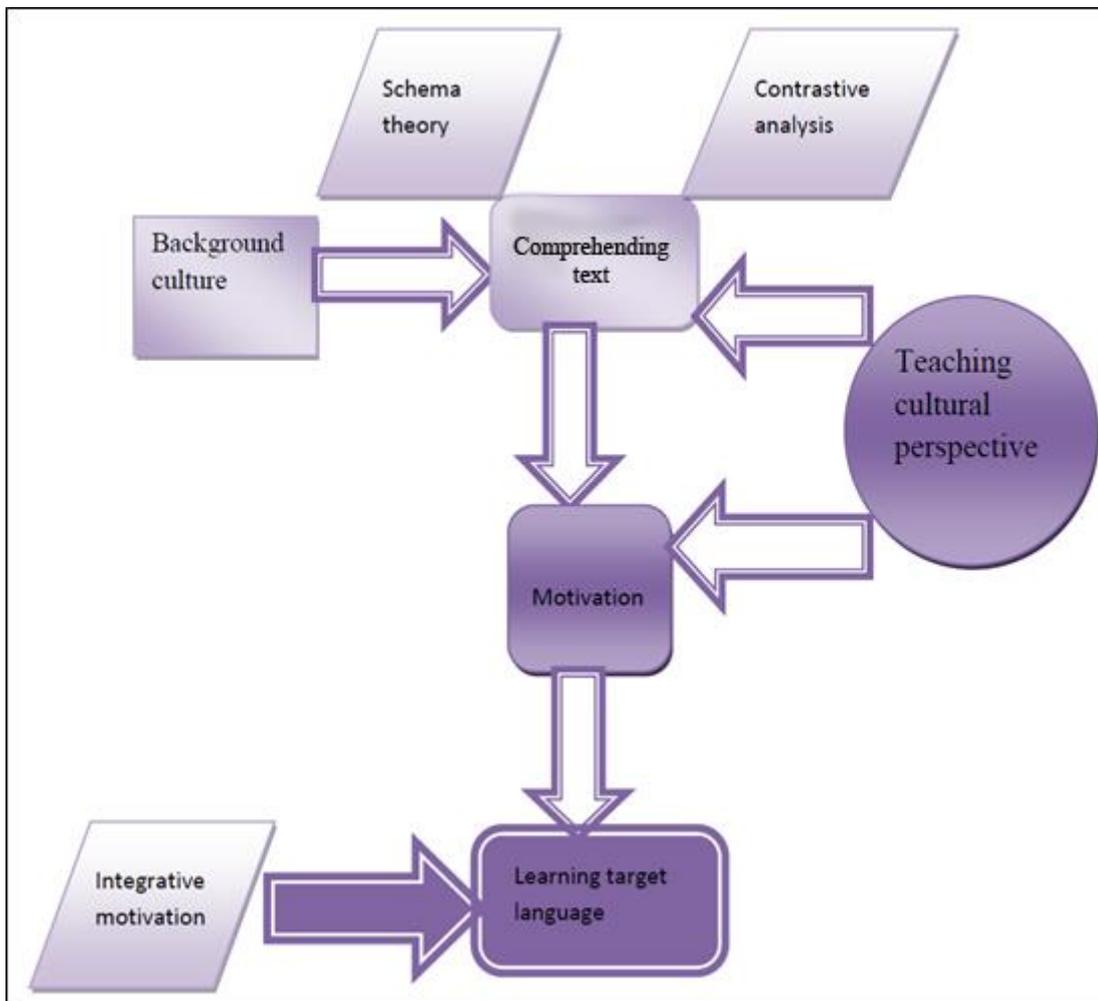


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework

The main base of this study is to highlight the role of cultural familiarity on the comprehension of reading text and motivation. According to this conceptual framework, the background cultural knowledge of learners aids them to comprehend the reading text, especially the cultural items embedded in the text. For this reason, teachers should teach the target culture of language in the classroom in order to make learners familiar with the culture and help them to understand better of the reading text. This familiarity improves the comprehension of learners reading and also their motivation toward the learning of new language.

The main problem faced by foreign language speaking learners regarding learning of new language is losing the motivation due to poor understanding of text. By teaching the culture of target language learners can improve their comprehension and it helps them to enhance their motivation toward learning the new language.

According to Figure 1.1, teaching cultural perspective of target language plays the effective role on enhancing comprehension and motivation of learners. It recommends that in order to improve the motivation of learners toward learning target language, teaching cultural perspective should be taught in the language classroom.

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