The Relevance of cultural background knowledge in EFL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to shed light on how schema theory can be of an important relevance in reading comprehension. It stresses the need of taking into consideration the learners' socio-cultural background in the selection of texts to be read for an effective reading process. This paper tries to highlight the difference that might exist between the presence and the absence of schema theory use in EFL teaching. It ends up by teasing out that schema is not that relevant for students since they are supposed to comprehend any literary text in EFL and comprehend it regardless its cultural background.

Key words

Schemata, Background knowledge, Schema theory, culture;

1. Introduction

It has always been recognised that the reading process is very significant in the EFL context. Traditionally, it was considered as a bottom-up process in which the reader is supposed to decode the text and to achieve its meaning and the writer's message. In this light, learners' comprehension lies in their syntactic and semantic knowledge in EFL context, where students are said to face comprehension issues because they lack grammar mastery and vocabulary (Bernhardt, 1991). This claim has been questioned by many scholars in the field. Consequently, the learner's cultural background knowledge started to gain more and more importance in the selection of literary texts to be read. Accordingly, Carter and Long (1991) have claimed that in order to better comprehend literary texts, there should be a cultural knowledge background to be taken into account. As a reaction to the traditional ideology, many scholars have contributed in improving reading comprehension by investigating schema theory. Anderson defines it as: "every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world" (Anderson et al. 1977, cited in Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). By investigating these researches, this paper tries to shed light on

the important role of schemata that might play in the reading comprehension process.

2. The Potential Relevance of the Learner's Schemata in Reading

2.1   *Prior Knowledge Definition*

In EFL context, the learner's prior knowledge implies his already acquired knowledge of his culture, universal knowledge, or particular subject's knowledge. These manifestations are acquired either formally or informally. According to Carrel and Esterhold (1983) assert that effective reading lies on the learner's background knowledge. According to them, in order to comprehend the meaning of any text, the reader needs to understand the knowledge that is already acquired. This type of knowledge is the reader's background knowledge or schemata. The latter, according to Ross and Bower (1981), is considered as a large conceptual construction that exists in memory; it relates different aspects, concepts and ideas to deduce a general understanding about one context. This process can be applied to new situations by comprehending and relating the prior variables in terms of value of specific aspects or events. Similarly, with regard to Anderson and Pearson (1984), schema is an abstract knowledge that is stored in the mind. A background knowledge is an organised operation since it demonstrates the relationship among different aspects.

2.2   *The Reading Process*

Reading comprehension has always been recognised as being of an importance in the EFL learning process. Researchers that were conducted during the late thirty years witnessed a new vision of reading as a mere process of decoding. Widdowson (1979) asserts that actual exploratory investigations on reading regard it as a reasoning activity in which the reader derives meaning by relying on the textual elements. Consequently, Carrell and Eisterhold posit that EFL reading has been affected recently by Goodman who views reading as "a guessing game" in which he builds the writer's message (Goodman, 1983). In this light, Grabe (1991) reacts to the Goodman's opinion of reading, he considers it as:

.... *an active process of comprehending [where] students need to be taught strategies to read more efficiently, e.g. guess from context, define expectations, make inferences about the text, skim ahead to fill in the context, etc.*

He claims that in order for the learner to comprehend the text effectively, s/he should know how to read effectively by using different strategies such as investigating the context.

2/ Types of schema:

In general, there are three main types of schema, formal schema, linguistic schema and content schema which are closely related to learners' reading comprehension. These types are: textual, content and cultural schemata.

2.1 Textual Schemata

Textual schemata relates the organizational forms and rhetorical structures of written texts (Jun, Xioa and Wei- hua, 2007). They consist of knowledge of different types of texts' organization, language formation, vocabulary, sentence structure and level of formality differently (Jun et al. 2007). Formal schemata are defined as knowledge of language and linguistic conventions, they refer to how texts are structured and the key characteristics of a particular genre of writing are (Alderson, 2000; Carell & Eisterhold, 1983). Formal schematic representations of a text can be used to understand information in s new text. In this fact, Carrell (1987) argues: "texts with familiar rhetorical organization should be easier to read and comprehend than texts with unfamiliar rhetorical organization" (Carrell, 1987: 464 revised in Etern and Razi, 2009).

2.2 Content Schemata

Content schemata refer to the background knowledge of content area of a text, or the subject a text talks about such as knowledge about people, the world and culture (Brown, 2001 revised in Etern and Razi, 2009). They include an understanding of the topic of the text and the cultural- specific elements required to interpret it. This type of schemata can be divided into two distinct types: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge. The former refers to the knowledge that may or may not be relevant to the content of a particular text, and the final is straight forwardly related to the text (Alderson, 2000 cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). Content schema is cultural- oriented, and since culture influences many aspects of life, it has certainly a considerable impact on all the elements of the learning process (Al- Issa, 2006). Language is not only a mere combination of vocabulary, syntax, and grammar, but it also encompasses different levels of the language's culture.

So, to some extent, content schemata can fill the gap for the lack of language schemata, and thus it helps learners comprehend texts by predicting, selecting information and eliminating vagueness (Jun et al, 2007).

2.3 Cultural Schemata

The third type of schema is cultural schemata. It is also called *abstract schema* (Nassaji, 2002; Oller, 1995 quoted in Etren and Razi, 2009), *story schema* (Mandler, 1984 revised Erten and Razi, 2009), or *linguistic schema* (Ketchum, 2006 documented in Erten and Razi, 2009).Yule posits that cultural schemata are developed "….in the context of our basic experiences" (Yule, 1996: 87 cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). They refer to the previously acquired knowledge about cultural of a particular acquired language. It is argued that cultural schema is a culture- specific extension of content schema since they refer to the role of cultural relationship that is required to comprehend the integrated meaning of the author's conception in nature; cultural schema aids a person to reformulate the story line through referring to more personally and culturally appropriate scripts (Offer, 1995 cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). Thus, we can say that in order to interpret a language appropriate culture schemata are prerequisite, for instance, if hotels are businesses that aim to make a profit they must generally charge more for their services than those services cost the owners. Therefore, deductive inferences give us a huge amount of information about all possible hotels that could not be acquired by merely checking the records of however many individual cases we might access to by whatever method might be applied.

It is argued that the different kinds of schemata are always independent but they do produce distinct output under certain experimental conditions, and that they are classified in a logical hierarchical way. Abstract schemata, are more general and powerful than formal schemata which in turn are mere general and powerful than content schemata. By referring to terms of Peircean logic, he associates each type of schemata with a particular inference: *deduction, induction,* and *abduction,* respectively. Despite the fact of acknowledging that formal schemata are stemmed from abductive reasoning, he argues that the unknown abstract schemata are logically important for the theory to be complete.

One immediate challenge for classroom, teaching is to apply abstract schemata and deductive reasoning to our own pedagogical

procedures and decision making. The various empirical studies and the inductive reasoning underlying them, without benefit of deductive reasoning, may produce nothing more than rather formalisms about teaching. Thus, the more powerful and functional type of schemata tells us about the way we proceed in class comes from abstraction and deductive reasoning with material reality and our own actual experiences.

2/ The application of schema theory on ESL

Many studies conducted on second language teaching have stemmed their strategies from schema theory. The most relevant feature of schema theory is the role of prior knowledge in processing the reading skill. It has been argued that relevant knowledge should be activated before reading; instructors should try to present prerequisite knowledge; and that close attention must be processed. In this light, Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) and Anderson (1999) highlighted the importance of prior knowledge on reading comprehension; i.e. his/her ability to relate the information that s/he takes from the text with prior knowledge. There is a strong relationship between reading process and schemata types. As it is previously mentioned, formal schemata comprise the knowledge of organizational forms and rhetorical structure of a text. In this fact, Carrell (1984 cited in Al-Issa, 2006) confirmed that intensive teaching of the text structure can improve students' reading comprehension. An appropriate use of formal schemata plays an important role in reading. Content schema which is defined as knowledge of content can be considered as the main element in understanding the text. Jun et al. (2007 .P.p.21) argues that:

"Content schemata affect comprehension and remembering more than formal schemata do for text organization. Readers remembered the most when both the content and rhetorical forms were familiar to them while unfamiliar content may cause more difficulties in correct comprehension".

Thus, content schemata are relevant for an effective comprehension. This lead to the readers' better remembering and comprehension of content forms if they are familiar to them, whereas it may be difficult for them if the content is unfamiliar.

3. Issues Related to Schema Theory

Generally, background knowledge varies from one level to another according to its mental abstraction. Schemata represent

various kinds of data, such as objects of academic topics, rules, events, routines, ideas and social situations. They refer to knowledge rather than definitions, so they are not language-based, but are representatives of knowledge which may be used for language comprehension. Schemata are not static, but fluid; they vary by depending on the provided input. Schemata can be modified ones they can be developed by the process of accommodation, i.e. the modification of prior schema with regard to new information. It is used in the reading areas and provides much effective implication to the teaching of foreign language reading. According to Urquhart and Weir (1998), by relying on Carrell's work, schematic knowledge consists of: background knowledge on the topic and relevant socio-cultural knowledge; formal schemata, which are related to the rhetorical structure of the text and are knowledge of how discourse is organized by with respect to different genres, different topics or different purposes; and linguistic schemata under different kinds of language. Moreover, it is claimed that readers' cultures can affect everything from the way readers consider reading itself, the content and formal schemata they hold, directly to their comprehension of concepts. Some of these may not be present in the schemata of some non-native readers, such as the term 'Lottery' in Carrell and Eisterhold (1983:87) which may hold different interpretations. The concept of 'full moon', for instance, in Europe is linked to schemata that include horror stories and madness, whereas in Japan it activates schemata for beauty and moon-viewing parties (for ordinary people not were wolves!).

3. Implications for Activating Background Knowledge

As it is argued in Carrell (1983, 1987), ESL/EFL teachers should also focus on reducing their learners' reading difficulties by providing them with familiar contents that include relevant cultural knowledge. Moreover, there should be a selection of reading materials that must activate the learners' relevant background knowledge which will then lead to an effective comprehension of what is being read. Many researchers such as Carrell (1983), Williams (1987), and others proved that ESL reading comprehension may be influenced not because the ESL readers require appropriate background knowledge, but because they fail to activate it. Thus, for the teacher, the relevance of schemata has three main implications: first, the teacher has to take into account

the knowledge on which any written text is based. Second, if a reader is not actively using his/her background knowledge, a significant part of the reading process is not taking place. Third, teachers should have as their main objective the development of problem-solving, creative, interpretive strategies in which the students can exploit whatever knowledge or resources they may have. Teachers, then, in teaching students how to activate and use their background knowledge, are pushing them to become better readers.

Another way to activate the learners' schemata is extensive reading which has been introduced by many scholars such as (Wallace, 1992; McCarthy & Carter, 1994). Yet, despite its positive effects, some researchers and educators have raised the issue of the possibility to include it in the curriculum. In this light, Grabe (2002) explores the problems related to extensive reading as the requirement to educate teachers about the importance of extensive pleasure reading, and providing classrooms with libraries with reading resources that can incite learners to read.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, many studies and investigations have been conducted to highlight the importance of background knowledge in EFL reading comprehension. These studies focused on the fact that the ability to comprehend a text does not only rely on the reader's linguistic knowledge, but also on the knowledge of the world and the extent to which knowledge is activated during this process of interaction between the text and the reader. The use of schema theory is important for teachers who are supposed to instruct reading materials. In this light, the relevance of background knowledge of the text to be read determines either the ease or difficulty of the reading comprehension of a particular text. In other words, regardless the fact of how the reader may master the language, s/he cannot comprehend effectively if s/he does not know about the content schemata of a particular text. Therefore, the learner's reading comprehension depends on the teacher's activation of textual related schemata through classroom activities and some teaching techniques.

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