

## **The Effect of Cultural Background Knowledge on Learning English Language**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the effect of cultural background knowledge on learning English Language. It also aims to investigate if there are significant differences between subjects' performance in reading comprehension according to sex and general ability in English (GAE). The study aims at answering the following questions: 1. To what extent is the effect of cultural background knowledge on subjects' performance in reading comprehension? 2. What is the difference in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge? 3. What is the difference between subjects' performance in reading comprehension texts which are loaded with American culture and their general ability in English. ?

The population of this study consisted of all first-year students majoring in English at Hebron University in the first semester of the academic year 2011/2012. They were 600. The sample of the study consisted of 60 subjects, males and females divided into four groups, two experimental and two controlled. The researcher followed the experimental method. Means, standard deviations and Pearson Product Moment Correlation were calculated by using SPSS program. The study revealed the following results: 1. There are statistically significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. 2. There are no statistically significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. 3. Subjects' GAE revealed that there are significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

In the light of the results of the study, the researcher recommends the following: Teachers should activate two types of prior knowledge when introducing new information: subject knowledge and cultural knowledge.

**Key words:** Cultural Knowledge, Teaching, Reading Comprehension

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an explosion of interest in learning English in the Arab World. Bernhardt (1993) lists three reasons for the interest in second language acquisition as it relates to literacy skill. The first reason is concerned with social- political interests. Some learners require instructions in the native language for success in school. Other non-native adult learners need employment for survival and therefore must attain functional literary skills. A second reason for the general interest in literacy skills in second language is pedagogical. Reading ability is acknowledged to be the most stable and durable of the second language modalities. That means, learners may lose their productive skills but still be able to comprehend texts with some degree of proficiency. The third reason for this interest is cognitive.

Bright and Macgregor (1970) note that where there is little reading there will be little language learning. Nuttall (1996) adds that reading is a highly effective means of extending the command of language. Gibson and Levin (1975) also state that reading has received more attention than other aspects of education, so there is small wonder that instruction in the early grades is organized around learning to read because almost everyone expresses concern about students learning to read. (Destefano, 1978:232-235). Knowledge of reading in a foreign language, in particular English is so necessary nowadays for most learners. Too much of the professional, technical and scientific information is published in English, so the ability to read in English is required by many people.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

In Palestinian schools reading comprehension constitutes a major part of the English language curriculum in all grades. In most cases, the textbooks accompanied by sets of exercises and activities that revolve around the reading passage. In other words, there are vocabulary exercises and exercises on syntax derived from and based on the reading passage. In the General Secondary School Certificate Examination, the reading grade constitutes 20% to 30% of the total grade in the English Examination. However, a considerable number of students fail to comprehend the reading passages and many of the teachers of English are often discouraged by the low grades the students obtain in reading comprehension tests at colleges and universities. So the researcher intends to investigate the factors that affect reading comprehension. In the present study the researcher investigated the effect of cultural background knowledge. The lack of sufficient research on the precise contribution of linguistic knowledge to reading comprehension combined with the serious limits of the few existing studies emphasized the need for a study that can accomplish the following:

1. explore the learner's knowledge of culture so as to determine its contribution as well as the precise contribution of each to reading comprehension. (Mecarty, 1994; Dwaik, 1997)
2. break with the traditional perspective of measuring learner's knowledge of the linguistic features of the language contained in the text and therefore, investigate the learners knowledge independent of text comprehension (Mecarty, 1994; Dweik, 1997)

Furthermore, the results of answering the questions of the study are expected to achieve the following results:

1. This study is expected to help English teachers by drawing their attention to the main factors that affect students' achievement in reading comprehension.
2. It is expected to help students to improve their level in reading comprehension.
3. It is expected to help the English language curriculum designers and draw their attention to the types of texts to be included in textbooks.

In summary, the researcher hopes that this study may contribute to improving students' level in reading comprehension by drawing teachers' attention to place more emphasis on vocabulary, grammar and cultural background knowledge when dealing with reading comprehension texts.

### **1.3. Statement of the Problem**

The study of foreign language comprehension is a complex phenomenon compounded by the fact that many types of processes and factors need to be accounted for and explained. The knowledge that the reader brings to the process is one of those many factors. "It is generally known that good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar helps the reader to understand the material he reads" (Faraj, 1998: 53). Reading is probably the most common of the four skills to be improved, and it may seem to be the easiest of the skills to test. However, testing reading does have difficulties, and there are issues that anyone testing reading should be aware of the fact that traditional reading tests tend to make use of short prose passages and ask general comprehension questions. These often do not deal with the variety of skills involved in reading or the variety of texts that testees may encounter.

According to the researcher's experiences as a teacher of English he noticed that most of the students finish high school and join the university without having the ability to read and to answer reading comprehension questions on reading passages. So we have to investigate the factors that affect reading skill in order to improve it. Kilani (2001) claims that a learner is expected to read with less comprehension if he or she does not possess adequate cultural background knowledge. Moreover, Tseng (2002) points out that successful language learning requires knowing the culture that underlies language.

Unfortunately, many classrooms today lack the use of "real language", and a general look at PETRA and OXFORD English Course textbooks used in Palestine indicate that the reading comprehension texts included are not authentic, but rather prepared for specific pedagogical purposes (Yousef, 1998). Consequently, EFL learners do not have the opportunity to get through the target language components explicitly that is necessary for successful communication.

### **1.4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of cultural background knowledge on the learners' achievement in reading comprehension. In short we can say that this study will try to help teachers of English in Palestine to improve their students' level in reading comprehension to achieve good communication in foreign language.

### 1.5. Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer the following questions

1. To what extent is the effect of cultural background knowledge on subjects' performance in reading comprehension?
2. What is the difference in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have background knowledge on 5 American culture and those who do not have any knowledge?
3. What is the difference between subjects' performance in reading comprehension texts which are loaded with American culture and their GAE?

### 1.6. Hypotheses

In order to answer the questions of this study, these questions were converted into the following null hypotheses:

- 1- There is no significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.
- 2- There is no significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.
- 3- There is no significant difference between subjects' performance in reading comprehension texts which are loaded with American culture and their GAE.

### 1.7. Limits of the Study

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations to the study. This study will be limited to the first- year English students at Hebron University for the academic year 2008/2009. Only one test type was used to measure the subjects' ability in reading comprehension, i.e. (Multiple-choice test) . The results of this study could not be generalized out the borders of these limits. All of the subjects are non-native speakers of English. The results of this study could be generalized only to other similar conditions.

## 2. Methodology

In order to achieve the purpose of the study the researcher conducted an experimental study. The sample of the study consisted of 120 male and female students divided into four homogenous groups: two experimental and two controlled groups. Two post tests will be given to the four groups.

## 2.1. Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of all first -year students majoring in English at Hebron University in the first semester of the academic year 2008/2009. They were 600. The sample of the study consisted of 60 subjects, males and females divided into four groups, two experimental and two controll. The researcher followed the experimental method.

The researcher gave the first experimental group five lectures on lexis and syntax while the first controlled group was not given any lecture. He also gave the second experimental group five lectures on American culture while the second controlled group was not given any lecture. The researcher gave the four groups of subjects a post test. The first experimental and controlled groups were given a post test concerns lexical and syntactic knowledge while the second experimental and controlled groups were given a post test concerns target language culture. The post test consisted of two texts followed by twenty questions for each group. Means, standard deviations and Pearson Product Moment Correlation were calculated by using SPSS program.

## 3. Results

The study revealed the following results:

### 3.1. The Effect of Cultural Background Knowledge on Reading Comprehension

This section will discuss the results of the effect of cultural background knowledge on reading comprehension.

#### Hypothesis 1

1- There is no significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviation of Students' Performance in Reading Comprehension (Passages One and Two)

Group	No	Mean	Std. Deviation	DF	T-value	Sig.
Controlled	30	0.538	0.156	58	5.027	0.000
Experimental	30	0.717	0.116			

Comparing the mean scores of both texts we notice that the experimental group which was given five lectures about American culture assigned higher mean scores (  $M= 0.717$ ,  $Sd=0.116$ ) than the controlled group which was not given any ( $M=0.538,Sd=0.156$  ). We

notice from Table 4-12 that the hypothesis is rejected. This result does not support the fourth hypothesis which says 'that there is no significant difference between cultural background knowledge and student's performance on reading comprehension'.

A significant difference in performance in reading comprehension was found between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. ( $P < 0.05$ ). These results agree with the results of Razi's study (2003) which indicated that cultural schema appears to have a significant affect on the comprehension of short stories.

Razi investigated the effect of cultural background knowledge and reading activities on reading comprehension. He carried out his study at Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University. His sample consisted of 60 participants. He drew his subjects from 3<sup>rd</sup> year students at the department of ELT at Canakkale University and divided them into two groups. The results showed that cultural schema appears to have a significant effect on the comprehension of short stories. The treatment group received the modified version of the story while the other group received the original story. After that he gave both groups a post test. According to the findings of the present study culture familiarly has a great effect on reading comprehension, and this support the findings of previous studies which indicated that the lack of cultural knowledge affects on reading comprehension. The reviewed studies indicated that there is a significant difference between students who have cultural background knowledge and their performance on reading comprehension. Also, the results support Sultans' results which indicated that there is a significant difference at  $P < .05$  between culture familiarity and reading comprehension. And this supports similar findings in the literature, which have suggested that cultural background knowledge facilitates comprehension, being an integral aspect of reading comprehension. (Sultan, 2004)

In summary, it could be said that cultural background knowledge plays an important positive role in students' achievement in reading comprehension. Moreover, good knowledge of other cultures helps students a lot in dealing with reading comprehension texts.

### **Hypothesis 2**

There is no significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

**Table2.** Means and Standard Deviation of Students' Performance on Reading Comprehension (Passages One and Two) According to the Sex

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	DF	T-value	Sig.
Male	31	0.656	0.136	58	0.556	0.580
Female	29	0.623	0.168			

This result supports the second hypothesis which says ' there is no significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between male and female students who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. The results showed that there is no significant difference in performance in reading comprehension at  $P < 0.05$  between male and female students who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. This result disagrees with the result of Sultan's study (2001) which indicated that there is a significant difference at  $P < 0.05$  between males and females performance in reading comprehension with texts which are loaded with cultures.

According to the researcher, this could be attributed to the fact that

- 1- males and females live under the same severe economical conditions.
- 2- males and females are strongly affected by the political situation in Palestine.
- 3- males and females finished the General Secondary Certificate Exam and entered Hebron University at the same time.

In summary, it could be said that cultural background knowledge does not play an important role in reading comprehension according to sex. The results of the present study showed that there is no significant difference at  $P < 0.05$  between male and female students who have cultural background knowledge and their performance in reading comprehension.

### **Hypothesis 3**

There is no significant difference between subjects' performance in reading comprehension texts which are loaded with American culture and their GAE.

**Table 3.** Results of the Two Way ANOVA of the Subjects' performance in Reading Comprehension According to Group, Sex and GAE

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-value	Sig.
Group	1	3117.668	3117.668	15.437	0.000
Gender	1	15.550	15.550	0.077	0.497
English (GAE)	3	628.003	209.334	1.037	0.036

GAE: general ability in English

The results showed that there is a significant difference in performance in reading comprehension at  $P < 0.05$  between students' who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge and their general ability in English. This result may be

attributed to the students' achievement motivation. A student who gets high marks will have strong motivation which derives him to achieve more, whereas a student who gets low marks will have a low motivation to study more.

**Table 4.** Means and Standard Deviation of the Subjects' Performance in Reading Comprehension Texts Which are Loaded with Cultural Background Knowledge According to Group, Sex, and GAE

Controlled Group					Experimental Group		
Sex	GAE	No	Mean	Std Deviation	No	Mean	Std Deviation
Males	65-	1	65	0.00	3	70.00	5.00
	65-74	6	69	15.62	4	71.25	7.50
	75-64	4	58.75	23.93	5	77.00	8.36
	85+	2	62.50	17.67	1	85.00	0.00
Females	65-	1	45	0.00	-	-	-
	65-74	3	50	17.32	2	85.00	7.07
	75-64	10	53	18.26	12	82.70	4.93
	85+	3	70	26.45	3	91.66	2.88

GAE: general ability in English

The results showed that there is a significant difference between the performance of students in reading comprehension and their general ability in English. This result is in agreement with the findings of the previous studies which indicated that there is a significant difference between students' GAE and their performance in reading comprehension. And this is a fact that students whose GAE is high, will assign high scores in reading comprehension and those who have low GAE will assign lower scores. These results agree with the findings of Sultan which indicated that there is a significant difference between the performance of students in reading comprehension and their GAE. Indicating that background knowledge has an influence on EFL learners reading comprehension is congruent with the results of (Carrell, 1924; Lee, 1986; Horiba, 1990; Ziddan, 1994; Sultan, 2004). On the other hand, this result appears to go against the findings of Johnson (1981) and Floyd and Carrell (1987) who found that background knowledge had more effect on test scores than did the level of language proficiency.

In summary, it could be said that cultural background knowledge plays an important role on reading comprehension according to GAE.

1- There are statistically significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

2- There are no statistically significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

3- Subjects' GAE revealed that there are significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

The results of the study revealed that the null hypotheses have been rejected; however, the hypotheses which concern the effect of lexical, grammatical and cultural background knowledge on students' performance in reading comprehension according to sex have been confirmed.

In the light of the results of the study, the researcher recommends the following:

1- Teachers of English language should give more attention to lexical and lacticammarg knowledge as the two main factors in improving reading comprehension.

2- Teachers should activate two types of prior knowledge when introducinq new information: subject knowledge and cultural knowledge.

3- Developing learners' understanding of the target language culture so as to promote international cooperation, and to gain access to life and thought of people who speak the target language.

#### **4. Conclusions**

To conclude, it could be said that reading comprehension plays an important role in teaching English language. Lexical, grammatical and cultural background knowledge affects reading comprehension so teachers of English should emphasize these three factors. This implies that they should have sufficient preparation in vocabulary, syntax and cultural background knowledge. Also, it implies that students who lack knowledge of vocabulary, syntax and cultural background tend to have difficulty with reading comprehension. The results of the present study revealed the following:

1. There is a statistically significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

2- There is no statistically significant difference in performance in reading comprehension between male and female subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge.

3. There is a statistically significant difference between subjects' performance in reading comprehension texts which are loaded with American culture and their GAE.
4. Cultural orientation of the text has a significant effect on reading comprehension. Readers are expected to attain the writers intended meaning by combining existing information with what they read. (Nuttal, 1996).

## **5. Recommendations**

In the light of the results of the research, the researcher recommended the following:

- 1- Teachers should activate two types of prior knowledge when introducing new information: subject knowledge and culture knowledge. The first is the students' previous knowledge of the subject. World knowledge is what students have learnt through their interactions with the world. Both are supposed to be crucial to facilitate reading comprehension.
- 2- Activating learners' schemata, especially when introducing new material that is culturally unfamiliar.
- 3- Developing learners' cultural understanding of the target language culture to promote international cooperation and to gain access to life and thought of people who speak the target language.

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