

## Familiar settings and culture in the texts make English language learning an easy task: A case of intermediate students.

- 1) **Abdur Rehman Tariq**-Department of English, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus  
 2) **Hafiz Ahmad Bilal**-Department of English, University of Sargodha, Sargodha  
 3) **Inam Elahi**-Department of English, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus  
 4) **Malik Zafar Iqbal**-Department of English, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus  
 5) **Sumara Hina**-Department of English, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus

### ABSTRACT

*Since the indigenous translated literature was included at the intermediate level, the students feel at home while reading them. While studying the native English writers, most of them are not at ease as foreign culture portrayed in those texts serves as a hindrance in the way of comprehension. Consequently, they may get fed up with the English Language. The purpose of this study is to explore the difference of understanding of the foreign and translated text with familiar setting and culture and to probe if the local translated texts serve the purpose of teaching English better than foreign texts written by native English writers. The data will be collected from a class of Intermediate Part I in a private college at Jauharabad Dist. Khushab. There will be a sample of about 20 students. Questionnaire will be set to collect the data that will be analyzed to conclude a result. The study is significant in the way that it may put forward some very practical and effective suggestions for redesigning the syllabus of English based on the opinion of students and teachers.*

**Key words:** *indigenous translated literature, foreign text, questionnaire*

### Introduction

In cognitive science, the reading comprehension in L2 was influenced by the schema theory. According to Brown [1] the feature of this theory is that the reader gives meaning to the text rather than the text itself. The reader gathers cultural knowledge, information & emotion from the text. After reading the text the reader concludes his / her intended meaning. The reader's prior knowledge works in his interaction with the text. He correlates the input against his schemas. According to this theory, it is the prior knowledge, which occupies a very considerable part in his understanding of the text. Many researches concluded that there is always a significant relationship between reading comprehension and prior knowledge of a text [2-6]. The comprehension of any unfamiliar text depends upon the prior knowledge of the setting and culture. The reading comprehension is always affected by Schemata; it was first of all studied by Bartlett [7]. During his research the English students were given an unfamiliar cultural text. The findings were inaccurate; the recalling of the story created mistakes due to past experiences of the reader and the explanation caused superfluity. According to some studies, the background knowledge emphasizes the importance of cultural schemata in target language learning. [8-9] Following it Johnson (1982) studied the consequence of comprehension of culturally originated prose of Persian intermediate & advanced ESL students at the university level. His findings showed that the reading perception was to a great influenced by the similar culture and settings found in the prose in spite of the complexities in the text. Some more studies shows that the text which are familiar to the native culture, are

conceived well by the native [10-14]. Most of the studies in their methodologies conducted their research by taking two groups of the participants. The participants were from different cultural schemata. Linguistically and rhetorically equal two reading texts were used in these investigations. These texts were about the cultural background of these groups. The conclusion was made that each group could comprehend the text of their own native culture. Following these researches a recent research on the reading comprehension of L2 was conducted. The role of cultural schemata was investigated in this study. Likewise two groups of participants were employed. These groups were from the same cultural background. However there was only one reading text but in two different versions, in a text some culturally unfamiliar words were converted into the familiar ones in the nativized version. One of the groups had a reading of culturally unfamiliar version while the second one read the culturally nativized version. The result of this study was just like the research result confirmed by Oller, Chihara & Sakurai [15]. They followed the assumption that "Very simple things like nouns referring to persons and places carry with them some fairly subtle semantic & pragmatic information" [15]. In this way leaving all other words intact, they replaced the unfamiliar English words with the familiar Japanese words. After controlling the other intervening variables, Chihara et al. [15] confirmed that the subjects of his population performed better on the culturally familiar version than that of the original. They proved that if in the original text culturally specific words are changed into native words, the readers can comprehend the text well and learning of L2 becomes an easy task. Alptekin [17] defines the

cultural nativization as “Social semantic and pragmatic adaptation of the contextual and cultural cues of the original story into the learner’s own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical context essentially intact” [p. 499]. According to him cultural cues are locations, settings, occupations and characters where as the contextual clues are cultural customs, values, rituals and notions.

Following the concept of nativization of Alptekin [17], Razi and Erten [18] carried on a study in which a reading text in two versions was employed. One was an original American short story and the other was a nativized Turkish short story. Their aim was to study the impact of reading and nativization on reading comprehension. The result revealed the better comprehension of the nativised version. This better understanding was just because of cultural familiarity.

Oller’s [19] claim was further supported and confirmed by Alptekin’s findings that reading comprehension can be facilitated by replacing culturally specific words with familiar words. Alptekin [17] studied the culturally familiar background knowledge in L2 reading in literal and inferential comprehension. For the study as a population, he selected 98 advanced EFL students in a Turkish University. The first group read the original version of the story while the second group read a nativised version. The multiple choice comprehension questions of each group were checked separately. The study revealed that by reading the nativised story, the Turkish students showed better result. Therefore, they concluded that in comprehending the original story, nativization contributes a lot.

The above studies on the effect of nativization on reading comprehension have given a lot of valuable information but they showed some limitations. As these studies were conducted in Japanese and Turkish cultures, the generalizability may not be achieved in other cultural environment. Therefore, the results of these studies must be conformed on learners of the other cultures. Besides we don’t know the attitude of ESL learners to nativization. If we know the attitude of the learners to the adaptation of cultural clues or of similar setting and culture, it would be valuable in designing ESL texts books because language pedagogy is always influenced by the culture.

More specifically the first purpose of this study is how familiar settings and culture affects the reading comprehension of L2. For this study two different short stories were selected. One the original English version “Thank You, M’am” by Langstan Hughes [24] and the short story of familiar culture and settings by a well known Pakistani Urdu writer Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, “God be Pleased” [24], a translated

short story from Urdu to English, were selected. It was supposed that the cultural familiarity in a text leads to better understanding of it for the native speakers at interferential and literal level. The second purpose is to know the attitude of the ESL learners towards familiar culture and setting in the stories. To optimize validity and reliability, a questionnaire as an instrument was employed after the reading comprehension of the texts.

### Hypothesis

“Familiar settings and culture in the texts make English language learning an easy task”

This study is supposed to answer the following questions:

1. Does similar settings and culture affect Pakistani ESL learners in comprehension of short stories?
2. What is the attitude of Pakistani L2 readers to short stories having similar setting and culture?

### Methodology

#### Population & Sampling:

I selected my population of Intermediate Part I from a private girls’ college at Jauharabad Dist. Khushab. I recruited 20 subjects randomly from my population. Students’ age range was 16 to 20; the participants in this study had learned English in instructed setting for about 10 years.

#### Tool or Instrument:

For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire as an instrument was employed.

#### Data Collection:

The original English version of the short story “Thank You, M’am” by Langstan Hughes was given to the participants. They first read this story and then the second short story having the familiar setting and culture, “God be Pleased” by Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, was given to them to read. Then a questionnaire was distributed among the students to be answered. Then this data was collected to be analyzed. The study revealed that by reading the story having familiar setting and culture, the students showed better result. Therefore, they concluded that in comprehending the story having familiar culture and setting contributes a lot.

#### Data Analyses:

This research studied the effects of the background knowledge of culture on reading comprehension. Here

follows the results of the data collected to be reported separately. The data was collected from the selected

population and it was analyzed statement wise with the graphical representation as under:

The story having the familiar culture and setting is easier to comprehend.

In response to this question 95% of the students responded yes while there were only 5% who replied “No”.

1. The story having the familiar culture and setting creates interest.  
In answer to this question 85% responded in “Yes” and 15% only replied in “No”

2. The students can learn target language more rapidly through the story having the familiar culture and setting.  
While answering this question 90% students responded in “Yes”.

3. The students can develop their concepts of language better through such stories.  
80% of the students answered in “Yes” here.

4. The concepts of grammar are easily comprehended.  
Here 85% of the subjects replied in “Yes”.

5. Such stories help to enhance the language proficiency.  
65% of the students agreed to this statement.

6. Sentence structure can easily be understood.  
Here 100% students confirmed this statement.

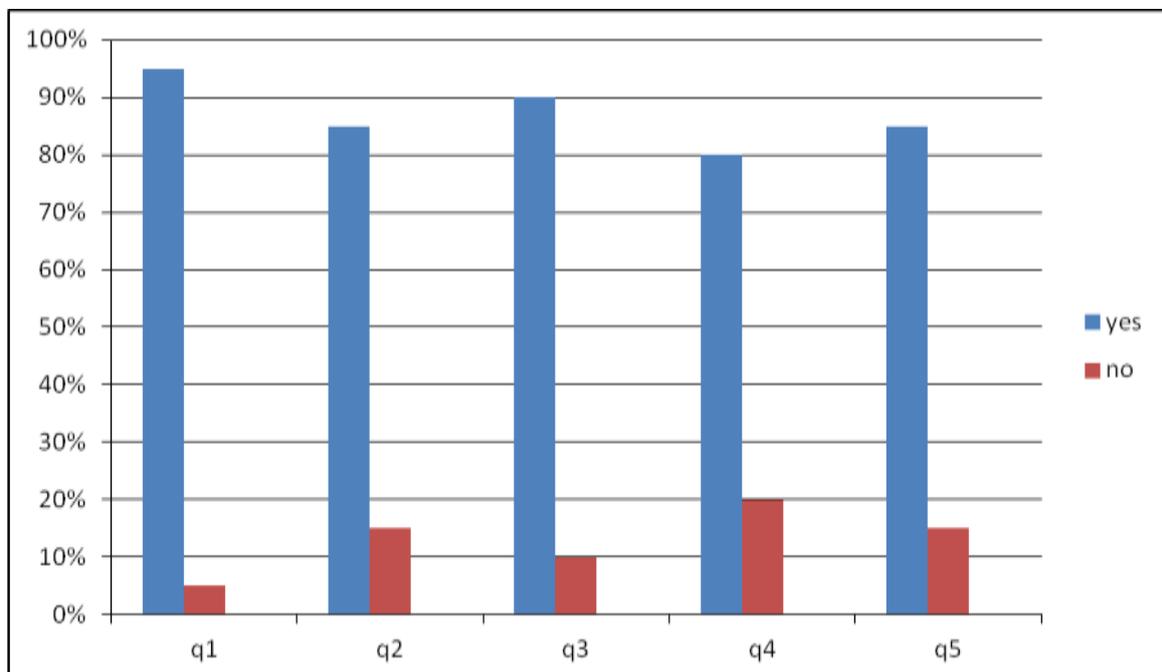
7. The use of natavized or local words creates more interest.  
This statement was agreed by 70% of the students where as only 30% refuted it.

8. Such stories can be comprehended through self study even.  
100% of the population agreed to this statement.

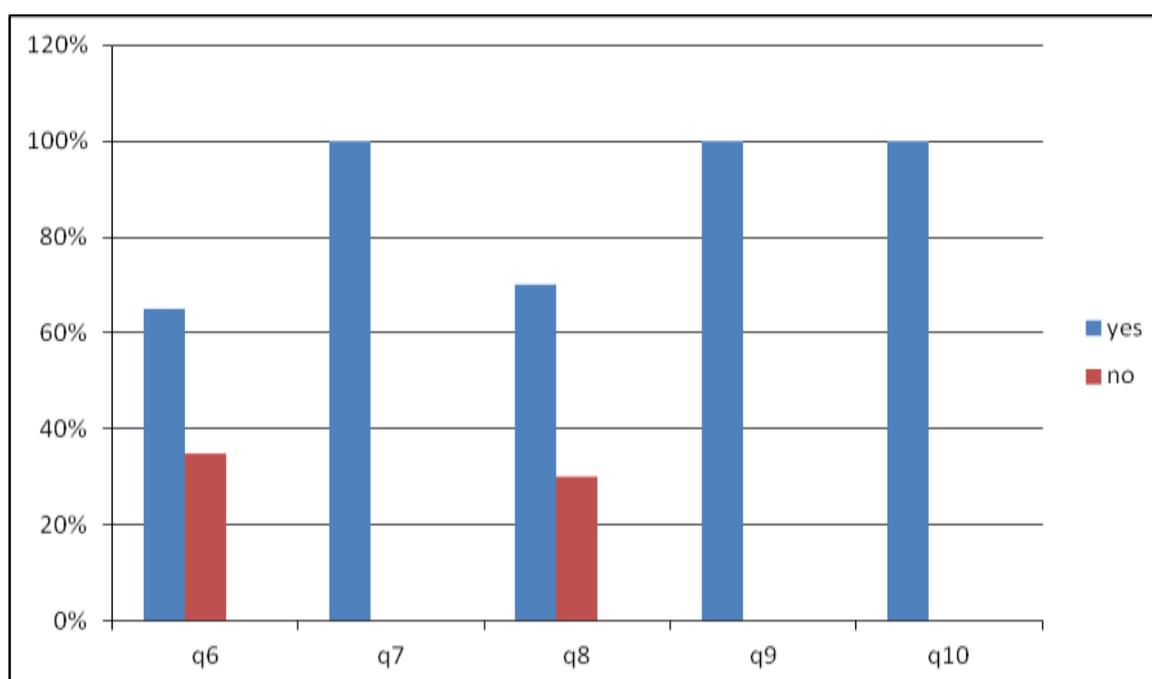
9. The meanings of the words are easily understandable.  
Here again 100% students agreed to the statements while none refuted it.

The graphical representation of this data analyses is as under

Graph1



Graph 2



### RESULTS:

The statement of our study affects the reading comprehension of the L2 learners. The overall result is calculated as 87%. Only 13% refuted this statement.

### CONCLUSION:

In conclusion the outcome of this research verifies the effects of cultural background on inference and literal understanding in reading comprehension. Moreover the attitude of the Pakistani students towards the nativization of short stories has been rated here. Furthermore there is a direct relation between familiar setting and comprehension of a story. This relationship is always weighty. Therefore, the participants showed positive response towards the statement.

As regards the role of cultural back ground knowledge on reading comprehensions of, the EFL teacher should view whether the cultural schemata in the authentic material are friendly to the learners or not. Due to lack of presence of such cultural schemata, the students may fail to comprehend that text. It is because the meanings do not exist in the text but it is the dynamic cultural background knowledge of the learners that gives meaning to it. Since the familiar setting and culture improves reading comprehension, therefore such stories must be used in text books as an authentic material to benefit the learners. To provide such familiar context will be a new technique for the course designers.

In learn L2 there is always a psychological barrier .and the fear of a new language that make the learning process very slow. When the student encounters the familiar cultural and setting in L2 text, these barriers are automatically overcome. They develop interest which leads to a positive attitude of the learners. It facilitates the L2 learning process. Furthermore the extensive spread of English (EFL) gave the concept of world Englishes i.e local varieties of English and culture. English language has become a global language from a national language. It is to communicate peoples' ideas and culture i.e. a localized language that is a process Sharifian [39] called glocalization of English. In this way the ideas and culture of the learners will also be preserved.

However the future studies should verify this research with more representative population. The concept of localization of English should be studied to make it clear and operational this localization is only possible if we conduct such active researches to probe the teachers and the learners as well.

The forthcoming studies, with different forms of question, may account the other levels of comprehension in such stories. The outcome of this study may be asserted or generalized with different texts and with the learners of different language

proficiency levels, different genders and age groups. As this study is concerned with the attitude of the learners, the attitude of the teachers is not rated here.

## REFERENCES

1. Brown, H.d, 2001. Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy. White Wesley Longman, Inc.
2. Change, C., 2006. Effect of topic familiarity and linguistics difficulty on the reading strategies and mental representations of nonnative readers of Chinese. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 4(2): 172-198.
3. Hammadou, J., 2000. The impact of analogy and content knowledge on reading comprehension: What helps, what hurts, *Modern Language Journal*, 84(1): 38-50.
4. Kendeou, P. and P. Van den B Broek, 2007. The effects of prior knowledge and text structure on comprehension processes during reading of scientific texts. *Memory and cognition*, 35(7): 1567-1577.
5. Keshavars, M., M, Atai and H. Ahmadi, 2007. Content schemata, linguistic simplification and EFL readers' comprehension and recall, *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 19(1): 19-33.
6. Leeser, M.j., 2007. Learning-based factors in 1, 2 reading comprehension and processing grammatical form: Topic familiarity and working memory. *Language Learning*, 57(2):229-270.
7. Bartlett, F.C., 1932. Remembering Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Carrell, P.L., and J.C Eisterhold, 1983. Schema Theory and ESL Reading Pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17:553-573.
9. Johnson, P., 1982. Effects on Reading Comprehension of Building Background Knowledge. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16:5203-516.
10. Abu-Rabia, S., 1996. Attitudes and cultural background and their relationship to reading comprehension in a second language: A comparison journal of *Applied Linguistic*, 6(1): 81-107.
11. Abu-Rabia, S., 2003. Cognitive and social factors affecting Arab students learning English as a third language in Isreal. *Educational Psychology*, 23(4):347-360.
12. Ammon, M.S., 1987. Patterns of performance among bilingual children who score low reading. In S. R. English as a second language. Norwood, NJ: Ables.
13. Carrell, P.L., 1983. Three components of background knowledge in reading comprehension. *Language Learning*, 33: 183-207.
14. Yuet, C. and H. Chan, 2003. Cultural Content and Reading Proficiency: A Comparison of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Learners of English *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16(1):60-69.
15. Chihara, T., T. Sakurai and J.W.J.R. Oller, 1989. Background and culture as factors in EFL reading comprehension *Language Testing*, 6(2):143-149.
16. Alptekin, C., 2002. The effects of cultural knowledge on EFL reading comprehension. Paper presented at the Opening plenary speech at International Balkan ELT Conference, Edirne: Trakya University.
17. Alptekin, C., 2006. Cultural familiarity in inferential and literal comprehension in 1, 2 reading. *System*, 34(4):494-508.
18. Erten, I.H. and S. Razi, 2003. An experimental investigation into the impact of cultural schemata on reading comprehension. Paper presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Balkan ELT Conference on Theory and Practice of TESOL.
19. Oller, J.W., 1995. Adding abstract to formal and content schemata: Results of recent work in peircean semiotics. *Applied Linguistics*, 16: 273-306.
20. Sweller, j., 1994. Cognitive load theory, learning difficulty and instructional design. *Learning and Instruction*, 4: 295-312.
21. Perfetti, C.A., 1999. Comprehending written language: A blueprints of the reader, in C.M, Brown and P. Hagoort (Eds.), *the neurocognition of language* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp 167-208.
22. Sasaki, M., 2000. Effects of cultural schemata on students test taking processes for cloze tests: A multiple data source approach *Language Testing*, 17(1):85-114.
23. Pritchard, R., 1990. The effects of cultural schemata on reading processing strategies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 25(4):273-295.

24. English Book – 1, For Intermediate Classes (short Stories)s, Punjab Text Book board, Lahore, Pakistan Editin 1<sup>st</sup> May 2011
25. Stanovich, K., 2000. Progress in understanding reading: Scientific foundations and new frontiers New York: The Guilford Press.
26. Erten, 1H. and S. Razi,2009. The effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. Reading in a foreign Language, 21 (1): 60-77.
27. Day, R. and J. Park. 2005. Developing reading comprehension questions. Reading in a foreign Language, 17(1): 60-73.
28. Rupp, A.A., T. ferme and H. Choi. 2006. How assessing reading comprehension with multiple-choice questions shapes the construct: A cognitive processing perspective. Language Testing, 23:441-474.
29. Sharifian, F., 2010. Glocalization of English in world Englishes: An emerging variety among Persian Speakers of English. In M. Saxena and T, Omoniyi (Eds.), Contending with Globalization in World Englishes Clevedonm, UK: Multilingual Matters pp: 137-158.
30. Ketchum, E.M., 2006. The cultural baggage of second language reading: An approach to understanding the practices and perspectives of a non-native product, Foreign Language Annals, 39(1): 22-42.
31. Yule, G., 1996, Pragmatics. Oxford. England: Oxford University Press.
32. Mandler, J.M., 1984. Stories, Scripts and scenes: Aspects of schema theory, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
33. Klapproth, D., 2004. Narrative as social practice: Anglo-Western and Australian Aboriginal oral traditions: Walter de Gruyter.
34. Anderson, R.C., 1978. Schema-directed processes in language comprehension. In A. Lesgold, J. W. Pellegrino and R. Glaser (Eds.), cognitive psychology and instruction Now York: Plenum, pp: 67-82.
35. Carrell, P.L., 1987. Content and formal schemata in ESL reading TESOL Quarterly, 21: 461-481.
36. Droop, M. And L. Verhoeven, 1998. Background Knowledge, linguistic complexity and second-language comprehension. Journal of Literacy Research, 30(2): 253-271.
37. Johnson, P., 1981. Effects on reading comprehension of language complexity and cultural background of a text. TESOL Quarterly, 15: 169-181.
38. Razi, S., 2004. The effects of cultural schema and reading activities on reading comprehension. Paper presented at the proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> international online conference on second and foreign language teaching and research, USA.
39. Jalilifar, A.R. and R, Assi, 2008. The role of Cultural Nativization in Comprehension of Short Stories in EFL Reading Contexts. The International Journal of Language Society and Culture, 26: 62-79.
40. Shaw, I., 2000. Short stories, five decades. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.