

The Effect of Cultural Background Knowledge on EFL Learners Reading Ability Case Study: First Year LMD Students

Bensalah HIBA

Faculty of literature and Foreign Languages, University of Mostaganem :

Abdelhamid IBN BADIS

Dr. Guerroudj Noureddine

Labortoire:

<http://dspmlab.webs.com/>

Abstract

Reading comprehension occupies a vital position as one of the skills in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. The ability of EFL learners in reading comprehension module requires interpretation of texts through making an accurate connection between the linguistic representation or meaning of words and sentences and their intended outcomes within a particular context. Thus, one of the burdens of English foreign language learners is to capture the intended meaning of any reading text easily. In this respect, EFL learners knowledge of form alone is insufficient; they also require a relative degree of background knowledge of a text to understand what is stated, and make the intended inferences. The fact of belonging to different cultures brings different systems of background knowledge to the comprehension process. As a result of such diversity of cultures, EFL learners tend to make incorrect assumptions when reading unfamiliar texts. In TEFL in general and the subject of reading comprehension in particular; it is crucial to find conducive ways to raise and improve EFL learners' ability to understand texts related to native speakers (e.g British context).

The present research aims at introducing the significance of cultural background knowledge, if there is any, and the fact of adopting such perspective in the process of reading comprehension.

ملخص

القراءة والفهم تحتلان موقعا حيويا باعتبارهما باعتبارهما اثنتين من المهارات الاساسية في عملية تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. قدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مقياس القراءة والفهم يتطلب تفسير النصوص من خلال الاعتماد على التمثيل اللغوي أو معنى الكلمات والجمل ونتائجها المرجوة ضمن سياق معين. وهكذا، واحدة من أعباء متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية هي فهم المعنى المقصود بسهولة من خلال قراءة أي نص يتعلق بالثقافة الأجنبية الإنجليزية. وفي هذا الصدد، إتقان ومعرفة بنية وقواعد اللغة وحدها غير كافية. ومع ذلك، فإنها تتطلب أيضا بدرجة نسبية المعرفة الخلفية للنص لفهم ما ورد، و الوصول للمعنى المقصود. علاوة على ذلك، فإن حقيقة الانتماء إلى ثقافات مختلفة يثير أنظمة مختلفة من المعرفة للمساهمة في عملية الفهم فيما يخص اللغة وثقافتها. نتيجة لهذا التنوع من الثقافات، نجد متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يميلون إلى افتراضات غير صحيحة عند قراءة نصوص غير مألوفة لهم والتي لا تتعلق بثقافتهم. في هذا السياق، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وبالطبع القراءة والفهم

على وجه الخصوص؛ لا بد من إيجاد السبل التي تؤدي إلى زيادة وتحسين قدرة المتعلمين على فهم النصوص المتعلقة بالناطقين بها وبالتالي يهدف هذا البحث إلى إبراز أهمية المعرفة الخلفية الثقافية، إذا كان هناك أي واقع اعتماد هذا المنظور في عملية الاستيعاب القرائي.

Introduction

One of the main areas in teaching English as a foreign language is teaching reading skill, which is regarded as an essential component in the curriculum, at different Educational levels. It has a significant place in Algeria as it is still very important for higher education, teaching of reading therefore, needs special interest from expert and professionals for a meaningful higher education in the country. In fact foreign language reading comprehension is known as highly complex, dynamic, multi-componential and multi- dimensional because it involves multiple interactions.

Accordingly, teaching and learning English as a foreign language can be highly demanding and requires teachers' understanding of not only the nature of reading and teaching methodology, but also the nature of learners and the context in which teaching of reading takes place. EFL is generally used to refer to situations like Algeria in which English is not used for communication. Therefore, many Algerian university students who are highly grammatically and linguistically competent in reading L3 texts fail to understand or to interpret different linguistic utterances as a result of different contextual forces and communicative goals.

Given this failure of understanding and difficulties within an artificial context of language, the presence and the awareness of the cultural aspect is more than a necessity in an EFL context. Therefore, raising and developing learners' cultural knowledge through reading comprehension texts could be a relevant aspect of investigation.

This recognition led to the perspective that teaching and learning culture in FL course is inevitable. However, it remains unclear to many foreign language educators as well as students why and how cultural background knowledge impact the area of the reading skill. Particularly while dealing with native texts. What impact this has on their classroom practice, and how to incorporate culture into EFL context. This article addresses these issues by working toward an understanding of the significant role of

culture in foreign language in general and reading skill in particular.

Key Words: culture, reading comprehension, EFL context, schema theory

An Emerging View of Culture

Within an era of diversity, hybridization, and globalization, the term culture recognized a special rank in comparison to the various approaches which focused only on linguistic structures. In the field of language teaching and learning, this emergent view of culture is a process in which emphasis is placed on context and situated practice. A highly degree of interest is required to be present in the context and teachers' pedagogy that supports both explicit and implicit ways of transmitting knowledge; that values not only facts but relations between facts; which encourages diversity of experience and reflection on that diversity. In other words, a great attention is required to the experience of meaning-making in the life-worlds of the learners and the negotiation of cultural diversity and practices that come with that diversity.

Recognizing differences in values among different communities is a necessary step to avoid cross-cultural and linguistic boundaries through contact. This facilitates some of the life experiences of the learners who approach a variety of texts in foreign language education. Whether these texts are presented as local, international, misrepresentative, or remarkable for their omission of the learners' position, at this step learners try to deduce and recognize the cultural patterns.

Within this emerging view of culture in foreign language education, the language classroom is considered as the heart of foreign culture and language education. In this context, language teachers are required to transfer cultural aspects of a language text, not only teaching formal structures. In addition to actualizing the meaning associated with a particular situation of life through their immersion in real life experiences that provides learners with critical ways of reading the world.

The Notion of Culture in Foreign Language Teaching

It is acknowledged that teaching culture of a particular community is a vital step in the foreign language classroom. Apart from teaching grammatical structures and lexis of a foreign language; thus, teachers are required to promote empathy and understanding from students towards different cultures and to provide them with a reflective image of other countries and their languages. The aim is to lead them to the

acquisition of the intercultural communicative competence, which includes an open approach as well as critical approach to otherness but also towards oneself and one's cultural beliefs, meanings and behaviours.

Teaching culture in foreign language courses and raising the cultural awareness of the students is an interesting topical area of research in every part of the world. In Algeria, the issue of teaching culture is increasingly becoming more significant as a response to the era of globalization and frequent contact with foreigners. Furthermore, Culture has always been taught to a certain extent, although not entirely in foreign language classes. Learning about culture is extended to factual information, but often the cultural connection between the given facts and the concerned society is missing.

Once again, the teaching of languages is assimilated with culture patterns, and including cultural aspects of a foreign language in a language classroom is a difficult task but it is a sensitive one. According to Kramsch (2009) culture is not something we are born into, or something which we biologically inherit, but we have to grow and be groomed into it. The fact of acquiring culture (Enculturation) is a process which based on both learning and acquiring all the requirements of the target culture such as values and behaviours that are appropriate or necessary in that culture.

According to Byram (1989) language involves the values and meanings of culture, referring to cultural items and indicates people's cultural identity. Language cannot be used without carrying meaning, The meanings of a particular language is connected with the culture of a particular society and the understanding of those meanings imply the analysis and understanding of that particular culture. He states that the study of culture is based on two purposes which are interdependent, first is to facilitate for learners the use of language, and the other is to help learners understand the concept of cultural "otherness", to realize how much we are the same and how much we are "different".

In the past, the teaching of foreign languages was based on the study of literature, and this was the principal instrument of culture transmission. In the 60s and 70s, many educators started discussing the value of including cultural aspects in foreign language learning, emphasizing on situational context and sociolinguistics of a

foreign language. The communicative approach in teaching emerged which is based on natural integration of language and culture. In the 80s culture started being recognized as a significant constituent of successful language learning. An emerging progress is recognized by educators for their consideration of culture as an important aspect in foreign language teaching and learning process. But, linguistic proficiency remained the ultimate center of attention in acquiring a foreign language. Furthermore, cultural knowledge should be an educational objective in its own right.

Context and Culture in Language Teaching

This article considers cultural knowledge in language skills learning not only as a necessary component, but as an educational objective in its own right. If foreign language education aims at fostering cross-cultural awareness and self- recognition, language pedagogy needs to take into consideration a wide range of fundamental issues: what do we mean by cultural context? What role does context play in the interpretation of foreign linguistic utterances?

By its very nature, foreign language teaching devoted a considerable attention to the important role that context plays in determining the meaning of language. We can easily comprehend each other provided we share the same system of exchange; all we have to do is to learn that code and pay attention to the context of that code.

Accordingly, Halliday and Hasan (1985), language only makes sense when it is placed within some context or situation, and language (text) and context are in fact two sides of the same coin. Halliday and Hasan use the term 'cycle of text and context' to indicate that the notions of text and context are inseparable. The cycle encompasses the text itself and its relations to other texts, as well as contextual factors related to situation and culture. This means that, making any attempt to understand something that is said or written, is simultaneously assimilated with interpreting the context in which the text is embedded. Given an instance of language, learners are immediately able to construct and interpret the situation in which the text functions.

According to Byram (1988) language has no function independent of the context in which it is used; therefore language always refers to something beyond itself: the cultural context. This concept is related to the patterns of language being

used when particular persons come together under certain conditions at a particular place and time. This combination of elements always involves cultural meaning which influences language use. Indeed, a set of interactions are not only based on the amount of knowledge shared between the participants, but on the understanding of the context in which the communication is taking place. Comprehending the context means the persons know these cultural meanings associated with person, time, place, and circumstance. This understanding, in turn, reflects patterns of language and behavior that are appropriate to those circumstances. In essence, one does not need to be familiar with the other person in order to interact effectively, but one does need to understand the context.

Gudykunst and Kim (1992) demonstrate that there are two types of contexts that are important in intercultural encounters. External context which refers to the different settings where interaction occur and the meanings society attaches to them. So, external context is about social meaning and internal context refers to the cultural meanings that people themselves bring into an encounter. It is the internal context that creates the conditions for understanding or misunderstanding among people from different cultures.

The concept of culture is central to all of the types of context. The context itself is not responsible for altering language use or how the interactants behave, it is the meaning associated with that context, and that meaning is determined by the culture. It is significant, therefore, for learners of foreign language to pay attention to the context in order to understand effectively.

Reading Comprehension and Cultural Schemata

An important part of reading comprehension is related to cultural knowledge, readers will understand a text better if they share the content schema assumed by the writer but, will distort the text if there is no shared schema.

According to Bernhardt (1991), Reading is a process in which the knowledge of language, the cultural background knowledge, and other specialized knowledge are altogether in effect. The cultural background knowledge is one of the areas which play an important role in reading comprehension. Many studies focus on the relationship

between language teaching and target culture teaching such as Byram and Morgan (1994), Kramsh (1993), Pulverness (2003). The existence of language is embedded in the culture of people and reflect the beliefs; ways of life of a certain speech community.

Rivers, (1968) recommends that the strong bond between culture and language must be retained for the student to have a complete understanding of the meaning of language. She believes that differences in values and attitudes are the main sources of problems in foreign language learning. Culture specific values can be a significant block to comprehension if the values of the text differ from the values held by the reader.

In this regard, the researcher agrees with the previous studies, and demonstrates that the reading skill is so valuable and it requires an amount of knowledge so as to reach a successful degree of comprehension. Thus, background knowledge about different domains and cultures can enhance as well as facilitate the task of readers, for being effective reader, students should be loyal and motivated to read so as to extend and reinforcing their knowledge about a variety of topics.

Integrating culture into reading comprehension skill has a motivating effect on the language learner and the learning process. At this step students will be able to find points of similarities and differences and make comparison among various cultural groups. As an EFL learner it can be dangerous to be limited in a mono cultural environment without any sound information about other cultures.

The fact of raising learners' awareness about the existence of various cultures and diverse ways of thinking and acting in the world is an important step for a complete comprehension of texts. Therefore, the notion of culture became an inevitable part in the process of reading comprehension.

The Role of Background knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Considerable attention is devoted to background knowledge and its effects on reading comprehension referring to the process of reading as a multi-component one; learners need to rely on their prior knowledge in order to interpret a certain meaning. Taking all this into account, we refer to Piaget's concept of constructivism that new

knowledge can be constructed by connecting it to dated knowledge base. Furthermore, Morzano (2004) emphasizes the relevance of possessing background knowledge. He asserts that insufficient background knowledge can cause difficulty of understanding. However, prior knowledge about a certain topic can facilitate and develop the rate of reading comprehension. Tierney (1983) asserts that the link between topic familiarity and comprehension is so important. Thus, reader's familiarity with a certain topic helps them to understand and to recall information as well as think critically.

Students' cultural knowledge creates a positive relationship toward reading comprehension. It is very important to create that sense of awareness especially within EFL learners in an artificial context about world diversity and cultural issues.

The Incorporation of the Cultural Aspect in the Reading Skill

The incorporation of culture in an EFL context is an inevitable act for several reasons. First, language and culture are inseparable but are acquired together. Second, it is necessary to teach culture, because we need to teach language at the same time the culture in which it operates. In a foreign language context, culture learning is based on three aspects: empathy and understanding, knowledge and communicative skills. In this article, we shed light on the significant role of inserting culture while teaching the reading skill. A major point is to provide an access to the best thought and institutions of a foreign nation, manners; way of life...etc. and is likely to be an enriching experience. In this regard, the ability of understanding a particular text is based on an interaction between culture and language learning.

Damen (1987) considers the knowledge of culture as the "fifth skill" for language learners in addition to listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Thus, she emphasizes that culture is required to be taught in each language class. However, culture shouldn't be taught independently. This study aims at assimilating culture with reading skill together.

Metaphorically speaking culture is like food. There are different local and international foods. People see, smell, and taste them; there are many foods that are

freely eaten, while there are some that are forbidden not only by legal and religious conventions, but also by the common sense. However, there is no danger in knowing what foods exist in the world. In fact, learning how to deal with them is important. Letting the students know how overseas people behave can facilitate the language teachers' work. They can teach cultural tips little by little according to the age and capacity of their students. If the learners are flooded with a huge bulk of cultural points, they may develop ambivalence and suspicion about the validity of their own culture.

Once again, integrating culture in teaching the reading skill is an important step. However, the fact of incorporating culture is not an arbitrary task to perform but should be organized under certain norms and conditions as well as to a specific pedagogy on the part of the language teacher which is of an absolute necessity. The aspect of culture can be conveyed through the linguistic code itself. More importantly is to double the usefulness of the lesson by adding the cultural dimension and facilitating the process of learning. In this regard, the amount of knowledge the teacher possesses, should be carefully transmitted in regard to learners' ability of interpretation and preparation to grasp such kind of information to which they may not be familiar hence, by adopting a set of procedures such as a good choice of culture oriented text, the teacher may enhance learners participation, their curiosity towards the target community and most importantly he may help learners to get rid of the negative and/or psychological effects that may arise by integrating the foreign culture into the foreign language classroom like the misunderstanding, stereotyping or the cultural shock.

In this context, Byram and Fleming refer to the role of the language teacher as a leader for learners in their building of cultural awareness. Consequently, the process of language teaching and learning is no more devoted to the unique teaching and learning of the pure linguistic systems, but largely expanded to include the cultural and social aspect of the language. So, the integration of the cultural element is regarded as an obligatory aspect within classroom practices.

Practical Techniques for Cultural-Based Reading Skill Teaching

In this study, the what, why, and the development of incorporating culture in the foreign language classroom have been established, a focus on the how is needed. Cultural awareness and understanding is a noble aim to be reached, but how can the shift be made from theoretical matters to the practical side in foreign language classroom?

Traditional methods of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom have been focused on grammatical structures and lexis of a foreign language as well as passive learning. Students do need both language structures and the cultural context. In order to be actively involved in the target language, foreign language students should be helped to sense and approach to the foreign peoples.

To achieve that goal, cultural activities and objectives should be carefully organized and incorporated into lesson plans to enrich and inform the teaching content. The use of following materials and techniques for presenting culture in the classroom is widely recommended.

Teacher as a Cultural Mediator

One among the several functions that a language teacher performs in his/her interaction with students in EFL classes is that of a cultural mediator. In most cases language teacher is recognized as the only representative of the target-language culture that students can regularly get in touch with during courses.

On this basis, the mediator can be defined as an informer, a teacher, a guide or in another role. The mediator's primary function is to encourage liaisons between the cultural object (material production or creative process) and individuals. His or her work will be modulated and redefined to adapt to specific aspects of targeted groups, publics, and individuals, and to the cultural, and social context within which they fit.

Creating Beneficial Cultural Contexts

It is widely acknowledged that immersing students in the culture of a native speaking country is conceived to be the first preference for learning its culture. Teachers are required to create a suitable environment through the procession of comprehensible classroom communicative activities and cultural aspects; culture learning is gradually pushed forward. Therefore, an effective approach is needed where language and culture study are more closely integrated and harmonized.

Selecting Authentic Materials

The use of authentic materials is based on native speech community themes that help students to cope with cultural experiences. Sources involve television shows, films, news broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, and other printed materials. In this context, selecting suitable materials plays a vital role to improve the comprehension ability of students. Teachers can adjust their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. However, authentic materials can frustrate some category of students who lack sufficient cultural and social knowledge of the target language, and therefore teachers should carefully select suitable materials and plan a motivating course which feed their learning interests. Teachers should explain cultural factors encountered in the material. Furthermore, Students now are equipped with visual aids such as films and videotapes which can help them in the process of cultural acquisition. Dialogue represents one of the effective authentic listening materials. It covers a wide range of western culture, such as traditions, habits, life styles and social manners. So it is quite necessary for teachers to give students an introduction to help them understand well native speakers and their culture.

Within the digital era of multimedia and network technology the teaching process become more effective. So, teachers can offer students not only rich sources of authentic learning materials, but also an attractive and pleasant interface, vivid images and pleasant segments of sounds, which to a large extent defeat the lack of authentic language environment and stimulates students' interest in learning. There are many good videos and texts published concerning western traditions, life styles and most teachers have access to them and the video equipment. Watching videos is simply another tool for learning and enjoyment; therefore, teachers should make use of the chances to work out some methods to arouse the curiosity and motivation of students.

Literature

The suggestion of integrating literature for teaching culture is regarded as an efficient way; including short stories, novel, folktales, and poems. Byram (1997) asserts that using literature as an instrument for transmitting culture to foreign language students provide them with opportunities to develop their intercultural skills. In addition, there are several reasons to

believe that the components of culture are widely located and loaded in literary works. According to Veronika Rot Gabrovec (2007), in literature, different concepts of time and space can be shown very clearly, conversational strategies, ways of socializing and thinking are discussed and described, and various social systems are presented.

Employing prediction

Prediction is regarded as a sub skill and an important step in every attempt of acquisition. Therefore, students use their knowledge about the language, and connect it with what they are provided with (e.g. title, topic area), their worldly knowledge and experiences to predict the listening or reading text's content and then validate or repair their predicted content so that a better and effective understanding can be achieved. Prediction is a skill that requires adequate foundations (knowledge about a variety of topics). Appropriate background knowledge such as religion, geography, history, politics, custom, and awareness of cultural differences between languages as well as their societies can contribute to reasonable predictions. Language always is affected by its cultural and social setting of some sort, and it must be interpreted in the light of this social and cultural environment.

It is necessary for students to develop solid background knowledge in order to be able to formulate useful predictions and activate significant concepts and experiences in their minds.

Prediction is a kind of practice that allows students to guess what they are going to learn. As mentioned above, prediction can be a useful means. Furthermore, it helps students to be actively involved in the learning process. For example, if the material comes on video, the teacher can ask students to watch TV with the sound off, to predict what is being said. Alternatively, stop the tape in the middle of an act and encourage the students to predict what happens next. In addition, when the students are given the title of the reading and asked to predict what they will learn, they will be forced to review their existing knowledge of the topic and raise their curiosity about whether their prediction is correct or not.

Conclusion

To sum up, this article is a kind of overview about one among the significant

features which affect the area of reading comprehension, particularly; cultural background knowledge. Seeing that the comprehension process of foreign language texts is not only based on linguistic and grammatical competence but also the cultural competence because of the cultural barriers they may encounter in interaction with texts from other cultures. Therefore, students need to be introduced to certain clues or background information about western culture to add them to their own cultural repertoire. At this level, cultural awareness and motivation toward the target culture will be raised.

The idea of teaching culture is nothing new to foreign language teachers. In many cases, teaching culture has meant focusing on literature studies. However, Literature is not the only means that vehicles culture teaching. Furthermore, it contains signs that are above the capacity of language learners especially those who are in their initial steps of language acquisition; consequently, this article points out to the significant role of teaching culture via reading skill.

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