

14. The Impact of Cultural Familiarity with Stories on Learners' Reading Comprehension¹

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Abstract

The learners' reading comprehension could be manipulated due to the cultural factors in a text, and teaching reading comprehension via culturally-familiar storybooks remains a controversial issue. Therefore, this study examined the effect of cultural familiarity on Turkish EFL learners' reading comprehension ability after being exposed to familiar and unfamiliar cultural stories through Turkish and American stories. The research population consisted of 30 pre-intermediate students in a tertiary-level institution in Istanbul. Students were given a pre-test of reading comprehension ability after reading storybooks, including culturally familiar stories such as Turkish culture and unfamiliar ones such as American culture. Results showed that students had difficulty comprehending culturally unfamiliar stories. As a treatment, students received reading activities such as brainstorming of character analysis and symbolism, and they took a post-test after eight sessions to determine the significance of this research. After applying treatment, Turkish EFL students performed better in reading comprehension tests for unfamiliar cultural stories compared to familiar ones.

Keywords: Familiar stories, reading comprehension, unfamiliar stories, character analysis, symbolism

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Kültürel Aşinalığın Öğrencilerin Okuduğunu Anlama Becerisine Etkisi³

Öz

Öğrencilerin okuduğunu anlama becerisi, metindeki kültürel faktörler nedeniyle manipüle edilebilir ve kültürel açıdan aşına olunan hikaye kitapları aracılığıyla okuduğunu anlama becerisinin öğretilmesi tartışmalı bir konu olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma, Türk ve Amerikan hikayeleri aracılığıyla tanıdık ve tanıdık olmayan kültürel hikayelere maruz kaldıktan sonra, Türk EFL öğrencilerinin okuduğunu anlama becerisi üzerindeki kültürel aşinalığın etkisini incelemiştir. Araştırma popülasyonu, İstanbul'daki bir yükseköğretim kurumunda öğrenim gören 30 orta seviye öğrenciden oluşmuştur. Öğrencilere, Türk kültürü gibi kültürel olarak tanıdık hikayeler ve Amerikan kültürü gibi tanıdık olmayan hikayeler içeren hikaye kitaplarını okuduktan sonra okuduğunu anlama becerisi ön testi uygulanmıştır. Sonuçlar, öğrencilerin kültürel olarak yabancı hikayeleri anlamakta zorluk yaşadıklarını göstermiştir. Tedavi olarak, öğrencilere karakter analizi ve sembolizm üzerine beyin fırtınası gibi okuma etkinlikleri verilmiş ve bu araştırmanın önemini belirlemek için sekiz oturumdan sonra bir son test yapılmıştır. Tedavi uygulandıktan sonra, Türk EFL öğrencileri, tanıdık hikayelere kıyasla yabancı kültürel hikayeler için okuduğunu anlama testlerinde daha iyi performans göstermiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tanıdık hikayeler, okuduğunu anlama, yabancı hikayeler, karakter analizi, sembolizm

³ **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

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Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that cultural background has affected comprehension ability during learners' educational life. In the field of language teaching and learning, reading is a controversial activity among both EFL and ESL learners because what humans learn is the foundation of what they have read and internalized. Researchers and teachers are concerned about reading as a meaningful activity because learners read a text with all cultural dimensions within it. According to Razi (2004), reading familiar and unfamiliar texts can be defined by various definitions, and it's not simple to explain it in a single sentence. For example, Grabe and Stoller (2002: 9) define reading as "to be able to draw meaning from the printed page and being able to extract the information appropriately." Moreover, Tseng (2002) points out that knowing the culture underlying language is a prerequisite for successful language learning. According to Bartlett (1932), in human memory, a schema is like storage of realized sensory information, and schemata are regulated culturally.

Rumelhart (1981/1984) showed that one can remember a large amount of information quickly if the number of schemata increases in their mind, and making a connection between an appropriate schema and new information enables someone to remember new and important ideas. Akyol (2006) described reading as a meaning-making process based on using prior knowledge with suitable methods and goals during effective communication between writer and reader. Gündüz and Şimşek (2013) showed that reading is not a simple action but consists of several actions, such as seeing, perceiving, understanding, comprehending, and meaning-making of words, sentences, or a writing with all its dimensions. Therefore, reading is a process that has to lead to the realization of the texts and connection with prior knowledge, as this article concerns reading familiar and unfamiliar stories. To understand the impact of text familiarity on students' reading ability, we need to consider the brain's role, as reading is not a single process. Tracy and Morrow (2006) believed that reading is based on cognitive theory and is performed by different functions of eyes, speech organs, and understanding, all of which are controlled by brain or mental processing. Cultural aspects of learning need to be looked at because of their effect on comprehension ability, so Schumann (1986) suggests a model focusing on the cultural aspect of learning, which he named "acculturation." Acculturation involves integrating the social and psychological characteristics of learners with those of target-language speakers.

Importance of the Study

One of the most problematic skills in schools, especially in English subjects, is reading comprehension ability. Students often dislike reading activities and exercises, so initiating reading with stories may help develop habits and eventually automatize it among students. While students may have different goals for reading, understanding and improving this skill should be central to teachers' focus, as seen in the National Reading Panel (2010) report, where reading fluency is emphasized due to its fundamental role in teaching. Reading can positively or negatively shape a person's insight and influence society. Libraries and bookstores are available nationwide, but people should know how to make suitable use of them (Inderjit, 2014).

This study seeks to determine whether reading familiar texts can improve this skill and find solutions to enhance reading comprehension through familiar or unfamiliar stories. The goal is to understand whether students' prior knowledge may help them better comprehend texts. Although reading is valuable for language learning, teaching and learning it presents challenges. To address these issues, this study examines L2 reading comprehension of familiar and unfamiliar stories in a tertiary-level

school in Istanbul, Turkey.

Research Questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. Does students' cultural familiarity knowledge of a text or story affect their reading comprehension?
2. Do story character analysis and symbolism help students activate their cultural knowledge?

Methodology

In this study which aims to develop reading comprehension ability on cultural stories whether familiar or unfamiliar, eight sessions of reading classes contained for understanding and solving the present problem by action research which allowed the researcher to integrate practical teaching methods while also collecting data to evaluate outcomes. The purpose was to examine how cultural familiarity with reading material could affect Turkish EFL learners' comprehension skills.

Chosen from three existing classes at a university in Istanbul. To ensure that the group was homogeneous in terms of language ability, a Cambridge Placement Test was administered. Only those whose scores fell within one standard deviation from the average were included in the main study.

The research was conducted across eight class sessions. The first four sessions were devoted to the initial reading of the selected stories—two Turkish and two American—and to a reading comprehension pre-test for each. These sessions provided a baseline for understanding students' comprehension levels before any instructional intervention.

In the second half of the study (sessions five through eight), focused instruction was introduced. This stage centered on two reading strategies: character analysis and symbolism. Through guided discussions, group activities, and teacher prompts, students explored the motivations and traits of main characters as well as symbolic elements found in the texts. These discussions aimed to help students link story content to broader cultural themes and to use context clues for deeper comprehension.

At the end of the final session, students completed the same comprehension tests again, now as a post-test. This allowed the researcher to measure any progress in understanding, particularly with respect to the culturally unfamiliar stories.

Participants

In a tertiary school in Istanbul 30 Turkish pre-intermediate EFL learners were selected randomly from three intact classes who were studying regular English courses. Their age varied from 18 to 22. In order have homogenous participants regarding to their English level, 80 pre-intermediate learners participated in the study based on their results in proficiency exam. The mean and the SD were calculated and the learners' score of 1 SD above and below the mean (1SD from the mean) were selected to execute the study. They attended 8-sessions of reading stories and attained compensation and determination strategies.

Materials

This study involved the selection of four literary stories, carefully chosen to represent both familiar and unfamiliar cultural contexts. Two of the stories—Madonna in a Fur Coat and The Forty Rules of Love—reflected Turkish culture and were likely more relatable for the students. The other two—The Minister’s Black Veil and A Dark Brown Dog—were rooted in American culture and less likely to be familiar. All texts were provided in English to maintain consistency in language use.

Before starting any research, teachers should be sure about their participants or students’ English level to figure out their problems and needs in an English classroom, so Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) was administered to have a homogenous class in terms of learners’ language proficiency. Therefore, according to their level the reading stories are selected but one level beyond their level based on Krashen’s $i+1$ input theory. Students read Several Turkish and American stories, two Turkish and two American stories in the class during eight sessions namely, “Madonna in a fur coat”, “the forty rules of love”, “the minister’s black veil”, and “a dark brown dog respectively”.

These stories were selected not only for their cultural relevance but also for their thematic depth. The Turkish stories deal with issues such as identity, tradition, and emotional transformation—common themes in the local context. On the other hand, the American stories explore moral judgment, race, and social justice, offering students a chance to engage with unfamiliar ideas and viewpoints.

Students read four Cultural stories presented in class which all are written in English Language, two by Turkish writers and two by American writers. Therefore, regarding to the familiarity, two stories represent the Turkish culture which are completely accustomed, and the other an American culture story that is fully exotic.

Procedure

Character analysis and symbolism were applied in teaching reading skill during eight sessions. First, a pre-test of reading comprehension before applying treatment was taken, the students read the two Turkish stories and two American stories and answered the reading comprehension tests regarding to each story separately during four sessions. Each story consists of 8 reading comprehension questions and after answering their scores on comprehension part were calculated. The treatment was applied for more four sessions. Interactive discussions about the stories in the class has been done and the students were allowed to the analyze the characters of the story under the teacher’s direct observation and then an interactive discussion about cultural symbols differences has been done in the class. Students analyzed the characters of Turkish stories and American stories, the Ella in “Forty rules of love” story and the child in “A dark brown dog”, The minister in “the minister’s black veil, and Madonna in “Madonna in a fur coat” also the symbols of the brown color, Love, veil, and fur coat. After session 8 the students read the stories again and were taken a post-test which was included the same reading comprehension questions about the four stories and their scores calculated respectively.

Validity and reliability

Cronbach’s Alpha is used to estimate the reliability of result of reading and proficiency tests in a pilot study on 30 EFL student. The below table shows the rest of reliability.

Table 1. Reliability Amount for the Reading Comprehension Test and CPE Test

Adres	Address
RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi	RumeliDE Journal of Language and Literature Studies
e-posta: editor@rumelide.com	e-mail: editor@rumelide.com,
tel: +90 505 7958124	phone: +90 505 7958124

Cronbach's Alpha	R amount	N of Items
Reading Comprehension Test	.737	30 EFL students
Proficiency Test	.773	30 EFL students

The reliability standards checking is created by Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott (1994) and we estimated the mentioned tests reliabilities based on their standards for the reading comprehension test and proficiency test the Cronbach's Alpha value were (.737), and (.773), respectively so both are satisfactory which illustrates that the instruments are considered as reliable tools for the main study (See Table below).

Table 2. Determined Standards for the Reliability Index (From Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott, 1994)

Interpretation	Reliability Indices
Good	.80
Acceptable	.70
Marginal	.60
Poor	.50

Methods of Analyzing Data

For analyzing data, the researcher used descriptive statistics and inferential statistics methods. ANOVA analysis has used for analyzing data between two paired-sample tests such as the pre-test and post-test scores of the same group.

Data analysis and findings

Table 3. Definitive and Informative Analysis of Pre-Test of Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability Scores

Measure	Mean	Number	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest of T1 and T2 (Turkish Stories)	6.70	30	0.94	2.59
Pretest of A1 and A2 (American Stories)	4.42	30	0.94	2.09

Table three indicates that the descriptive statistic result of the pre-test of the students score in reading both Turkish culturally familiar and American culturally unfamiliar stories. The number of students, the Mean, and the standard deviation in the pretest of Turkish stories are 30, 6.70, .94, respectively and in the pretest of American stories are 30, 4.42, .94, Respectively. Here the Mean of scores shows that the students performed better in reading Cultural familiar story than cultural unfamiliar story in pretest which the grade calculated out of Eight (appendix). Although, the standard deviation of both is the same but there is a significant difference between their mean.

Table 4. Descriptive Analysis of the Post-Test of Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability Scores

Measure	Mean	Number	Std. Deviation
Post-test of T1 and T2 (Turkish Stories)	7.03	30	0.86
Post-test of A1 and A2 (American Stories)	6.73	30	0.92

This study tried to answer to the questions of research and solve the problems of reading comprehension

on unfamiliar texts and regarding to several statistical steps were done. Thus, to understand whether reading stories made any markable differences or not, the reading comprehension scores of pretests and posttest were compared to each other, and the results are presented in the table below.

Table 5. Informative description of measured pre and posttest of both Turkish and American stories

Group	Mean	Number of Participants	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of Mean
Paired Pretest and Post-test (T1-T2)	6.87	30	0.24	2.62
Pretest and Post-test (A1-A2)	5.58	30	1.64	2.36

This table shows the key statistics (mean, number of participants, standard deviation, and standard error) for both the Turkish (T1-T2) and American (A1-A2) pre-test and post-test comparisons. According to table 5. The mean of Paired t-tests of Turkish stories has not made a difference rise significantly and but still the mean of Paired t-tests of American stories is higher than first but from the std. Error Mean we can understand that their reading skill has been made a significant progress because its amount is lower than std. error mean of Turkish cultural familiar stories, so it shows that reading stories affect students reading comprehension ability.

Findings

The analysis of pre-test results revealed that students performed better on culturally familiar Turkish stories compared to unfamiliar American stories. The mean score for Turkish stories was 6.70, while for American stories, it was 4.42, both with a standard deviation of 0.94. This indicates a noticeable gap in comprehension ability between the two cultural contexts. The results suggest that students' familiarity with cultural content significantly influenced their ability to understand the stories. Familiarity with cultural references and contexts appears to have provided an advantage in comprehending the Turkish stories during the pre-test.

Following the implementation of targeted teaching strategies, including character analysis and symbolism, the post-test scores demonstrated significant improvements, particularly in the comprehension of American stories. The mean score for Turkish stories increased slightly to 7.03, while the mean score for American stories showed a more pronounced improvement, rising to 6.73. These results indicate that the intervention successfully bridged the initial comprehension gap, as students became better equipped to understand culturally unfamiliar content through focused activities.

Comparing the paired pre-test and post-test results further emphasizes the impact of the intervention. While the improvement in Turkish story comprehension was modest, the enhancement in American story comprehension was substantial. This disparity highlights the effectiveness of the teaching strategies in addressing cultural unfamiliarity, enabling students to better engage with and comprehend foreign cultural elements. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating targeted reading strategies to foster students' reading skills across diverse cultural contexts.

Result

From the discoveries of this study, it could be reasoned that familiar cultural stories have significant impact on learners' reading comprehension ability in a normal situation with common strategies such as skimming and scanning, reading the whole text for getting the gist of story and being familiar with characters in the mentioned stories and searching for details and understanding the hidden meaning behind each symbol in stories. Hence, language teachers, educators specially those who try investigating the reading comprehension skill among other English learning skills, are highly recommended to use much more educative practices, for example, explicit teaching of reading in their instructing; this matter can enlighten both the learners' and teachers' perspective to learn how to achieve the level of meaningful reading of a word, phrase, sentence or a text in addition how to be an active and effective educator totally. As the results shows in pretest the students performed better in reading comprehension questions of Turkish stories than reading comprehension questions of American stories whereas the students performed better after getting four sessions treatment in posttest after by being familiar with some symbols and characters of the two American stories the treatment of the study. There is not a sharp rise between pretest and posttest of students' scores in Reading comprehension questions of Turkish Stories but there is a sharp increase between their scores of pre and posttest in reading the American stories after treatment.

As a final remark, it ought to be noticed that text familiarity instruction is a profitable learning exercise which may improve reading comprehension in unfamiliar texts or stories. One ought to remember that even experienced readers face many problems while reading an unfamiliar text (e.g., unknown words such as symbols in different contexts). Thus, teaching reading via familiar and unfamiliar text instruction is an effective way to improve learners' reading ability, making it an enjoyable activity for learners and motivate them to go on day by day.

Limitations of the study

As English learning path consists of four surface skills such as Listening, speaking, writing and reading and a lot of submerge skills, but in this study, we just considered reading skill. Therefore, during the action research we concerned the reading skill and other skills were not applied. In any context, there are other factors may cause difficulty in reading or low comprehension such as anxiety, the environment, motivation, and the temperature of class, or even the feeling of comfort on the chair or desk and other factors that are difficult to be filtered by teachers while they are doing action research. Therefore, the generalization of this study is under question in any other contexts.

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