

## THE EFFECTS OF PRE-READING ACTIVITIES ON ELT TRAINEE TEACHERS' COMPREHENSION OF SHORT STORIES

OKUMA ÖNCESİ ETKİNLİKLERİN ADAY İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENLERİN KISA ÖYKÜLERİ  
ANLAMALARI ÜZERİNE ETKİLERİ

Müge Karakaş  
[mgekarakas@yahoo.com](mailto:mgekarakas@yahoo.com)

### ÖZ

*Bu çalışma okuma etkinliklerinin öğretmen adaylarının okuduğunu anlama yeteneğine etkilerini araştırdı.*

*Bu amaca ulaşmak için deneysel bir çalışma tasarımı (exploratory quasi-experimental) kullanıldı. Kısa hikaye okunurken etkinliklerin sonuçlarını sınamak için "Deney ve Kontrol" grupları oluşturuldu. Katılımcıların başarılarını ölçmek için son test uygulandı.*

*Ön-okuma evresinde, geçmiş bilgi (background knowledge) hareketliliğini sağlayan okuma etkinliklerinin bu bilgiyi harekete geçirmeyen etkinliklere kıyasla okuduğunu anlamaya daha fazla katkıda bulunduğu görüldü.*

*Bu çalışma ideal bir kısa hikaye dersinin, okuma öncesinde öğretmen adaylarının geçmiş bilgi hareketliliğini sağlamak için "ön tartışma (previewing), ön görüde bulunma (predicting), ve anahtar kelimeler (key-words) etkinliklerinin kullanımını önermektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** kısa öykü; arka plan bilgisi; okuma öncesi etkinlikleri; ön görüde bulunma; beyin fırtınası.

### ABSTRACT

*This study intended to investigate the effects of pre-reading activities on ELT trainee teachers' reading comprehension of short stories. An exploratory quasi-experimental design was chosen for the study since there were already two intact groups of students in the ELT department where the study was conducted. A Previewing/Brainstorming activity was used as the treatment condition vs. a Brainstorming only condition. 49 students, 8 of whom were males and 41 were females, participated in the study. They were all third year students and their levels of proficiency varied from upper-intermediate to advanced level. Statistical analysis showed that the Previewing/Brainstorming condition yielded better results than the Brainstorming only condition. The study concludes that Previewing activities contribute immensely to the comprehension of short stories and can be usefully used to help readers digest new stories.*

**Keywords:** short stories; background knowledge; pre-reading activities; previewing; brainstorming.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW & BACKGROUND**

Reading is often referred to as the most important of the four language skills for EFL learners (Gu, 2003), as it enables students to gain exposure to the target language and receive valuable linguistic input to build up language proficiency (Erten & Razi, 2003). However, mere exposure to reading material does not always suffice to gain linguistic knowledge. Readers as language learners need to go through an active process rather than simply decoding the graphic representations. Anderson (1999) explains this very neatly as follows:

“Reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page... (a) synergy occurs in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the reader’s background knowledge and experiences.” (Anderson, 1999:1)

Early work on Second Language reading assumed a rather passive, bottom-up view (Carrell, 1988:1). Difficulties in second language reading and reading comprehension were viewed as being essentially decoding problems, deriving from the print. It was thought that while reading, readers ought to be able to construct a meaning from which they could assimilate the original meaning of the author. Goodman (1971) asserted that readers need to analyse different types of information to understand the author’s meaning.

Reading involves a reader, a text, and a writer. Reading skills are developed in an active process. This process involves the surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with interpretation of the written text and interchanges between the writer and the reader (Goodman 1969 in Carrell 1988). If the writer is careless, the reader may not get the message. If the writer makes demands that the reader cannot fulfill, the message will not be received, even though to another reader it might be clear. If the reader is careless, reading will result in incomplete interpretation. The reader tries to interpret the text through his/her own experiences, but they may differ from the writer’s experiences. This explanation proves that reading is not just an active process, but also an interactive one. Reading is closely linked with meaning. For this reason, lack of shared assumptions presents the most difficult problem in reading. Nutall clarifies this as follows:

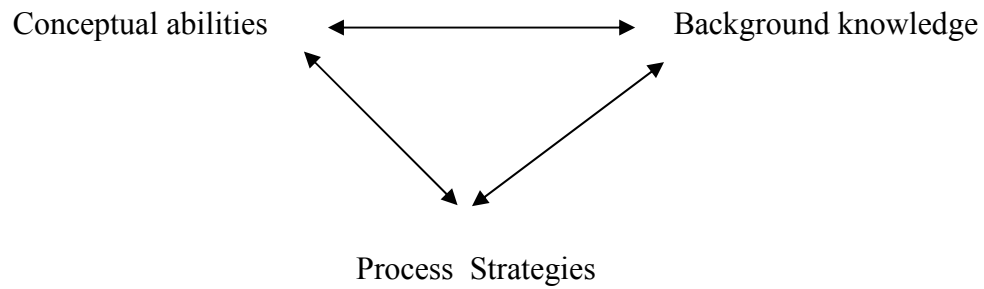
“... while reading, the reader will always have to draw on his interpretative skills to reconstruct the writer’s assumptions. He has to read with enough skill and care to make the right inferences about what the writer means and has to remain objective enough to recognize differences in viewpoint between himself and the writer.” (Nutall:1982:10)

Goodman has described reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game” (1967; Carrell and Eisterhold 1983) in which the “reader reconstructs, as far as possible, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display” (1971:135). In this model, the reader does not use all of the textual cues but he chooses information he is familiar with. The reader uses background knowledge to guide him to produce comprehension. Goodman explained this as follows:

“... the reader does not use all the information available to him. Reading is a process in which the reader picks and chooses from the available information only enough to select and predict a language structure which is decodable. It is not in any sense a precise perceptual process.” (Goodman 1973b:164)

Coady (1979 in Carrell and Eisterhold 1983) has suggested a model in which the EFL/ESL reader’s background knowledge interacts with conceptual abilities and process strategies to produce comprehension.

**Figure 2 Coady's (1979) Model of the ESL Reader**



Conceptual ability means general intellectual capacity. Processing strategies mean various subcomponents of reading ability (e.g., grapheme-morphophoneme correspondences, syllable-morpheme information, lexical meaning and contextual meaning).

Interactive models are currently accepted as the most comprehensive descriptions of the reading process, which combine elements of both bottom-up and top-down models. Murtagh (1989) stresses that good second language readers are those who can 'efficiently integrate' bottom-up and top-down processes.

In interactive models of reading, reading is viewed as a kind of interaction that occurs between the reader and the text (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Grabe, 1983). The meaning, as an outcome of the interaction between the reader and the text, not only resides in the text itself, but also lies in the interaction between the reader and the text (Grabe, 1991). To this end, everything in the reader's background knowledge has a significant role in reading comprehension (Alptekin 2002, & 2003; Karakaş, 2002; and Razi & Erten, 2003).

Different types of background knowledge have been proposed in the reading process. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) and Carrell (1987) point out two different schemata; **formal and content** schemata; believed to account for the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. Stott (2001) also mentions two different types of schemata based on Carrell's definition. Nevertheless, Singhal (1998) and Alptekin (2002 and 2003) subcategorise schemata under three headlines. Singhal names them as **content, formal, and linguistic/language schemata** while Alptekin names them as **content, formal, and abstract/story** schema.

The content schema can be defined as knowledge of the world (Carrell, 1983). If the reader has the **content schema** presupposed by a text, it is likely that the comprehension of the text will be easier, and vice versa.

**Formal schema** is background knowledge of the organizational pattern of different types of texts. Each type of text (i.e. story, fable or expository text) has its own conventional structure, which represents a different schema of ways in which writers organize and readers understand topics. Knowledge of these conventions has a role in the comprehension of a text (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983).

The third type of schema is **abstract schema** (also called **story schema**) that refers to the role of cultural membership. Students who are equipped with abstract schema can free valuable short-term memory space to economically extend the limits of the information processing capacity in the human short-term memory which contributes to the comprehension of short stories (Erten and Razi, 2003).

### **The place of pre-reading activities in comprehending short stories**

The importance of reading comprehension has been emphasised by studies that have been conducted on the Second Language reading process. Comprehension failures or

deficiencies may occur at the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages. This study attempts to find out the effectiveness of pre-reading activities on reading comprehension.

Students may fail to comprehend the texts while studying short stories. Lazar (1993:76) groups such problems as follows:

- **Motivation**
- **Comprehension**
- **Making interpretations**
- **Inadequate reading strategies**

Jecksembievva (1993) studied “Pre-reading activities in EFL/ESL reading textbooks and Turkish preparatory school teachers’ attitudes toward pre-reading activities” and concluded that pre-reading activities contributed to comprehension of the texts; thus, the teachers found the activities to be useful in the classroom setting.

Different schema-activating activities should be used in reading classes. The aim of using pre-reading activities is to activate the reader’s background knowledge, to prevent failure, and to support the reader’s interpretation of the text. Arda (2000) studied “The role of content schema related to pre-reading activities” and stated the effectiveness of the activities on readers’ comprehension of the texts. These reading activities can promote interaction between the reader and the text, which is, as Widdowson terms it, “authentic” (Wallace 1992).

Ur (1996) emphasises that the aim of pre-reading activities is to provide anticipation and activate reader’s schema (Ur, 1996). The purpose of including these activities is to develop a better self-awareness of the relationship between the reader’s meaning and the author’s meaning; and to help readers understand the teacher’s expectations and views.

Different researchers such as Lazar (1993:83), Chen and Graves (1995:664), Taglieber, Johnson and Yarbough (1988:456), and Moorman and Blanton (1990:176) have provided definitions of pre-reading activities. Lazar for example, defines pre-reading activities as activities that help students with cultural background, stimulate student interest in the story, and pre-teach vocabulary. Chen and Graves define pre-reading activities as “devices for bridging the gap between the text’s content and the reader’s schemata”.

Focusing on L1 reading instruction, Taglieber, Johnson and Yarbough (1988:456) point out the motivational aspect of pre-reading activities. According to these writers, pre-reading activities activate or develop prior knowledge, provide knowledge of the text structure and also establish a reason for reading.

Lazar (1993) classifies the common pre-reading activities used to activate appropriate knowledge structures or provide knowledge that the reader lacks as:

- **Previewing**
- **Providing background knowledge**
- **Pre-questioning**
- **Brainstorming**

**Previewing:** This activity is appropriate for situations in which texts are difficult and may contain unfamiliar concepts not existing in the students’ working schemata. Previews contain:

- **Introductory questions and statements.**
- **A synopsis, including the setting, point of view and plot of the story up to the climax for narratives; and important happenings, items, generalizations and concepts for expository texts.**
- **Definitions of vocabulary (Graves et. al, 1983; McCormick, 1989)**

**Providing background knowledge:** This activity is particularly suitable for culturally unfamiliar passages. Steven's (1982) study has shown that providing background knowledge improves the comprehension of reading passages.

**Pre-questioning:** Pre-questioning involves presenting students with a set of written questions (Royer et. al., 1983) or having students generate their own questions on the topic of the reading passage (Taglieber et.al., 1983). The aim of the activity is two-fold. As Carrell (1988:247) points out, "pre-questioning functions to motivate students to read what follows for a purpose, that is, to gain the requisite information to answer the question. Being motivated is one of the most important factors that can help students in the process of reading". "The more students look forward to reading and anticipate in their minds what the text could hold in store for them, the easier it will be to grasp the main points of the passage" (Grellet 1981:62). Pre-questioning also "functions to get students to predict within a context area what the text will be about" before studying the text (Carrell 1988:247). They make students "aware of what they wish to learn about the topic" (Grellet 1981:62), since these questions set purposes for reading.

**Brainstorming:** One very popular kind of pre-reading task is "Brainstorming." Students are given a particular key word or key concept and then invited to call out words and concepts they personally associate with the key words or words provided by the teacher. It has many advantages, since it requires little teacher preparation, allows learners freedom to bring their own prior knowledge and opinions to bear on a particular topic, and involves the whole class. No one need feel threatened when any bid is acceptable and can be added to the framework. The results of this kind of activity resemble what has been called "semantic mapping" (Wallace 1993:92).

## **THE STUDY**

**Purpose of the study :**The researcher herself observed the difficulties mentioned above by Lazar (1993). She sought solutions to these problems. Experimenting with different pre-reading activities appeared to be a plausible solution. However, the effects of new activities on student comprehension needed to be tested. Therefore, this study intended to investigate the effects of using different pre-reading activities on ELT trainee teachers' reading comprehension of short stories.

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Methodological design of the study:** Experimental designs are frequently used by researchers but for the current study an exploratory quasi-experimental design was thought to be suitable since there were already two intact groups of students in the ELT Department, where the study was conducted. The study sought to compare the progress of these two intact groups.

The researcher was aware of the fact that the internal validity of the study could be biased by such a practice. However, this was the only possible way of conducting the study, as it was not possible to undertake random assignment of control and experimental groups. Thus; the study pursued an exploratory quasi-experimental design.

**Setting:**This study was carried out at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Education, ELT (English Language Teaching) Department, Turkey. The ELT Department served as an appropriate research setting as the author was employed in the same department and had constant access to students. Further, the teacher-training programme followed at the department usefully included a Short Stories course prescribed by the Turkish Higher Educational Council.

**Participants:** 41 students, 7 of whom were males and 34 were females, participated in the study. They were all third year students and their levels of proficiency varied from upper-intermediate to advanced level.

**Table 3: Number of participants**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Experimental Group</b>	Female	15	18
	Male	3	
<b>Control Group</b>	Female	19	23
	Male	4	
<b>Total</b>			41

### **Materials and Instrumentation**

**Material:** In “The Diamond Necklace”, by Guy de Maupassant, the author argues against the philistinism of the bourgeois and relates the fall of the Loiseles family due to their passion for luxury.

**Selection of the short story:** The first step of the activity was the selection of the short story, on which would be based the material to implement the reading activities and administer tests. The story was chosen with reference to several principles, which were: language, length, and student interest.

**Language:** The language of the story was of great importance. If the story contained too many unknown words and had a very complex sentence level of structures above the participants’ level of language proficiency, they would be discouraged and would not participate in the study willingly, which might affect the findings of the study.

**Length:** The study took three class-hour periods. The length of the story was important for the application of the reading activities since they included a post-test which also required class time.

**Interest:** There was limited time in which to carry out the study. A short story by a well-known author was chosen in order to hold the participants’ attention and to give them a taste of literature. The theme of the story was one about which the participants were able to make comments and express their own experiences, which could activate their prior knowledge and help them avoid a sense of burden and boredom. The theme of the story was assumed to be appropriate for the students, since many people think that modern times have led to the corruption of human values and a passion for luxury along with the advancement in technology.

**Procedures for data collection:** For data collection, the Experimental Group was given Brainstorming + Previewing activities as pre-reading activities, which were expected to result in better comprehension and response to questions (see Appendix A) 6 and 8 in the post-test. The Control Group was given only brainstorming activity.

A previewing activity was used as the treatment condition. This activity was suitable for the study, since Maupassant lived in the 1800’s and participants needed information about the setting, time, and place of the story. The activity involved information about Maupassant’s life in relation to social life, class, and the values of the time.

**Table 4: Activities used in the study**

<b>Experimental Group</b>	<b>Control Group</b>
Brainstorming	Brainstorming
Previewing	

**Pre-test:** Prior to the study, the participants were given a questionnaire and asked whether they had read the story before. After analysing the questionnaire, the researcher found that the participants had not studied the story before. This finding showed that the both Experimental and Control Groups were at the same starting point for the study. Due to time restraints, a pre-test was not given to either group. (See appendix B for the questionnaire.)

**Post-test:** After the administration of the “Previewing” activity, which was expected to be effective in trainee teachers’ comprehension of the short story by activating their prior knowledge for questions 6 and 8, a post-test was administered to the Experimental and the Control Groups to observe any difference(s) occurring between the two groups. (See appendix A for post-test.)

**Marking:** While marking, participants’ post-test papers’ grammar mistakes were ignored, as the study aimed to test only the effectiveness of the reading activities on ELT learners’ reading comprehension skills via the content of the comprehension questions.

**Inter-rater reliability:** to provide inter-rater reliability, another lecturer marked 25% of randomly chosen student post-test papers. The correlation coefficient for the post-tests was .990 ( $p < .000$ ). The result showed that the marking carried out by the researcher was consistent and reliable enough for the study.

**Procedures for data analysis:** The data collected from the post-test was analysed statistically to find any differences between the Control and Experimental Groups. To do this, an independent samples t-test was run using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 10.0 for Windows).

## FINDINGS

**RQ:** Do pre-reading activities with short stories have an effect on ELT trainee teachers’ reading comprehension?

The “Previewing” activity was expected to help the trainee teachers’ comprehension. After the activity, the difference between the two groups of students was assumed to appear in questions 6 and 8 of the reading comprehension test as these questions were related to the previewing activity.

The same independent samples t-test procedure was then run on the scores from the post-test. Table 4 below presents these results.

**Table 4: Results of t-test procedure after post-test**

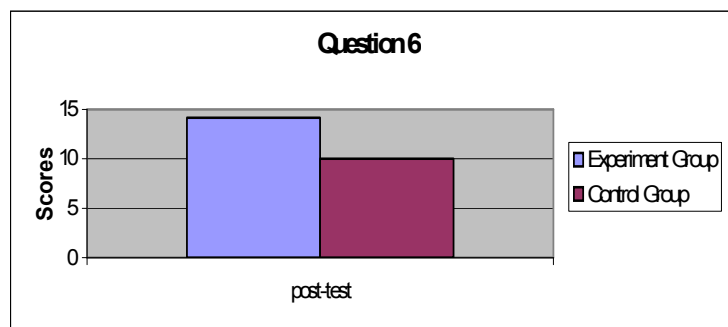
Question	Mean	Mean difference	T-value	Df	Significance	
6	Experimental	14,16	4,1667	2,274	38	,029
	Control	10,00				
8	Experimental	5,11	,9747	,578	38	,566
	Control	4,13				

The Control Group gained a mean score of 10.00 in question 6, while the Experimental Group earned 14.16 with a mean difference of 4.1667 ( $p < .029$ ). Such a difference indicated that the previewing activity helped the Experimental Group outperform the Control Group.

Question 6 was as follows “How does she act during the ball? What are those “awakened desires” that she fulfils there?” The previewing activity was helpful in giving the readers a picture of the values of that time ; thus, they were better able to comprehend the subject. As a result, the Experimental group outperformed the Control group. The participants were able to make interpretations about the question with regard to the social conditions and values of the time, and Mme Loisel’s ambitions.

Figure 3 illustrates the differences between the groups of students in their scores from the post-test.

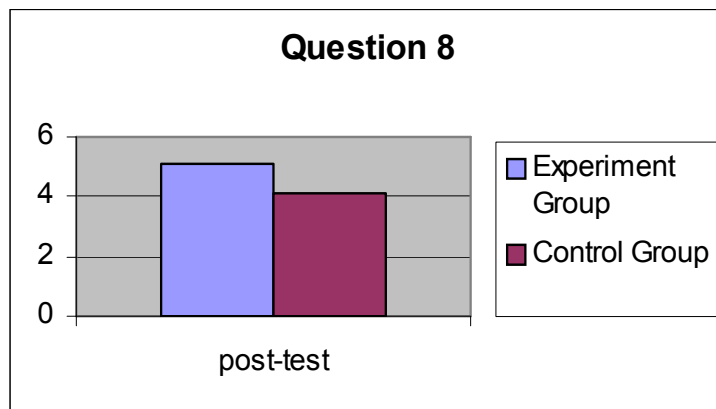
**Figure 3: Mean differences in post-test**



Question 8 was “How does Maupassant treat the themes of money and social position as Mme. Loisel is gradually driven out of the middle class?” The Control Group gained a mean of 4.13 opposed to the Experimental Group’s 5.11, with a mean difference of .9747 ( $p < .566$ ). The difference was not statistically significant, it may be due to the question type or the type of activity given may not have supported the theme strongly.

Figure 4 illustrates these differences.

**Figure 4: Mean Differences in post-test**



Although this difference is not statistically significant, it can tentatively be concluded that the pre-reading activity was helpful for comprehension of the subject and the Experimental Group thus performed better than the Control group.



## **DISCUSSION**

This study, which investigated the effects of pre-reading activities, shows that pre-reading activities done with the Experimental Group in the pre-reading stage contribute more to the comprehension of short stories than those done with the Control Group. In the study, the Experimental Group was given “Brainstorming and Previewing” activities, whereas the Control Group was only given “Brainstorming” activity. The previewing activity in the study helped the trainee teachers activate their prior knowledge about the 1800’s and relate it to the newly given information. The activity was intended to activate their schemata (Barlett, 1932; Adams and Collins 1979; Rumelhart, 1980). The Previewing activity helped the students to become familiar with concepts not existing in their working schemata since it included a synopsis, including the setting, point of view and plot of the story and a generalization from the author’s point of view about the subject (Graves et.al, 1983; McCormick,1989). Further; Carrell and Eisterhold (1988:104) state that if a reader has the content schemata presupposed by a text, for example, information about physics, Greek mythology or American culture, it is likely that the comprehension of the text will be better. They further state that while interpreting a text the readers relate all input to existing schema. In the pre-reading stage with the previewing activity, the study emphasised the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension. Brainstorming activity on its own was not sufficient to activate the participants’ background knowledge.

The Previewing activity may have provided the students with knowledge of the text structure and established a reason for reading (Taglieber, Johnson and Yarbough 1988:456).

## **CONCLUSION**

The study indicated that, in the pre-reading stage, the “Previewing” activity contributed to the comprehension of trainee teachers by activating their schemata, with the help of content schemata more than the use of Brainstorming activity alone.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In light of the present study, it may be useful to administer reading activities in reading classes which employ schema activation, as they contribute more to the comprehension of readers. These activities also promote a dialogue between the reader and writer, in which it is important to grasp the writer’s point of view. An ideal short story lesson, then, should provide interaction between the reader and writer, reader and reader, and reader and teacher in the reading class.

In the reading stage, “Previewing and Brainstorming” activities can be usefully used to help readers digest new stories.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Müge KARAKAŞ**, BA Gazi University & MA Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Institute, works for Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. She is interested in the processes involved in comprehending short stories. She teaches Introduction to English Literature and Teaching and Examining Short Stories within the ELT Department. She can be contacted at [mgekarakas@yahoo.com](mailto:mgekarakas@yahoo.com).

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### GENERAL COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS FOR “THE DIAMOND NECKLACE”

- 1-Which class does Mme. Loisel’s family belong to? Why does she look down on her husband?
- 2-What kind of a person is Mme. Loisel at the beginning of the story and what is the change in her personality during and after the process of replacing the necklace?
- 3-What is the occasion to which they were invited? Is she happy at the news of invitation?
- 4-How was her problem solved? Was the money saved for that purpose?
- 5-Why did she visit Mme. Forestier before the party?
- 6-How does she act during the ball? What are those “awakened desires” that she fulfils here?
- 7-What does the necklace symbolise in the story in close relation to Mme. Loisel’s individualistic dreams?
- 8-How does Maupassant treat the themes of money and social position, as Mme. Loisel is gradually driven out of the middle class?
- 9-Mme. Loisel’s first name “Mathilde” means “mighty battle maiden”, Does that fit her personality, after she endures hardships?
- 10-What kind of an irony does Maupassant end the story with? Is it a plausible conclusion or not?

### Appendix B

#### QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Have you read “The Diamond Necklace” before?
2. Do you know who Guy de Maupassant is?
3. What do you know about the 1800’s?