Comprehending a Culturally Unfamiliar Text: The Role of Pre-reading Activities

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Abstract

The paper investigates whether the cultural unfamiliarity is a hindrance to reading comprehension or not and, if this is a barrier, whether pre-reading activities can be of any help to overcome it. The study was conducted with 19 foundation English course students at a private university in Bangladesh collecting data from their two consecutive reading comprehension classes. Two texts—one is about “ragging” of which each of the students had direct practical experience, and the other is about Halloween of which some of them had some vague ideas through movies and internet—were used as teaching materials following the same kind of pre, while, and post reading activities. The reading comprehension tests confirmed what had been widely acknowledged as the negative effect of cultural unfamiliarity on reading comprehension and showed that the pre-reading activities were useful to turn the negative effect into positive ones. However, the pre-reading activities were not equally useful for all the students; the positive impact of the activities was obvious only in the motivated students' performance.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, Pre-reading activity, Cultural familiarity, Cultural unfamiliarity
Introduction

Language, many scholars argue (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Byram 1989), is integrated with culture which presupposes the necessity of the learners’ acquaintance with the target culture for learning the target language in the true sense of the term. However, at the same time, unfamiliar culture is found to be a barrier in dealing with micro-level text-driven features such as lexical access, letter identification, and pattern recognition etc. (Ilieva 2000; Ndura 2004). Boriboon (2004) examines such a situation in Thailand and finds that the unfamiliar cultural elements create reading comprehension difficulties. Nevertheless, in order to gain intercultural competence, which is one of the objectives of ESL learners all over the world, the students have to be acquainted with foreign cultural elements (Garcı’a, 2005; Majdzadeh, 2002; Victor, 1999; Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). Theoretically, one of the few ways to resolve this dilemma is to use the pre-reading activities. It is widely acknowledged that activation of readers’ existing schema or by providing them with background or subject matter knowledge (Alptekin, 2006; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979) can enhance reading comprehension. However, the extent of effects of the reading activities meant for activating readers’ schema on reading comprehension is not properly explored yet. The study aims to explore the effects of pre-reading activities on the comprehension of a culturally unfamiliar text. It addresses the following two research questions:

1. Does the familiarity or unfamiliarity of a text affect the readers’ comprehension?
2. Do the pre-reading activities help comprehend a culturally unfamiliar text?

The paper tries to find out to answer the question by collecting data from 19 students studying in a foundation course of a private university in Bangladesh. First of all, keeping all other variables under control the scores obtained for the culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts were compared in order to measure the impact of cultural unfamiliarity on reading comprehension. Secondly, the scores of the students who actively participated in the pre-reading activities were sorted out to find that only the motivated students could overcome the barriers of cultural unfamiliarity by being active in the pre-reading discussion.

Literature Review

Reading, as the applied linguists all over the world are unequivocally agreed upon, is not just taking in the information from the reading materials; it is an interaction between a text and the reader (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Anderson, 1999). The proposition of the reader’s active participation in the reading process presupposes that the reader has already something in his mind regarding the text he reads. Logically speaking, the more information she/he has regarding a reading text, the more interactive she/he can be in the reading process and consequently the more interaction is supposed to ensure the better comprehension.

However, as understanding the smaller units of language is as important as larger conceptual units, a reader has to deal both with micro-level text-driven features like pattern recognition, letter identification, lexical access etc. and macro-level reader-driven features like activating prior knowledge or monitoring comprehension. In order to complete the processes satisfactorily, a reader needs to use her/his limited working memory space efficiently. In other words, if she/he does not have the necessary prior linguistic and conceptual background knowledge, she/he has to overload her/his small working memory and thus becomes unable to
comprehend the reading material satisfactorily. Therefore adequate relevant linguistic and conceptual knowledge contribute to the automatic processes (McLaughlin, 1987) keeping the attentional space free for unfamiliar and new elements in the text.

The importance of background knowledge in the reading process is also discussed within schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Bartlett, 1932) which deals with “preexisting knowledge structures stored in the mind” (Nassaji, 2002, p. 444). The theory explores the ways in which the readers combine their knowledge with the text (Alptekin, 2006; Ketchum, 2006; Ajideh, 2003; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Alderson, 2000; Anderson, 1999; Murtagh, 1989; McKay, 1987; Carrell, 1983; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Johnson, 1981, 1982). There are many kinds of schemata: formal schema, content schema, cultural schema etc. The formal schema (Singhal, 1998) is in fact textual schema—knowledge of conventions of language and textual organization. Relevant studies suggest that if a reader has knowledge of these conventions, she/he is supposed to understand a text better than one who has not this knowledge. In Carrell’s (1987, p. 464) words “texts with familiar rhetorical organization should be easier to read and comprehend than texts with unfamiliar rhetorical organization”. Content schema, which is described as content knowledge (Carrell, 1983), can be termed as background knowledge or subject matter knowledge. The knowledge which is not directly related to a particular text is background knowledge and the knowledge which is directly related to the text is subject matter knowledge (Alderson, 2000).

Method

The study was conducted at a private university in Bangladesh where the medium of instruction is English. The data were collected from two English classes held consecutively on the 28th (the class for familiar text) and 29th (the class for unfamiliar text) October 2014.

Participants

19 young urban adults (aged 18-21) who participated in the study are the students of Department of Architecture (2), Bachelor in Business & Administration (12), Computer Science & Engineering (2), Economics (1), Biotechnology (1), and Pharmacy (1). All of them studied English as a second language for 12 years in their pre-university schools (Primary, Secondary, and Higher Secondary) but their medium of instruction for other subjects was Bangla. All of them can be considered to be very good students in terms of their respective disciplines as they were enrolled in the university through a very competitive admission test.

Nevertheless, in terms of their performance in English course that they were studying in the period between September-November 2014, the students showed different kinds of motivation and diverse levels of proficiency. The teacher who had been teaching them for the last 3 (September-November 2014) months observed that there are 3 types of students (see Table 1). It is to be noted here that the teacher had been teaching the same English course to the same level of students in this particular institution for the last 5 years having an MA in Applied Linguistics.
As mentioned above, two reading texts—one culturally familiar and the other culturally unfamiliar—were used in two consecutive classes. The content of the first text titled “Ragging in Educational Institute: A Human Right Perspective” was very much familiar to the students. All of them had the painful experience of being insulted, tormented and maltreated by the senior students. The text (429 words) consists of five paragraphs of almost equal length. The second text titled “Halloween in America” (419 words) describing culture specific Halloween parties is largely unfamiliar to the students and has the same size and the same number of paragraphs. In fact, both the texts were tailored in terms of language and size by the class teacher to the students’ level and class time. However, in spite of taking all the measures, the texts could not be made exactly equal in terms of their readability—the Flesch Reading Ease of “Ragging in Educational Institute: A Human Right Perspective” (43.2) was slightly higher than that of “Halloween in America” (40.6).

### Pre-reading activities

The teacher conducted the same kind of pre-reading activities (see Table below) with the same students in both the classes. The allocated time for one class was 80 minutes out of which 35 minutes were spent for the pre-reading activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Classroom activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Reading strategies are discussed (5”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>After a general discussion on Ragging and Halloween the specific texts are discussed (10”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>Students’ working in small groups is followed by intra and inter group discussions (20”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>Pattern of the answer to opinion based question is discussed (10”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5</td>
<td>Reading comprehension test (20”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 6</td>
<td>The students’ answers are peer reviewed (8”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 7</td>
<td>Submission of the students’ write-ups (5”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 8</td>
<td>Wrapping up of the class (2”).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Classroom activities**

Note. “=minutes
Test

In both the classes, the students took opinion-based tests after having a pre-reading session of 35 minutes. The students got 25 minutes for writing their scripts and eight minutes to get their scripts peer reviewed by other students. They had to write at least 150 words for five marks. Out of five marks, two were awarded for content (ideas) and three were given for language. Regarding content, the papers were marked on proper addressing to the prompt; clear, meaningful, and relevant ideas followed by adequate examples, evidence, and reference. Regarding language, the papers were marked on organization, grammar, spelling, variation in sentence structure, and vocabulary.

Data analysis

Marking the papers: Two independent raters marked the papers in terms of their content (two marks) and linguistic features (three marks). The two sets of marks for the same text—“Ragging in Educational Institute: A Human Right Perspective”—were analyzed through Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test and a high correlation coefficient was found between them, $r = .92, p < .001$.

Statistical analysis: SPSS was used to analyze the participants’ posttest scores and a post-hoc LSD (least significant difference) test was employed to find out the difference between the posttest scores for the familiar and unfamiliar texts. Cohen’s $d$ was used to calculate the effect size.

Results

The descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 3 and 4. As can be seen, on average, the students did better in familiar than in unfamiliar text. However, if the focus is narrowed to the Type B students only, we see that unlike Type A and Type C students they scored higher in the test for unfamiliar text than in that for familiar one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Text Type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type A</td>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.325</td>
<td>0.43684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfamiliar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.0625</td>
<td>0.37942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type B</td>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>0.51218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfamiliar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.485</td>
<td>0.63511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type C</td>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.40094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfamiliar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>0.43243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Familiar</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.62632</td>
<td>0.60009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfamiliar</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.37895</td>
<td>0.73301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Mean scores in terms of student and types
Table 4: Results of the post-hoc LSD test on text difference in terms of types of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type A</td>
<td>Familiar vs. Unfamiliar texts</td>
<td>0.263</td>
<td>0.507</td>
<td>0.642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type B</td>
<td>Familiar vs. Unfamiliar texts</td>
<td>-0.165</td>
<td>0.630</td>
<td>-0.286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type C</td>
<td>Familiar vs. Unfamiliar texts</td>
<td>1.060*</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>2.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Familiar vs. Unfamiliar texts</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>0.300</td>
<td>0.369</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * p < .05

From the Tables above, it is clear that Type A and Type C students did better in the test for familiar text than that for the unfamiliar one though with regard to Type A students the difference between the scores of familiar (M=4.32) and unfamiliar (4.06) texts is not significant (d=0.64). However, in the case of Type C students, the difference between the scores of familiar (M=3.68) and unfamiliar (M=2.62) texts indicates a large effect size (d=2.54). The results substantiate the findings of the studies discussed above. Nevertheless, the scores of the Type B students is quite surprising; they did slightly better in unfamiliar text (M=3.48) than in the familiar (M=3.32) one, though the difference is not statistically significant (d=−0.28). The class as a whole did better in familiar text (M=3.62) than in unfamiliar one (M=3.37) though the difference is not statistically significant (d=0.36).

Discussion

Theoretically and logically, the scores for the familiar text should be higher than those for the unfamiliar one, as all other variables like students, teacher, time, question pattern, linguistic difficulty, text readability, text length, and reading activities are controlled. However, the teacher could not control the variable of pre-reading activities. She tried to do follow the same steps allocating the same amount of time but the students did not respond in the same way. The reason is, as she assumes and as the students admitted later on, too much familiarity of the text “Ragging in Educational Institute: A Human Right Perspectives” dissuaded them to participate in the discussion. Perhaps the idea that they knew everything about ragging persuaded them against activating the related schema. Therefore, pre-reading activities became virtually meaningless in the class for familiar text. By the same token, the students (at least one of the Type A and six of the Type B students), goaded on by their curiosity to know a slightly known and seemingly “weird” exotic religious ritual, actively participated in the pre-reading activities with a lot of interest which ultimately facilitated their comprehension of the unfamiliar text.

Therefore, in answer to the question no. 1—“Does the familiarity or unfamiliarity of a text affect the readers’ comprehension?”—we can say that the familiarity with the content of a text enhances reading comprehension and the results shown in the Tables above confirm what has been widely acknowledged as the positive effect of schematic knowledge on reading comprehension (e.g., Alderson, 2000; Alptekin, 2006; Ketchum, 2006; Oller, 1995; Steffensen et al., 1979). In answer to the question no. 2—Do the pre-reading activities help comprehend a culturally unfamiliar text?—we can say that the pre-reading activities can help only those who
are motivated. As we have seen, only 7 out of 19 students were motivated and they reaped tangible benefits from the pre-reading activities.

Conclusion

Two conclusions, with regard to two research questions, with some caveats described below, can be drawn from this study. Firstly, cultural familiarity enhances reading comprehension and secondly, pre-reading activities can adequately compensate for the lack of relevant cultural schema if the students are motivated to participate in classroom.

The study is not without limitation. The statistical findings would be more generalizable if the study were conducted with more participants. Moreover, if the statistical data analysis were done on the scores for language and content separately, it would provide deeper insight into the impact of pre-reading activities on the students.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the results of this study have important pedagogical implications. The teachers, especially the teachers, who teach global course books in Kachru’s (1982) Outer and Expanding circles and who have to deal with culturally unfamiliar texts, can take it for granted that they have to pay extra attention to the reading elements unfamiliar to the students through pre-reading activities. Moreover, they have to keep in their mind that the short pre-reading activities that are usually administered in the English classrooms can ultimately help only the motivated students who are ready to pay intensive attention to the activities and eager to participate actively in them. The other unmotivated learners including very good learners like Type A students (see Table 2) need to be paid extra attention in order to overcome the hurdles of an unfamiliar text.
References


