The Difficulties of Reading Cultural-based Texts among Yemeni EFL Learners

Fazee Khalid Alezi Almuslimi

Faculty of Education-Sana'a University

aboehab1977@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study aimed at discovering the difficulties that level two students in the English Department, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University-Sana'a in reading comprehension when reading cultural-based texts. To achieve the study objectives, a test was administered in which participants were required to read two texts; one was cultural-based and the other was ordinary. The study method was descriptive. 51 participants were randomly selected from the whole population (180 students). The obtained data from the instrument was analyzed by calculating frequencies and paired sample t-test using SPSS program. The results revealed that even though students face difficulties when reading cultural texts, there is no significant statistical difference in their performance in the cultural based test and the ordinary one in the three subskills under investigation in this study (the main idea, guessing meaning from the text, and making inferences). Some recommendations were suggested. It was ended with some important recommendations related to its results in which teachers and learners should take into account enhancing and activating both of cultural and structural schemata.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a crucial component in educational settings of a foreign language learning. In academic contexts, reading plays an essential role in students' achievement. It is also a part of any desired success on both the personal and the economic level. Due to the previously mentioned, reading has been defined as the most important academic language skill (Carrell, 1988a; Grabe & Stoller, 2002, cited in Dimassi, 2006). Richards and Renanaya (2003) point out the special focus that reading receives in a foreign language. To them, there are two important reasons for this: "First, many foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals"(p.215). Second, various pedagogical purposes served by written texts help reading to receive this special status.

Reading comprehension is the essence of reading and the active process of constructing meaning (Durkin, 1993). (Van den Broek & Espin, 2012) viewed reading comprehension as a

complex interaction among automatic and strategic cognitive processes that enables the reader to create a mental representation of the text.

According to (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p.11), reading comprehension is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language". This process of interaction and involvement with the text is a function of both reader and text variables that take place within a larger social context (Goldman, Saul, & Coté, 1995; McNamara & Magliano, 2009; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002 cited in Hidayati, 2015). When successful, the product of reading comprehension is a coherent mental representation of a text's meaning that is integrated with the reader's prior knowledge (Hidayati, 2015).

Prior knowledge is extremely essential when it comes to comprehending any reading material. Without Prior knowledge, comprehension is hindered despite the fact that the words might be easy to understand and the language structures used in the text are simple as well.

The first conception is what is related to this study. Referring to background knowledge is a necessity for reading comprehension. The prior knowledge used while reading to have a sensible reading interpretation of the given text is referred to as schema. Schema is a term used in psychology and cognitive science, which describes a systematic pattern of thought and behavior. Schemata (plural of schema) affect attention and the absorption of new information. People use schemata to organize prior knowledge and provide a framework for future understanding (Zaho & Zhu, 2012). Schema is a general term for a conventional knowledge structure that exists in memory (Yule, 2006, p. 132).

In terms of background knowledge, cultural schema is a factor that influences foreign language reading (Fuhong, 2004). Rentsch and colleagues (2007) proposed that a schema for cultural understanding may aid novices to quickly learn a novel culture. Forming a schema for cultural knowledge may be particularly helpful, as abstract cultural concepts can serve as a guide even when one's familiarity with a specific culture is limited. Entering a new, unfamiliar culture often involves high anxiety and, initially, only superficial knowledge of the location and people.

A cultural schema may include features or concepts that have proved salient or useful in previous intercultural situations. Generalizing from these specific past experiences may help guide appropriate behavior, reduce anxiety, and facilitate learning the specific culture (Abbe, n.d).

Statement of the problem

A growing deficiency of comprehending cultural-based texts is very common among several students of the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University. This problem manifests itself when a cultural text is presented. Despite the fact that the words of the text may not be of a high level of difficulty, students still struggle to understand the ideas of the text and on more than one plane their obstacles are found. At times, they suffer from not being able to get the gist of the text. Other times they do not understand vocabulary, unable to make an inference based on the information of the text, and form distortion of some information due to the lack of understanding, etc.

Even as students extensively translate numerous words in their attempt to obtain a sense of comprehension, they usually are in dismay when they find out that all this translation ended up unprofitable after all. Feelings of disappointment and failure control their minds since they may be unaware of the fact that unfamiliar cultural contexts have caused a partial or total lack of comprehension.

Students of all levels in the department face this problem. The results of reading courses is yet an additional evidence of the existence of such a problem. Only students with great western cultural background can score high in exams where students are exposed to cultural –based texts.   Despite the fact that there are four courses of reading being taught in the department, students are still unable to comprehend what they read if the texts are culturally based. Even as graduates, some still struggle with understanding texts built on cultural content. This is due to the fact that lacking knowledge about cultural topics makes comprehending the text an uneasily attainable task. It is noticeable that even forming a general main idea from texts of this type is out of reach of the students in most cases.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1)   Identify the difficulties level two students in the English Department, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, face in reading comprehension performance when they read ordinary texts and cultural-based ones.

2)   Find out if there is any significant statistical difference between the results of the ordinary test and the cultural one.

Questions of the Study

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the difficulties of reading comprehension the students face when being required to read ordinary texts and cultural-based ones?
2. Is there any significant statistical difference between the results of the mean scores in the ordinary text and the cultural text?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in the sense that it:

1. Reveals the importance of cultural background knowledge for reading comprehension.
2. Helps in understanding the significance of providing cultural knowledge into the English language teaching of reading courses in the department.
3. Makes curriculum designers, decision-makers, and educational planners to include cultural aspects in learning the language.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to:

- Level two students of the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University, 2018-2019, second semester.

- While there are three types of schema, this study is solely concerned with the cultural schema, for it is related to the cultural-based texts.

- Investigating the effect of cultural schema on only three reading skills; identifying the main idea of a text, guessing the meaning of words from context, and making inferences.

Term Definitions

Reading has been defined as the most important academic language skill (Carrell, 1988a; Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

It is defined by the researcher as "the method or skill through which an individual is able to attain knowledge and become literate".

Reading Comprehension is the essence of reading and the active process of constructing meaning (Durkin, 1993).

(Van den Broek & Espin, 2012) defined it as "a complex interaction among automatic and strategic cognitive processes that enables the reader to create a mental representation of the text".

And it is defined by the researcher as "the interaction between the reader and the text in a way that enables the reader to extract meaning and come up with an understanding of the printed letters through the process of decoding these written symbols".

Culture

"Culture means the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation" (Birukou, Blanzieri, Giorgini, Giunchiglia, n.d)

Culture is the socially transmitted knowledge and behavior shared by some group of people (Peoples and Bailey [21, p. 23] cited in Brumann, 1999).

And it is defined by the researcher as "a set of social conventions, rules, customs, and behaviors that cause one group or society to be distinguished from the other group".

Cultural based texts

The definition of a text in cultural studies is significantly broader than the definition of a text in traditional literary studies. In cultural studies, a text is not simply a book. In fact, in cultural studies, a text need not be a material document at all. The text can be a literary document (a novel or poem), or some other artistic document (a film or photograph), or what is called a "cultural artifact" (a hairstyle or political slogan) (Harvard college, 2019).

In this study, cultural- based texts are defined by the researcher as "texts that reflect the cultural aspects of the native speakers communities such as social and cultural events, occasions, conventions, etc".

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND PREVIOUS STUDIES

This part of the study is divided to four main sections. In the first section, reading comprehension is presented with different definitions, explanation of the nature of reading comprehension, and the two most common reading processes; bottom-up and top-down. The second section provides information about the schema and the schema theory. It also further

explains the types of schema. The third section introduces the effect of cultural schema on three reading skills which are the main focus in the study. These skills are identifying the main idea, guessing meaning from context, and making inferences. The last section presents a number of previous studies. It relates these studies to the current one with discussion of all mentioned studies.

2.1. Reading Comprehension

Reading is the most important skill to acquire knowledge. It is through this skill that humans are able to attain the necessary information to create and innovate everything that will be essential in their lives. The interplay between the reader and the text is manifested in the process of comprehension. Reading comprehension is a complex process that includes explicit and implicit; external and internal mental abilities to decode the message in the written symbols of a text.

According to Falk-Ross (2015), "reading is a number of interactive processes between the reader and the text, in which readers use their knowledge to build, to create, and to construct meaning" (p. 61). The construction of meaning involves the reader connecting information from the written message with previous knowledge to arrive at meaning, at an understanding" (R. Day & Bamford, 2010, p. 13).

2.2. The Nature of Reading Comprehension

Theorists vary on the nature of reading. Traditional opinions regards reading as a passive (bottom-up) decoding process. Thus it is believed that "meaning is embodied in the text and the reader can extract the meaning from the print if he understands it letter by letter and word by word" (Goodman, 1988). It is assumed by traditional views that the bottom-up processes lead to the top-down processes which go beyond the simple decoding of the letters to extract the meaning to extract purposes, attitudes, views of authors, etc.

2.3. Bottom-up and top-down processing in reading

As far as cognitive tasks are concerned, two divisions of reading processes have been established; bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up processes depend on the mechanism of taking in the information from the outside; the symbols of the writing system in reading, for instance**.** high knowledge processes are excluded in this type of reading processing. With regards to top-down, an uptake of information occurs through the background prior

knowledge which allows for more sophisticated processes to take place. An interplay between the bottom-up and top-down processes is suggested through which successful comprehension comes about (Treiman, n.d).

The emphasis on either bottom-up or top-down processes in reading varies from one scholar to the other. These two approaches are stressed differently when it comes to their importance in the realization of reading comprehension.

2.4.Schema

Anderson (1977) has stated that a schema is a knowledge "structure" containing slots, or place holders, for each of the component pieces of information subsumed under the more general idea, or structure. A schema is an indicator of the link between its component parts. This means that the formation of schema stems from the filling of the empty slots of the schema with examples and events.

A schema is a general term used for conventional knowledge structure that exists in memory. Our knowledge of the surrounding environment is used by us to have better and deeper insights about the world around us. Humans generally have many schemata about various matters around them, for instance, if someone describes an experience he has in a classroom, an individual listening to him will not need an explanation of the meaning of classroom or what can be normally found in the classroom for such information already exists in the schema of that individual. He resorts in such cases to his prior knowledge to understand what has been said about the experience of the classroom mentioned. Our knowledge of certain matters and our interpretation does not always come from the printed word, but from our knowledge structures in our minds (Yule, 2006).

2.4.1. Schema Theory

Schema theory is a theory of knowledge. Its main concern is the acquisition, processing, and retrieving of knowledge. Cognitive science is the discipline that such terms come from. Schemas, or schemata, are seen as cognitive constructs by which we organize information in our long-term memory (Widdowson, 1983, cited in Issa,2006). They reproduce through memory our experiences, values, attitudes, strategies, skills, etc. Therefore, schema represents "the building blocks of cognition" (Rumelhart, 1982, cited in Issa, 2006). Schema theory is an explanation of how readers use prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from the text (Rumelhart, 1980).

"*Everything we know and believe is organized in a theory of what the world is like, a theory that is the basis of all our perceptions and understanding of the world, the root of all learning, the source of hopes and fears, motive and expectancies, ……*".

Schema is an abstract structure that facilitates the organization of knowledge. Bartlett (1932) had contributed many definitions of schema concerning cognition. These definitions are in "*Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*". Bartlett was the first to use the term "schema" in psychology. He explained schema as " an active organization of past reactions or experiences" (1932,p.201). In addition, Hudson (1983) explained the massive role that schema plays in reading comprehension (An,2013).

Reading comprehension operates in two different directions: from the bottom up to the top and from top-down to the bottom of the hierarchy. The bottom-up processes start from a low level of the written text; however, the top-down processes start from the general to enable the reader to make predictions by the information that was extracted from the text during the bottom-up processes at first. It is assumed according to the theory of the schema that both of these processes occur simultaneously and in an interactive manner (An, 2013).

Therefore, the schema theory postulates that knowledge is organized and embedded into different constructions that are more dominant and abstract. Based on this comprehension occurs when there is a match between the characteristics of an event and the slots an individual has in the schema. It is worth mentioning that not all slots in the schema will be filled and that some slots will be filled by information obtained through making inferences rather than through information given in the event.

2.4.2. Developing a Schema for Reading

Anderson, Pichert, Goetz, Schallert, Stevens, and Trollip (1976) propose nouns, for instance, do not have fixed meanings for the user. Instead, they have a range of meanings that are controlled mainly by the context in which they are put. The writers state that there are many definitions for each noun based on its uses. Reading can have several definitions and distinguishing characteristics depending on the different uses it has. The notion of relating the definition to the uses of reading means that a student can have various meanings for reading closely linked to the different types of uses of reading. Thus reading at home under bedcovers requires a set of strategies and efforts that are different from those needed when reading street signs, for

example. The required approach to reading a recipe may differ from an approach required to read a letter. This stems from the fact that these different types of reading are very distinct in their nature and in what strategies, effort, and attention the reader is supposed to give for each one of them.

Reading in the intermediate grades has not been dealt with systematically (Durkin, 1977). The focus instead has been more on learning new vocabulary and answering comprehension questions posed by the teacher or are in the workbook. The technique of discussion is usually used to elicit correct answers from the students. It has not been the custom of teachers to ask their students to think critically about what they read or to relate what they have read to their own experiences.

There are several reasons that are given to the failure of students to comprehend a text. A student may fail to understand a text because he/ she lacks the ability to know and identify the words of the text. Another possible cause is that students may have no interest in reading or due to a narrow background of experience. For reading to occur, there must be other factors other than simply interest and experience despite their significance.

2.4.3. Types of Schema

There are various kinds of schemata that have been proposed: formal schema that is concerned with the rhetoric structure of the text. The linguistic schema that revolves around the existing language proficiency in different aspects of the language like vocabulary, grammar, and idioms. The content schema which is related to the content of a text. Cultural schema is the kind of schema that deals with aspects of cultural knowledge that is shared by bigger segments of the population. Cultural schema is usually categorized under content schema for CoS include cultural facets as well (An, S, 2013).

1- Formal Schema

The formal schema is part of the macrostructure of the text and it has the pattern of organization for the text. Meyer and Freedle (1979) discovered the effect of formal schemata on recall. Cause and effect schema, contrastive schema, problem-solution schema, and collection-of-description schema are four types of schema that were compared in their study.

Meyer et al. (1980) conducted an experiment to discover whether being able to identify the pattern of organization of the text can have an effect on recalling more information by respondents participating in the experiment or not. The results came in accordance with this notion that those who were able to identify the organization of the structure of the text were capable of recalling more information than those who were not aware of the text organization. However, these experiments were conducted in L1 contexts. Regarding L2, further research and investigation are needed since the studies conducted in L2 contexts are limited (Zhang, 2008).

2- Linguistics Schema

A linguistics schema refers to the reader's knowledge of aspects of the language such as phonetics, grammar, vocabulary and idioms. This type of schema plays a crucial role in assisting learners to comprehend a text.

3- Content (Cultural) Schema

Carrell (1985, cited in Zarei & Mahmudi, 2012) defined content schema to be the background knowledge in relation to the content domain.

According to Al-Haisoni (2017) various studies have been conducted that verified the notion that content, or cultural to some, schema has greater influence on the reading comprehension than formal schema does. Familiarity with the topic is probably one of the most vital deciding factors that assist in comprehending a given text. If a learner knows more about a certain topic, then understanding the text will be much easier and more facilitated.

The effect of cultural schema can extend to many reading strategies. Among these strategies are the three strategies that are discussed in this study, and they are identifying the main idea, guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, and making inferences.

4- The Effect of Cultural Schema on Identifying the Main Idea of a Text

Extracting the main idea of a text is considered to be a question which is performed through the top-down reading process. It requires the reader to use the prior knowledge he/ she has especially in cultural-based texts. Such questions are considered to be global since they necessitate knowledge of the world (Shirzadi, 2015).

It is assumed that if learners know most of the words in a text, for example, a percentage of 90 per cent, they can find the main idea of the text accurately. However, those learners who do not have the same knowledge of that percentage of words will probably be unable to identify the main idea in the text. Also, they will not have a chance to learn new words either.

Regardless of the percentage of known words the reader is supposed to have, being able to extract the main idea, the learner must use different parts of the text to successfully cite the correct main idea. This can be accomplished using the strategy of concept mapping, for example. Concept maps are knowledge being sorted out and organized in graphical representations. These representations permit readers to visually establish the links among ideas and concepts. Graphically, these maps are usually presented with concepts put in circles or boxes and lines that connect these circles and boxes to reveal the types of relationships they have (Khanghaninejad, 2015).

5- The Effect of Cultural Schema on Guessing Meaning from Context

There are many reading strategies that learners need to deal with and give special attention to while reading. These strategies are the sub-skills that are in an interplay to guide the reader through the stages of constructing a complete and effective reading comprehension. Identifying the main idea, guessing meaning of unknown words from context, making inferences, etc. are some of the strategies of reading. The kind of guessing the learner performs when guessing meaning from context is usually referred to as contextual guessing. Contextual guessing refers to using context clues to be able to infer the meaning of unknown words (Gorjian, Hayati, Sheykhiani, n.d).

There have been a collection of studies that attempted to investigate the factors that affect the vocabulary meaning inferencing from context. (Carnine, Kameenui, & Coyle, 1984; Jenkins et al., 1984; Konopak, 1988; Nagy et al., 1987; Nist & Olejnik, 1995; Schatz & Baldwin, 1986; Shu, Anderson, & Zhang,1995 cited in Diakidoy, 1998). In all these studies there were proven to be some learning of vocabulary, the knowledge of words was very minor.

The mental representation formation is facilitated through understanding concepts. Words and their concepts are naturally inseparable. This connection insinuates that learning a word meaning necessitates learning something about the concept associated with that word (Anderson & Freebody, 1981 cited in Diakidoy, 1998). Any information that is learnt with the word is part of this network of interrelated concepts. (Graves & Buikema, 1990) conducted studies examining

the effect of teaching students strategies for inferring word meanings from context. Their findings were that students were more successful in guessing meaning from context when they were directed to study and use the events of stories they were asked to read in addition to specific clue information they used to put the pieces of the text together.

One of the most important determinants that control the effectiveness of word meaning guesses from context is the relevant prior knowledge. Cultural knowledge being part of the prior knowledge the students possess is a factor that determines the accuracy level of educated guesses of word meaning from context as well.

6- The Effect of Cultural Schema on Making Inferences

If we take individual differences into consideration, the characteristics of the context, and the features of the text, a question of what might happen when all these come together is posed. At the basic level microstructures such as prepositions, words are decoded through the bottom-up processes and represented by mental images (Butcher & Kintsch, 2003 as cited in Pardo, 2004). These mental images summon the information stored in the long-term memory helping the reader to build connections between representations. These connections are between the reader, the text and also between different parts of the text. If these connections are being utilized effectively may lead the reader to maintain gist of the text.

These connections lead to mental representations in several ways. One of these ways is making inferences. Coherence and chains of related events are the things readers look for in order to be able to make correct inferences. When readers move further in the text, they build inferences summoning ideas from the long term memory which have coherence as one of its characteristics. It is presumed that making inferences is executed in an automatic manner and it is considered to be one of the most significant processes of comprehension (Butcher & Kintsch, 2003; van den Broek, 1994 as cited in Pardo, 2004).

Moreover, if a reader encounters a sentence like " the bat broke" next, the reader with knowledge related to baseball will automatically assume that the bat belongs to Jose and it broke probably as it was used to hit the ball, but for a reader who does not possess such a schema, a bat may not be more than a flying mammal (Sthal, Hare, & Gregory, 1991).

Villalobos (1992) highlighted that making inferences is a top-down process where the readers use the information obtained through the more basic level of bottom-up processes and then try to

discover the connections these parts have as mentioned before. She has mentioned three hypotheses that help explain the effect of schema on remembering to reach the final stage of making inferences. The three hypotheses that have been proposed are the retrieval-plan hypothesis, the output editing hypothesis, and the reconstruction hypothesis.

Kroner (2012) clarified that an explicit understanding of the text where a reader only comprehends what the author has explicitly stated in the text is not sufficient. Therefore, it is essential that the reader is able to understand what the author did not explicitly state so that he, the reader, can be esteemed to have an implicit understanding of the text and inferencing abilities. In recent times, most reading definitions established a link between the text and the reader's prior knowledge (Alfassi, 2004; Meneghetti, Carretti & De Beni, 2006 cited in Korner, 2012). Dehghan & Sadighi (2011) indicated that various studies conducted in the field of foreign language reading research reveal that cultural familiarity plays a crucial role in understanding reading texts. Being familiar with cultural-based texts, ideologies, experiences, lifestyles, and types of texts contribute to making reading comprehension very successful and effective.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

This section sheds light on the studies that have been previously conducted to investigate relevant variables to this study. They discussed previous studies are either relevant to one of the variables or more than one. These studies' concern revolves around cultural schema and its effect on the reading comprehension as a whole or its effect on some of the skills of reading comprehension such as identifying the main idea, ability to recall information read in texts, vocabulary meaning acquisition, making inferences, etc. This section contains six studies; they are ordered chronologically from the most recent to the least recent. They have been conducted in different countries around the world as will be shown below.

Shirzadi (2015) conducted a study to examine the effect of cultural knowledge on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension across male and female learners. He attempted to investigate if there are any differences between male and female learners. To answer the study questions, the researcher selected 50 intermediate EFL learners and ask them to take a reading test. The instrument of the test was four reading texts; two of which were based on culturally familiar topics while the other two were based on cultural unfamiliar topics. Each passage was followed by 4 comprehension questions. The results of statistical analyses showed that learners

performed significantly better on cultural familiar texts, but there is no difference between men and women in using cultural schema and familiarity of text.

Demir (2012) conducted another study that aimed to investigate the influence of background knowledge and cultural familiarity on reading comprehension and vocabulary inference of Turkish 7th-grade students in public primary schools in Turkey. For this purpose; two texts, one of which was based on the authentic culture and the other one based on the nativized version, a vocabulary test and parallel reading comprehension tests were developed by the researcher. To carry out the research, experimental and control groups were arranged and reading comprehension texts & tests were administered to the subjects in both groups. Each group consisted of two classes in two different primary schools, four schools in total in Konya, Turkey, with a fair distribution of classes in terms of gender and level of students to provide reliability for the study. It was concluded that cultural nativization of the text and elements related with background knowledge in the nativized text had a facilitative effect on comprehension of the short passages and inferring the meaning of the unknown words by the students. It was observed that EG students, who read the nativized version of the text got higher scores both in reading comprehension and vocabulary tests compared to CG students who read the denativized(authenticated) version.

The third study by Rashidi & Soureshjani (2011) was set out to investigate whether teaching the culturally-loaded texts to Persian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners bear any influence on their performance on reading comprehension tests. Further, this study attempts to discover any interrelationship between the teaching of culture-oriented texts and the motivation level of language learners. To achieve such objectives, 102 Persian EFL learners (belonging to two classes) were sampled, using a convenient procedure of sampling. The experimental group was given the treatment (teaching culture-loaded texts). They were also given a motivation questionnaire. Analyzing the gathered data, the results 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 culture teaching has a great role in improving the motivation level of language learners.

The study of Erten & Razi (2009) attempted to find out whether cultural familiarity affects comprehension of short stories. It also aimed to investigate whether nativizing the story or using reading activities compensate for lack of cultural familiarity. The study was conducted with 44 advanced-level students of English at a state university in Turkey. In a 2×2 experimental

research design. The analysis of variance showed that students who read the nativized version of the story had better comprehension than those who had not. Even though the activities used in the 2nd and 4th groups influenced the results, yet these activities did not cause any change for the nativization which is an indicator of the great significance cultural schema has on comprehension.

Bakhtiarvand (2007) attempted through conducting this study to investigate the effect of "Contextual guessing technique" as a strategy for speculating the meaning of unfamiliar words in a text on the reading comprehension ability of the Iranian EFL third-grade high school students. Unlike the previous studies above, this study focuses on one of the reading comprehension skills which is guessing meaning from context. It highlights the role of prior knowledge in facilitating the process of guessing meaning from context. The study attempted to identify the advantage of using this strategy in vocabulary recognition of students in an unseen text. The results indicated that the two groups were approximately homogeneous in terms of vocabulary recognition in reading comprehension passages. The results necessitated that the null hypothesis should be rejected. It means that contextual guessing technique improved vocabulary Recognition of third – grade Junior High school students in reading comprehension texts.

The study of Dimassi (2006) investigated the effects on EFL/ESL reading comprehension of culture-specific content schemata. the study aimed to test the following hypothesis: "*Readers with sufficient and proper cultural background knowledge perform better on reading comprehension activities than those who have insufficient and inappropriate background knowledge*". To test the above hypothesis, the study compared the reading comprehension of three groups of beginner subjects. The subjects were female dentistry students at Ajman University Fujairah branch.

The first group (Control Group C) consisted of thirty Emirati female students who knew a lot about traditional Emirati weddings. The second group (Experimental Group A) included thirty Iranian female students who did not know anything about traditional Emirati weddings. The third group (Experimental Group B) comprised thirty female students who had been taught the features and vocabulary of traditional Emirati weddings. The results showed that cultural schema made the students in control group C to surpass the students in experimental group A in all measures and experimental group B in some measures. Moreover, pre-teaching allowed group B to outnumber group A on all measures, and group B were able to spend less time reading and recalling the text than group A. Consequently, the absence of cultural schema was a

debilitative factor that prevented group A students from performing as they should have done on reading comprehension tasks. Finally, it was concluded from the results that there are other factors that enhance reading comprehension other than cultural schemas such as language proficiency and metacognition.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE PREVIOUS STUDIES

Reading the previous studies, several points are noted. **First**, the number of the students of the samples varied in the different studies, for instance, the number was 50 respondents in both of Shirzadi's and Bakhtiarvand's studies but reached 121 in Demir's study. **Second**, the population from which the samples were selected varied. Some were from schools while others were from universities. **Third**, in terms of the variables in these studies, they mostly focused their attention on the effect of cultural schema on reading comprehension as a whole. However, there were some other variables that were included in some of these studies. For example, while all the studies were set out to investigate the effect of cultural schema on reading comprehension, Shirzadi's study examined this effect relating it to differences among males and females. **Fourth**, most of the previous studies mentioned above have experimental design. **Fifth**, the number of texts given to students are also different. For instance, in Shirzadi's study, 4 culturally- based texts were used; two were familiar to the students' culture while two others were not.

The study in hand generally shares with the previous studies mentioned before the aim to investigate the effect of cultural schema on the reading comprehension. However, the present study specified three areas of investigation; identifying the main idea of a text, guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, and making inferences. Another difference is that this study is a descriptive study which is different from the experimental studies previously mentioned. The results of this study showed that even though there are difficulties students face when reading cultural texts, the differences of their mean scores when reading cultural and ordinary texts are not statistically significant due to factors from the formal schema that affected the performance of the participants.

5. Study Method and Design

This present study followed a descriptive design. As the description gets more sophisticated, the researcher divides the data into groups and presents it in tables, and figures (Anderson & Aresenault, 1998).

The descriptive design was used in this study due to two reasons: first, this design was used to discover the type of difficulties that students may face when reading cultural-based texts in the skills of identifying the main idea, guessing the meaning from context, and making inferences. Second, to investigate whether there is a statistically significant difference when performing a cultural reading text and an ordinary one. Its type was quantitative when numbers were used and its data was quantitative.

Population and Sample of the Study:

a. The population of the Study

The population of this study was 180 of level two students in the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University during the second semester, 2018- 2019.

b. Sample of the study

17 students from each one of the three groups of level two were selected. A systematic random sampling method was followed in which the first name from each group was randomly selected and then choosing every fifth name from the list of names of each group. The participants of the three groups were mainly girls with a minority of boys since boys represent a small fraction of the whole population.

c. Data Collection Instrument

To achieve the objectives of the study, one data collection tools was used as:-

A test

Two tests were prepared for the same group.

The source of the tests: these two tests were ready made tests. They were taken from (Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test by Philllips,, 2001). Both of them had the same length and level of difficulty and were selected from the same set of tests in the Longman Course for the TOEFL Test.

The purpose of the two tests (the cultural-based text and the ordinary one) was purposed to obtain data on respondents' ability to identify the main idea, guess meaning from context, make inferences from a text with unfamiliar cultural norms in the case of the cultural based test and their ability to identify the same thing in the ordinary text that does not include any cultural aspects.

The structure of the test: Two tests were prepared. The two tests were standardized tests included different texts (Ordinary and cultural texts). One of the texts was an unfamiliar cultural text. It talked about a type of American music which is Jazz. The other text was not based on cultural topic and it was an ordinary text talking about deserts in general. Each text was followed

by five questions. The questions were categorized in three categories. The first category was about identifying the main idea (Which included only item). The second category, there were two items that tested guessing meaning from context. The last category was about making inferences with two question items. Each item consisted of a stem and 4 alternatives. Students were supposed to choose one of the alternatives as the correct answer. The researcher chose the two texts with question items that tested the same skills. For example, the first question item tested the students' ability to identify the main idea in both passages. The second and the third questions tested their ability to guess meaning of words from the context. The fourth and the fifth question tested their inferential comprehension (making inferences).

Administration of the tests: The two tests were administered at the same time. The researcher administered the tests on Wednesday, the 3rd of April, 2019. 51 students were present as chosen randomly from the list of names. The time given for the tests was 40 minutes and supervised by the researcher himself.

Analysis of the tests:- Two methods of analysis were used using SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Sciences) program: (1) Finding the frequencies of performances in the two tests to figure out the number of students who either face problems in reading cultural texts especially in terms of identifying the main idea, guessing meaning from context, and making inferences. (2) Paired sample t-test to compare the participants' performance when reading two texts where one is culturally based and the other is an ordinary one focusing on the reading skills mentioned in this study.

6. Results Presentation, Discussion and Interpretation of the collected data:-

In this part of the study, data analysis tools and results of the tests and the close-ended questionnaire are presented. The tests were analyzed by using frequencies, percentages, and T. Test to compare between groups. Regarding the analysis of the questionnaire, means and standard deviation were analyzed. The results of the different questions are presented below:

Results Related to Question One

The first question was ***"What are the difficulties of reading comprehension the students of level two in the English Department, Faculty of Education, Sana'a University face when being required to read ordinary texts and cultural-based ones?"*** To answer this question, a test was given to level two students in the English Department, Faculty of Education; Sana'a University-Sana'a where they had to answer two tests (culturally-based text and the ordinary one). The study focused on three reading skills to check the level of performance of the students on these skills when reading the two types of texts. These skills were identifying the main idea,

guessing meaning from context, and making inferences. In order to find these difficulties, the frequencies and percentages of the students who answered each item either correctly or incorrectly of each skill in both texts were analyzed. The results of each field of the test will be shown in tables (1) below:-

Table 1: *Frequency Table of the Main Idea of the Cultural Text and the Ordinary one*

				Frequency	Percen
The main Idea	The Cult. Test		Correct	29	56.9
			Incorrect	22	43.1
	The Ordin test		Correct	26	51.0
			Incorrect	25	49.0
Guessing meaning from context	The Cult. Test	The word Conglomeration" Could be best replaced by":	Correct	33	64.7
			Incorrect	18	35.3
		The word "living" Could be easily replaced by	Correct	17	33.3
			Incorrect	34	66.7
	The Ordin. test	The word "thrive" means	Correct	34	66.7
			Incorrect	17	33.3
		The word "Mechanisms" Could be easily replaced by:	Correct	19	37.3
			Incorrect	32	62.7
		According to the passage, ragtime was	Correct	38	74.5
			Incorrect	13	25.5
Making Inferences	The Cult. Test	The name of Scott Joplin's most composition probably came down	Correct	9	17.6
			Incorrect	42	82.4
	The Ordin. test	According to the passage, what causes an to be classified as a desert area	Correct	23	45.1
			Incorrect	28	54.9
		The passage implies that:	Correct	26	51.0
			Incorrect	25	49.0

The Results of the Main Idea Skill:-

As it is clear from tables 1 above that there is no big difference between the answers of the students to the question of the main idea identification. The number of students who answered correctly this question in the cultural text was 29 (56.9 %) out of the whole sample which was (51) respondents while the number of students who answered the same question in the ordinary test correctly was 26 (51 %.).

This shows that not only did the students perform almost equally in both texts when identifying the main idea, but also they did slightly better in the cultural text than the ordinary one. This is may be due to the fact that the ordinary text has structures that may not be familiar to the students while the cultural one was relatively easier regardless of containing cultural norms that were foreign to the students.

The results here are in contradiction of studies that showed the importance of cultural background in identifying the main idea in a cultural text. Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011) claimed that content schema is a part of every individual's cultural orientation. They stressed that culture has an impact on all life aspects; therefore, cultural background has an impact on all reading elements including the ability to identify main ideas of texts.

The results of the Guessing Meaning Skill:-

The next reading skill that was tested by the researcher was the ability to guess meanings of unknown words from the two texts (the cultural based text and the ordinary one).

It is apparent from the table (1) above that the students answered two items for the reading skill; guessing meaning from context. It can be noticed that the number of students who answered the first item of the question of guessing meaning correctly in the cultural text was 33 (64.7%) and the second item was done correctly by only 17 students (33.3%). But in the case of the ordinary test, the first item of the guessing meaning section was done correctly by 34 students (66.7%) and the second item of the same section was answered by only 19 respondents (37.3%).

According to the findings of the two tests (guessing meaning section of the two tests), it is clear that there is no big difference between the two tests. This can be interpreted that this relates to the level of those students who may be high achievers, and therefore did a pretty job in the two tests.

But, in the case of question two in the same tests (guessing meaning section), the results in table (1) above show that in both groups (the ordinary and cultural groups), most of them did not do well in the case of the second item. This might be because that this item is more difficult than the first item. Furthermore, the level of students might be the same.

This result came contradictory to the result of the frequencies of the identification of the main idea. Vocabulary is an essential part of learning the language. If the text contains cultural aspects that are unfamiliar to the students, the process of guessing the meaning of unknown words in such unfamiliar texts is hindered. Gilakjiani & Ahmadi (2011) stated that in investigating the effects of text familiarity, findings showed that lacking or using the wrong schema was a significant factor influencing test scores. Demir (2012) concluded from a study he conducted that having a background knowledge has a positive effect on inferring the meaning of words in the text. This explains why students were not very successful in inferring the meaning of words in the cultural text.

Making Inferences skill:-

Making inferences was the last reading skill that was tested in this study. Having two items of questions for students to answer in each of the texts, frequencies and percentages of the respondents' answers were calculated the same way of the previous reading skills. When coming back to the table (1) above, it is noticed that there is a difference between the respondents' answers in the cultural test and the ordinary one. In the cultural text, the number of the students who were able to make correct right inferences is less than the number of students who were able to accomplish the same in the ordinary text in the case of the second category of making inferences, but in the first category, it was the opposite. In the first item of the ordinary text, 23 respondents answered it correctly (45.1%), while in the case of the cultural test, 38 students did it correctly (74.5%) which means that in this test, they did better than in the ordinary one.

Regarding the second item of the cultural test, 9 students did it correctly (17.6%), but in the case of the ordinary test, 26 respondents did it correctly (51%). This means that it was difficult for students to make the inference from cultural texts, but in the case of ordinary tests, it wasn't.

Dehghan and Sadighi (2011) demonstrated that global items in reading such as making inferences are greatly affected by the existence of cultural background knowledge. In their study, participants scored higher in local items such as literal comprehension than in global items as making inferences when the text was not culturally familiar. In addition, Brewer & Nakamura

(1984) referred to some studies that highlighted the role of knowledge or schema in aiding learners to make the right inferences.

It can be concluded from the results above that even though in some items of the two texts there appear not to be very considerable differences in participants' performance in the cultural text and the ordinary one, the existence of difficulties is not deniable. For instance, in the frequencies of identifying the main idea, 22 of the participants were not able to identify the main idea in the cultural text.

Results Related to Question Two:

The second question of the study is *"Is there any statistically significant differences in the mean scores of the participants' performance when reading the cultural text and the ordinary one?"*. To answer this question, a paired t-test was used to compare between the mean scores of the participants' performance in the three reading skills examined in this study to highlight if there is a significant statistical difference between the answers of the respondents in the two tests in the reading skill. This is shown in table (2) below:-

Table 2: *Paired Sample T-test of the significant Statistical Differences between the three fields of the two.*

		N	Mean	St. Deviation	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
The Main Idea	Text 1 (Cultural test)	51	1.4314	.50020	50	.537
	Text 2 (Ordinary test)	51	1.4902	.50488		
Guessing Meaning Context	Text 1 (Cultural test)	51	3.0196	.76132	50	.652
	Text 2 (Ordinary test)	51	2.9608	.69169		
Making Inferences	Text 1 (Cultural test)	51	3.0784	.59475	50	.771
	Text 2 (Ordinary test)	51	3.0392	.74728		

*The negative mean indicates that the mean of the first text (text 1) is lower than that of the second text (in this case, text 2).

As shown in Table 2 above, the mean score of participants' performance in text 1 is almost the same as the mean score of their performance in text 2. A very minor difference between the two mean scores. This reveals that participants performed similarly when attempting to identify the main idea in both texts; cultural and ordinary. The difference as indicated in the table is not statistically significant since (p>0.05). In other words, the participants performed almost equally on identifying the main idea of the text in both the cultural and ordinary texts. This result may be

attributed to the familiar structures of the cultural text despite containing elements of a foreign culture to the students.

Hidayati (2018) clarified that determining the main idea in a text was among the most difficult areas for the participants. He investigated in his study several other reading strategies; determining the main idea was one of these strategies. In his study, the students expressed that identifying the main idea of a text is very difficult for them even though the texts presented to them were not culturally based. In case there are cultural aspects in a text, but the structures used are easy, determining the main idea can be facilitated and compensates for the lack of cultural knowledge. In addition, This might not because of the students' background. There might be other factors that affect their performance. Coady (1979) as cited in Peishi, (2014) clarified that not only background knowledge plays a role in facilitating reading comprehension, but there are other factors that contribute to the actualization of reading comprehension skills such as strategies and other conceptual abilities.

Formal schema has an important effect on reading comprehension as well. In Zahong (2008) the subjects were presented with different texts that contain the same content but with different formal schemata. The results showed that structures had a great effect on the participants' performance regardless of the fact that the texts had the same content. The results of the study provide an interpretation of this current study results.

Also in the case of the skill of guessing the meaning from context, there was no significant statistical difference between the two groups in the two tests (the ordinary and the cultural texts) less than .05. It is assumed that guessing meaning from context is more challenging for learners when they are required to read a cultural text; nevertheless, the results in the table above revealed an unexpected outcome.

This outcome may have resulted from the effect of other factors related to other types of schema. If learners possess linguistic or formal schema, they can be able to guess the meaning of words in guessing a text by relying on these factors in the text to assist in raising their accuracy of guessing. According to (Kaivanpanah & Alavi, 2008 cited in Cetinavci, 2014), there are two factors that determine the success of the guessing ability: reader-related variables and text-related variables. Reader-related variables are vocabulary size, knowledge of grammar, language proficiency, attention to details, cognitive and mental effort, and reader characteristics. The text-related variables, on the other hand, are word characteristics, text characteristics, the presence of

contextual clues and topic familiarity. In such results as the ones shown in the table above, it can be concluded that an interplay between these variables or at least some of them may have led to these results. The most obvious variable that may have led participants to perform slightly better in the cultural text is the fact that the text was rich with contextual clues while this was not the case with the ordinary one.

One illustrative example from the cultural text was the first question item that required participants to guess the meaning of a word from the context. The first sentence of the cultural text was " *American jazz is a* **conglomeration** *of sounds borrowed from such varied sources as American and African folk music, European classical music, and Christian gospel songs*.". The word the participants were supposed to figure out the meaning of the context was (conglomeration). From the structure of the sentence, it can be very attainable to guess the meaning from the context; the preposition (of), and the presence of many examples listed after can be considered to be very rich in contextual clues that aided the participants to know the meaning of the word which is (a mixture of) using that rich context.

Cetinavci (2014) stated that success in guessing meaning from context can be determined by the amount and quality of these contextual clues. The term contextual richness and context pregnancy was adopted by Mondria and Wit-de-Boer (1991). They defined contextual richness and context pregnancy as a context which provides sufficient clues enabling readers to infer the meaning of unknown words easily and correctly.

Finally, table 2 above shows that there is no significant statistical difference between the two groups in the two tests in the making inferences skill of reading. This indicates that there was no difference in the performance of the participants in the two texts. The p-value as indicated in the table is more than 0.05. Similarly to the results obtained in the reading skills of identifying the main idea, and guessing meaning from context, participants performed in both texts with no statistically significant differences.

This result may be attributed to the fact that even if students are confronted with a cultural text, they do not only rely on cultural prior knowledge but textual clues as well. Zaid (2009) explained how contextual clues helps readers understand the whole text sometimes.

In the content and structure treatment group, students were given content knowledge and knowledge of macrostructure of the text. The inference-awareness group was given training in

the use of metacognitive strategy designed to make them use their ability to make text-based inferences relating them to prior knowledge and textual elements.

Another related interpretation of the results of is that the structures of the ordinary text are perhaps of a more complex nature than that of the cultural text in addition to the fact that there were not many contextual clues in the ordinary text which led participants to struggle a little with the ability to make inferences in such text. So the cultural elements of the cultural text in addition to the lack of formal schema regarding the structure of the ordinary text may have been the reason that made the mean scores of the participants in both texts so close with no statistically significant difference.

To conclude, while the cultural background is essential to comprehend a text and perform well when reading one, the results of the study in hand showed that other types of schemata can come into play and commence to affect reading comprehension skills as well. This effect can be so considerable as to lead to results similar to the results of this study.

Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

An Overview:
This part of the study includes a summary of the most important results, recommendations, and suggestions for further studies.

Summary of the Study

This study was a quantitative study which tries to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the difficulties of reading comprehension the students face when being required to read ordinary texts and cultural-based ones?
2. Is there any significant statistical difference between the results of the mean scores in the ordinary text and the cultural text?

To answer the questions of the study, a test of a cultural reading text and another one of ordinary reading text were given for two groups of study. Through the analysis of the collected data, the following findings of the study were concluded:

1. There is no big difference between the answers of the students to the question of the main idea identification.

2. It can be noticed that the number of students who answered the first item of the question of guessing meaning in which in one of the items of cultural text, respondents did better than those of the ordinary text and vice versa in the second item.

3. it is noticed that there is a difference between the respondents' answers in the cultural test and the ordinary one. In the cultural text, the number of the students who were able to make correct right inferences is less than the number of students who were able to accomplish the same in the ordinary text in the case of the second category of making inferences, but in the first category, it was the opposite.

4. There was no significant statistical difference between the two groups of students in the two types of tests (The cultural and ordinary text).

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Material designers should incorporate cultural and formal aspects of the language into the reading passages taught to highlight the importance of these aspects to the students and to equip them with the necessary preparations before they read in the foreign language.
- Teachers need to come up with strategies they use at the beginning of their classes to expand the schema of learners to aid them through the reading process such as warming up activities that focus on cultural and structural elements of the written language.
- Teachers ought to use strategies to activate the students' schema.
- Teachers must use pre-reading activities that help activate the learners' schemata.
- Teachers should create a positive attitude for the students regarding the culture of the target language so that learners can integrate the learning of a language with its culture.
- Educators in charge in the department should explicitly teach aspects related to cultural, formal and linguistic schemata.

Suggestions for Further Studies

According to the findings of the study, the following further studies are suggested:

- The current study may be replicated or expanded in different contexts and settings to include two types of the schema; cultural and formal.

- Other researchers can attempt to discover difficulties students face when being exposed to cultural input in other skills such as listening, for example.

- Further studies can be conducted that may use three, four, or more texts to verify the results even further.

- Other studies can investigate the effect of cultural, formal schema on the different levels of comprehension.

- Other studies can be done on several universities or schools other than the English Department-Faculty of Education –Sana'a.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

Fazee Almuslimi is an associate professor at the Department of English, College of Education-Sana'a, Sana'a University. He holds a BA in English language, an MA and PhD in ELT (Curricula and Methods of Teaching English, and is currently a lecturer of Curriculum and Methods of Teaching English at the Department of English, College of Education-Sana'a, Sana'a University. His areas of interest are Curriculum and instruction, Educational research, linguistics, and ELT in general.