

CULTURAL SCHEMATA IN EFL READING: INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of cultural schemata in enhancing reading comprehension among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Drawing on schema theory, it examines how activating learners' cultural background knowledge influences their ability to interpret culturally unfamiliar texts. The study employs a mixed-methods approach. Data is collected through questionnaires distributed to 30 English Language Teaching (ELT) instructors. Findings indicate that culturally relevant schema activation significantly improves comprehension by providing context and bridging gaps in understanding. Nearly 90% of surveyed instructors emphasized the importance of integrating cultural awareness activities into reading lessons. The findings highlight the value of pre-reading strategies like discussions and multimedia aids. Challenges such as limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and students' varying proficiency levels were identified as barriers to effective implementation. Recommendations include developing culturally inclusive curricula, enhancing teacher training, and using technology to support schema activation. By fostering cultural awareness alongside language skills, educators can create more inclusive and effective learning environments and enhance reading comprehension and intercultural competence.

Keywords: EFL instruction, cultural schemata, schema activation, reading comprehension, teacher perceptions

Introduction

Reading and comprehension are important skills taught in language classes. It is a two-way process since the readers associate the information provided in the text with that of their own knowledge. Brown (2001) states that a reader's perception gives meaning to a text. Research by Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer (1980) shows that two factors are key to understanding a text: real-world knowledge and text structure. Meaning emerges when the reader combines their linguistic and schematic knowledge with the text's information. Barnitz (1986) calls reading a complex process influenced by language proficiency. Thus, comprehension varies between native and non-native languages based on skill. Along with language proficiency, studies also show that cultural exposure helps develop language skills (Taylor, 1983; Barnitz, 1986). A person develops a mental image and concepts of everything they have been exposed to throughout their lives. Individuals derive meaning from events and actions by comparing and relating new experiences to their pre-existing knowledge, commonly referred to as schemata or schema.

Bartlett (1932) introduced the concept of schema as the process of tailoring and reorganizing information in memory for future use. Nassaji (2007) discusses the importance of past experiences in understanding and remembering events. Bartlett (1932) referred to the way these experiences are organized in the brain as schema. Later, researchers like Anderson and Pearson (1984), Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, and Goetz (1977), and Schallert (1991) expanded on how knowledge is structured in memory.

Schema theory focuses on the reading process, the reader's role, and the interaction between their background knowledge and the text (Nassaji, 2007). It helps explain cognitive processes like learning, reasoning, inferencing, remembering, and problem-solving. The theory is crucial for understanding how reading works, especially in second language learning. While studies on this topic are limited due to the complexity of the connection between comprehension and background knowledge, existing research emphasizes the importance of background knowledge in understanding texts (Nassaji, 2007). Schema theory suggests that comprehension relies on linking the text to its context and background knowledge of the reader. In other words, comprehension is connecting known information to the unknown.

This research evaluates the reading skills of foreign language learners. Its purpose is to explore how the absence of foreign cultural content schema affects meaningful comprehension. The study examines the interaction between text features, such as unfamiliar cultural content, and reading tasks that influence comprehension. It also aims to inform teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Foreign cultural content schema is essential for EFL learners. Exposure to foreign cultures helps build knowledge in the learner's conscious and subconscious mind and influences comprehension (Roller & Matambo, 1992; Carrell & Wise, 1998). This research seeks to improve reading outcomes and identify key areas where further study can benefit the teaching and learning community.

The main challenges in reading education include understanding how EFL learners comprehend texts. Such studies are useful for designing instruction that promotes comprehension and develop effective evaluation methods.

Problem Statement

In Pakistan, English is widely taught as a foreign language. However, many learners struggle with reading comprehension when engaging with texts containing foreign cultural references. This difficulty arises due to the lack of exposure to foreign cultural content schema, which plays a critical role in understanding and interpreting texts. Existing teaching methods and evaluation strategies often fail to address the cultural gaps that hold back effective comprehension. There is limited research on how the absence of foreign cultural knowledge affects the reading comprehension of Pakistani EFL learners. This study seeks to explore the influence of foreign cultural content on reading comprehension among Pakistani EFL learners, identify the challenges they face, and provide insights to enhance teaching practices and evaluation methods in the context of English language education in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. How does cultural content schema affect the reading comprehension of EFL learners?"
2. What strategies do English language teachers use to address this challenge?"

Literature Review

The Role of Cultural Schemata in Reading Comprehension

Cultural schemata or the mental frameworks formed by cultural background play a crucial role in the reading comprehension process. A significant body of research accentuates the influence of these schemata on readers' ability to interpret and retain information from texts. Studies on schemata are particularly important in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This review synthesizes the findings of key studies to feature the importance of cultural familiarity and background knowledge in facilitating reading comprehension. The review also focuses on the pedagogical implications of schema activation strategies.

Johnson (1981) investigated the effect of cultural origins on Iranian ESL students' reading comprehension using folktales. The participants were divided into groups, with one group receiving adapted and simplified American and Iranian folktales, while the other read the

original versions of these texts. The results showed that the students performed better on culturally familiar texts despite the simplification of syntax and vocabulary. This finding suggests the structural simplification of a text cannot compensate for the lack of cultural connections. The results indicate the importance of background knowledge in decoding even complex syntactic structures. Johnson (1982) further explored the influence of cultural exposure by introducing Iranian ESL students to elements of Halloween celebrations before assigning texts on the topic. This exposure enhanced their recall of culturally familiar information. However, teaching text-relevant vocabulary alone did not significantly impact comprehension. These studies underscore that cultural familiarity provides a framework for readers to understand and retain textual information. Based on the results, Johnson stated that cultural familiarity is a critical factor in reading comprehension.

Carrel (1987) expanded the discussion on cultural schemata by analyzing the combined effects of content and formal schemata on reading comprehension among EFL students. Two groups of Muslims and Roman Catholics were tasked with reading texts that were either culturally familiar or unfamiliar. The findings revealed that content familiarity significantly influenced comprehension far outweighing the effects of formal structure. Students struggled more with culturally unfamiliar content even when the rhetorical form was familiar. This indicates that while formal text organization can aid comprehension to some extent, content familiarity serves as the cornerstone of effective reading.

The relationship between background knowledge and comprehension extends beyond cultural contexts to include linguistic and orthographic understanding. Perfetti and Stafura (2014) identified linguistic knowledge (morphology, syntax, and phonology), orthographic knowledge, and general knowledge as crucial components of reading comprehension. Snow (2000) further emphasized the role of academic and curriculum-based knowledge in enabling readers to make sense of texts. Carrell (1991) and Bossers (1991) explored the interaction between first language (L1) and second language (L2) reading skills. They concluded that L1 proficiency often served as a stronger predictor of L2 reading comprehension. For instance, native Spanish speakers learning English relied on their L1 reading skills. Native English speakers learning Spanish depended more on L2 proficiency due to limited exposure to Spanish outside the classroom. Bossers (1991) found that less skilled readers leaned on L2 proficiency whereas skilled readers primarily utilized L1 reading skills, supporting Cummins's Threshold Hypothesis. These findings illustrate the interplay between linguistic proficiency and cultural schemata in shaping reading comprehension outcomes.

Pre-reading activities designed to activate cultural schemata have emerged as an effective strategy for enhancing comprehension. Bensalah and Gueroudj (2020) conducted a quasi-experimental study with EFL students at Ibn Khaldoun University. One group participated in pre-reading tasks to activate background knowledge, while the control group did not. The experimental group demonstrated significantly higher comprehension levels. It shows the role of schema activation in bridging gaps caused by cultural unfamiliarity. Similarly, Kukus (2021) explored the influence of religious knowledge on comprehension by focusing on texts related to Christmas Eve and Ramadan Eid. Participants with relevant religious backgrounds showed improved performance on both literal and inferential comprehension tasks. These findings reaffirm the necessity of schema activation, particularly in diverse classrooms where students encounter texts embedded with unfamiliar cultural references.

The integration of schema theory with vocabulary instruction has also been explored in research. Kafipour and Jahansooz (2017) examined the combined effects of content schemata, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension on translation performance among Iranian students. While content schemata and comprehension emerged as strong predictors of

translation success, vocabulary knowledge alone had minimal impact, likely due to students' reliance on dictionaries. This indicates that while vocabulary is essential, it must be supported by robust schema activation strategies to ensure comprehensive understanding.

Maghsoudi (2012) further demonstrated the effectiveness of schema activation through pre-reading activities in improving comprehension outcomes. In a study involving sophomore students, participants who engaged in schema activation scored significantly higher on comprehension tests compared to those who did not. These findings align with earlier research by Ganji (2012) who investigated the role of topic familiarity in comprehension. Students performed best when reading passages on familiar topics. The study emphasized the importance of topic-related schemata in helping learners process and understand texts efficiently.

Pedagogical studies have underscored the importance of culturally responsive teaching methods in activating schemata. Asmari and Javid (2018) surveyed English language teachers in Saudi Arabia to examine their perceptions of content schemata and the strategies they employ to activate background knowledge. The teachers identified pre-reading strategies, such as brainstorming and classroom discussions, as effective tools for activating schemata. While-reading strategies including drawing attention to main ideas and signal words were also noted to enhance comprehension. However, challenges such as low English proficiency and insufficient teaching resources were identified as barriers to effective schema activation. Khanum, Zahid, and Mondol (2014) reproduced these findings in their study on schema-based approaches in Bangladeshi classrooms. They advocated for structured pre-reading activities to improve comprehension outcomes.

The role of cultural schemata extends beyond reading comprehension to other linguistic tasks such as translation. Kafipour and Jahansooz (2017) stated that content schemata significantly influence translation performance. Their study supports the broader applicability of schema theory in language learning. Similarly, Asmari and Javid (2018) emphasized the need for well-designed pre-reading and while-reading activities to activate background knowledge. These strategies can bridge comprehension gaps in diverse educational settings.

In conclusion, the reviewed studies collectively give emphasis to the critical role of cultural schemata in reading comprehension. From enhancing linguistic decoding to improving inferential reasoning, cultural and content schemata provide the foundation for effective reading. The activation of these schemata through pre-reading and while-reading strategies has proven to be a highly effective approach in addressing comprehension challenges, particularly in ESL and EFL contexts. Furthermore, the integration of schema theory into broader linguistic tasks, such as translation, affirms its relevance in fostering overall linguistic competence. For educators, these findings advocate the adoption of culturally responsive pedagogies that prioritize schema activation, ensuring that learners are equipped with the tools to navigate and comprehend diverse texts.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of cultural schemata in enhancing reading comprehension among EFL learners. The design combined quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of instructors' perspectives and practices. A survey was utilized to collect quantitative data, while open-ended responses allowed for qualitative insights into the challenges and strategies associated with teaching texts containing foreign cultural content.

Participants

The participants consisted of 30 English Language Teaching (ELT) instructors from diverse educational institutions. These instructors were selected based on their experience teaching

reading comprehension to EFL learners. The sampling method was purposive, ensuring that all participants had relevant experience in teaching texts embedded with foreign cultural content. The instructors represented a range of teaching contexts, including schools and colleges providing varied perspectives on the challenges faced in their classrooms.

Data Collection Tools

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect data on instructors' experiences, strategies, and perceptions of teaching foreign cultural content in EFL classrooms.

The questionnaire was distributed online. Responses were collected over two weeks to provide sufficient time for participants to complete the survey. To ensure clarity and relevance, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with three ELT instructors before dissemination, leading to minor refinements in question phrasing.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and patterns in instructors' responses. Percentages were calculated for each closed-end question to provide a clear depiction of the collective perspectives. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and insights. Open-ended responses were coded and categorized into themes such as "challenges in teaching foreign cultural content," "use of supplementary materials," and "importance of professional development." This dual approach ensured that both numerical trends and nuanced insights were captured.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. No identifying information was collected, ensuring anonymity.

Limitations

While the sample size provides valuable insights, it may not be fully representative of all ELT instructors. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce bias, as participants could overestimate or underestimate their practices and perceptions. Future studies could expand the sample size and include classroom observations to triangulate findings.

This methodology ensured a rigorous and balanced approach to exploring the role of cultural schemata in EFL reading comprehension, combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives to provide a holistic understanding.

Findings

1. To what extent do you believe students' lack of background knowledge affects their ability to infer information from passages or poems embedded in foreign culture or traditions?

19 responses



Figure 1

Instructors' Views on Impact of Students' Background Knowledge on Inferring Meaning in Foreign Cultural Texts

About 58% believe background knowledge significantly affects comprehension, while 42% think it has a moderate impact. None selected "Not at all" or "To a small extent." The results underline the importance of cultural context in reading comprehension. Unfamiliar traditions or practices can affect students' understanding. Overall, the data shed light on the need to integrate cultural knowledge into the curriculum to improve reading comprehension in second-language learning.

2. How important do you think it is to integrate activities or discussions that promote cultural awareness alongside reading comprehension exercises?

19 responses

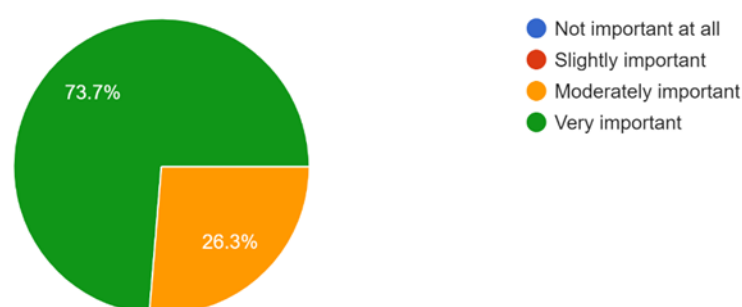


Figure 2

Teachers' Views on Integrating Cultural Awareness with Reading Comprehension

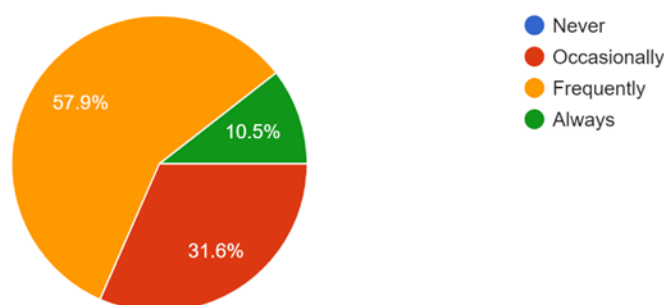
A majority (74%) considers integrating cultural awareness vital, while 26% see it as moderately important. None selected "Not important at all" or "Slightly important," showing a consensus on the significance of cultural awareness in language learning. The findings emphasize that effective comprehension requires more than grammar or vocabulary. The findings align with previous studies suggesting that cultural context is essential in second-language reading instruction.

Figure

3

3. How frequently do you encounter detachment from students when encountered with unfamiliar foreign cultural content in reading comprehension lessons?

19 responses

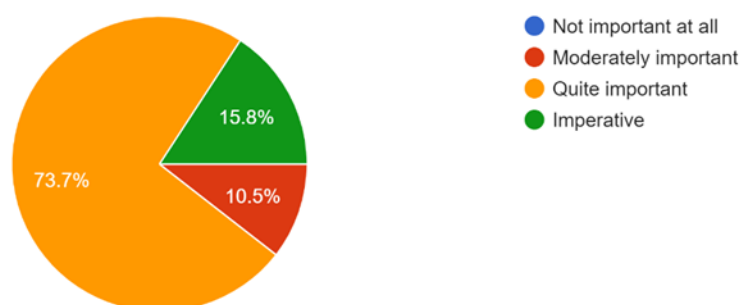


Instructors' Responses on Student Detachment from Unfamiliar Cultural Content

Among 19 participants, 57.9% encounter detachment frequently, 31.6% occasionally, and 10.5% always, with none selecting "Never." These results show that unfamiliar cultural references negatively impact engagement. The disinterest of students cause disconnection during lessons. This points out the need for strategies like pre-teaching cultural references or incorporating cultural discussions to improve student engagement and class dynamics.

4. How important do you think it is to integrate activities or discussions that promote cultural awareness alongside reading comprehension exercises?

19 responses



Figure

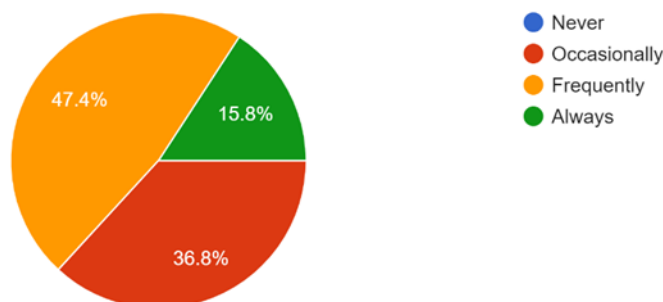
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Instructors' Perceptions of the Importance of Integrating Cultural Awareness with Reading Comprehension Activities

74% of the participants believe integrating cultural awareness is "quite important," 16% consider it "imperative," and 10% see it as "moderately important." No one selected "not important at all." These findings show a strong consensus on the value of integrating cultural awareness into reading comprehension lessons. The majority view it as critical for fostering deeper understanding, especially when engaging with culturally diverse texts. By providing context through cultural discussions, educators can enhance students' comprehension of language and the cultural nuances embedded in the material.

5. How often do you adjust your teaching strategies to resolve students' lack of background knowledge in foreign culture or traditions?

19 responses



Nearly 48% of respondents frequently modify their teaching methods. It shows a proactive effort to bridge understanding gaps on the instructor's behalf. Another 36.8% occasionally adjust their strategies depending on the content or class diversity. 15.8% always adapt their methods. This emphasizes cultural context as essential for making material accessible. None selected "Never," indicating unanimous agreement on the importance of adapting teaching for cultural content.

The data shows the shared priority among educators to tailor instruction for cultural understanding. Adjustments not only enhance comprehension but also foster inclusivity and help students connect personally with the material.

Figure

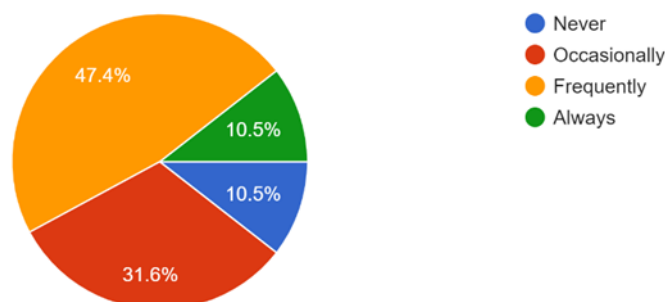
6

Instructors' Use of Supplementary Materials to Enhance Students' Understanding of Foreign Cultural Content

About 47.4% of teachers frequently use additional resources like videos or cultural readings to bridge knowledge gaps. Meanwhile, 31.8% use them occasionally depending on content or class needs. A smaller group of 10.5%, always integrates supplementary materials. This group prioritizes cultural context as a key part of language learning. On the other hand, 10.5% never uses these materials. This group possibly focuses on other language aspects or rely on organic cultural exposure. Overall, the data showcases varied practices among educators. Most

6. How often do you use supplementary materials or resources to enhance students' understanding of foreign cultural content in reading comprehension passages or poems?

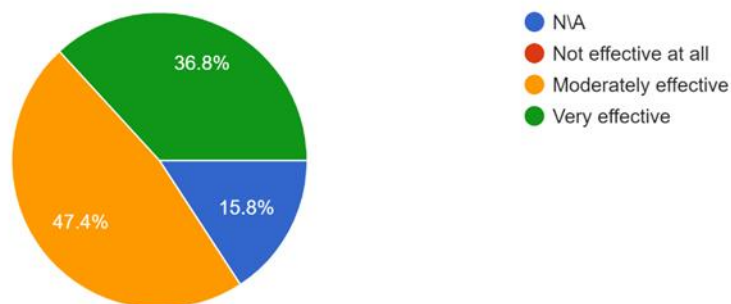
19 responses



participants recognise the value of supplementary resources while differing in their frequency and approach.

7. How effective are these supplementary materials or resources?

19 responses



Figure

7

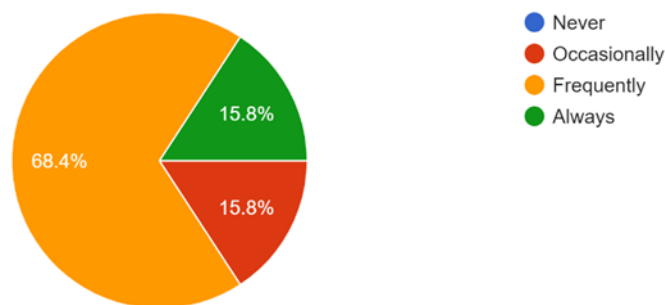
Instructors' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Supplementary Materials in Enhancing Cultural Understanding

About 47.4% of respondents found the materials moderately effective. It suggests that the supplementary material provide some benefits but may not fully meet learner or teacher needs. 36.8% rated them as very effective, indicating strong support for learning through engaging and relevant resources. A smaller group of 15.8%, found the question inapplicable due to limited experience with the materials or their irrelevance to their teaching context. No one rated the materials as "not effective at all," affirming their baseline usefulness.

While most instructors view these resources as effective, improvements could increase their impact. Enhancing relevance and alignment with students' needs might shift more responses to "very effective." Addressing the needs of those who found the materials inapplicable could broaden their utility and ensure greater inclusivity in cultural awareness efforts.

8. How often do you find the need to allocate additional time for explaining foreign cultural concepts during reading comprehension lessons?

19 responses



Figure

8

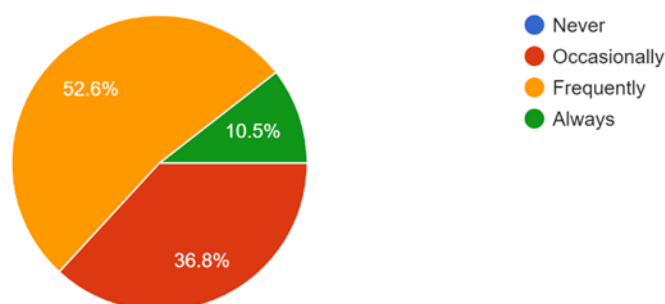
Instructors' Views on Allocating Additional Time to Explain Foreign Cultural Concepts in Reading Lessons

The majority of the respondents (68.4%) frequently extend lesson time for cultural explanations. It indicates the routine need to address culturally unfamiliar content. Another 15.8% always allocate extra time and consider cultural understanding as integral to their instruction. 15.8% occasionally extend lessons due to fewer challenges or less frequent need for cultural interventions in their classes. Notably, no one selected "Never," indicating universal recognition of the importance of cultural explanations.

The findings showcase the significant role of cultural awareness in reading comprehension, with most educators adapting their teaching to bridge cultural gaps and aid student understanding.

9. How often do you seek resources to enhance your understanding of a foreign culture before teaching it in class?

19 responses



Figure

9

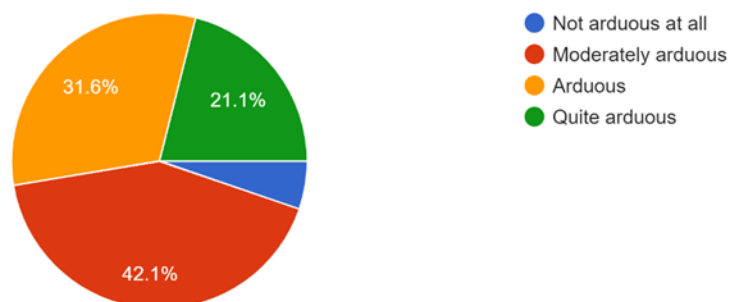
Instructors' Frequency of Seeking Resources to Enhance Their Understanding of Foreign Cultures Before Teaching

The data shows that 52.6% of respondents frequently seek additional resources. This indicates their commitment to bridging cultural gaps and delivering well-informed lessons. Meanwhile, 36.8% occasionally seek resources. Their choice of resources depends on the complexity of the material or students' needs. A smaller group of 10.5%, always seeks cultural knowledge, emphasizing the importance of thorough preparation for fostering meaningful discussions and addressing students' queries.

None of the respondents selected "Never." It reflects a unanimous understanding of the value of cultural awareness in teaching. This consensus underscores that cultural knowledge is integral to effective instruction and improving comprehension of culturally unfamiliar texts.

10. How arduous do you find teaching reading comprehension in passages or poems with foreign cultural content to students lacking background knowledge?

19 responses



Figure

10

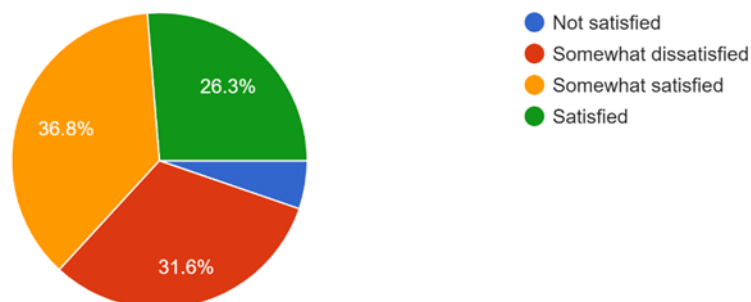
Instructors' Views on the Difficulty of Teaching Reading Comprehension with Foreign Cultural Content to Students Lacking Background Knowledge

The majority of respondents (42.1%) find the task moderately arduous. They manage to address the challenge of cultural gaps by using classroom strategies. A significant 31.6% find it arduous. This group, yet again, emphasizes more pronounced challenges in making material accessible through contextualization. Meanwhile, 21.1% report the task as quite arduous, requiring extensive effort to overcome comprehension barriers. A small 5.2% find it not arduous at all due to effective methods or globally aware student demographics.

In summary, responses reiterate varying levels of difficulty based on teaching context and student backgrounds. It indicates the diverse challenges of incorporating foreign cultural content in reading comprehension lessons.

11. Overall, how satisfied are you with the effectiveness of your current strategies for teaching reading comprehension with foreign cultural content to students lacking background knowledge?

19 responses



Figure

11

Instructors' Satisfaction with Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension with Foreign Cultural Content

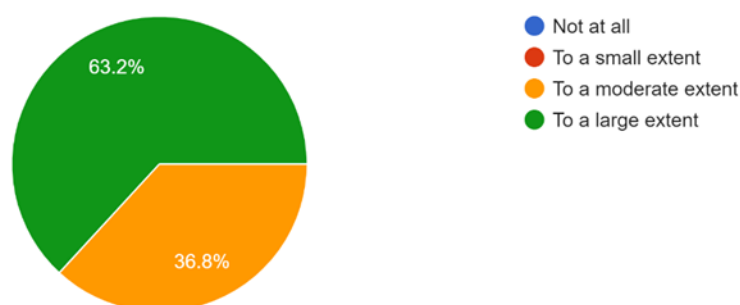
The largest group of 36.8%, opted for "somewhat satisfied," indicating that improvements are needed due to partially effective strategies. Meanwhile, 31.6% are somewhat dissatisfied. This group reflects the frustration and perceived inadequacy in addressing comprehension gaps. A

smaller group of 26.3%, is satisfied. It shows their confidence in their approaches. Lastly, 5.3% are not satisfied and find their strategies entirely ineffective.

This distribution indicates varied success levels among educators in addressing cultural barriers. It shows the need for refining and innovating teaching methods to enhance comprehension outcomes.

12. To what extent do you believe professional development workshops could help address challenges related to teaching reading comprehension with foreign cultural content?

19 responses



Figure

12

Instructors' Views on the Potential of Professional Development Workshops for Teaching Reading Comprehension with Foreign Cultural Content

The largest section of 63.2% participants believe such workshops could help to a large extent. Workshops have greater value in equipping teachers with effective strategies to address cultural knowledge gaps. Meanwhile, 36.8% believe workshops could help to a moderate extent, recognizing their benefits but with some reservations about their overall impact. No respondents indicated that workshops would help only "to a small extent" or "not at all." The overall responses show a strong consensus on their usefulness. The results underscore the importance of continuous professional learning in enhancing teaching approaches and improving students' comprehension of culturally unfamiliar material.

Any comments/reflections on the subject will be appreciated:

3 responses

I would like to know more about the discussion.

An important topic as most of the writings in prose and all poems in English are by British or American writers and poets and for that matter, awareness about that culture is very important for teachers to make students understand in a better way.

Workshops will help greatly in this regard as this is a less focused area for now.

These responses collectively describe the challenges of teaching reading comprehension with foreign cultural content. It requires both pedagogical expertise and cultural sensitivity. As one respondent observed, much of the English literature taught originates from British or American writers. This creates a significant cultural disconnect between students' experiences and the content. This gap negatively effects students' ability to comprehend and engage with the material effectively due to their lack of relevant cultural background knowledge.

The dual responsibility of teaching language skills and bridging cultural divides falls on educators. Unfortunately, many of them lack sufficient cultural context. This affirms the critical need for professional development workshops that address both pedagogical strategies and

cultural awareness. The expressed interest of a respondent in learning more about the issue reflects the ongoing relevance of this challenge. By sharing experiences and strategies, teachers can collaboratively build a robust framework for addressing cultural barriers in reading comprehension.

Discussion

The current study's findings not only replicate but also extend previous research on the relationship between cultural schemata and reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The study particularly reinforces the conclusions of Bensalah and Gueroudj (2020), Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), and other scholars who assert that cultural background knowledge is vital for effective reading comprehension. These researchers point out that cultural schemata allow readers to make sense of new information by connecting it with their prior knowledge. Background knowledge is crucial when dealing with unfamiliar cultural contexts.

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) argue that cultural schemata reduce cognitive load by activating existing mental structures that assist in decoding and processing unfamiliar material. This idea is evident in the responses from instructors in the current study. The responses emphasize the importance of providing students with cultural context to facilitate comprehension. For instance, the significant number of respondents who believe that cultural awareness is imperative or quite important demonstrates a clear consensus among educators regarding the role of cultural knowledge in understanding foreign texts. These findings align with schema theory which posits that the activation and modification of existing knowledge is essential for comprehension (Bransford & Johnson, 1972; Anderson, 1977). The instructors' perspectives underline that cultural background knowledge is not an additional but rather a foundational element in the reading process. Thus, cultural schemata is central to effective language instruction.

The study also reaffirms Kukus (2021) and Bensalah and Gueroudj's (2020) findings that cultural schema activation enhances comprehension. The effectiveness is noticeable in relation to inferential and literal comprehension. The current study's emphasis on the use of pre-reading activities and supplementary materials mirrors these findings. The responding instructors noted that such resources are frequently used to help students activate their cultural schemata. As the study by Bensalah and Gueroudj (2020) suggests, pre-reading activities that introduce cultural context can serve as a bridge to understanding and facilitate the reading process. The instructors in the present study similarly reported that they regularly incorporate supplementary resources, such as cultural readings, videos, and discussions, to prepare students for texts that contain foreign cultural content. This demonstrates a proactive approach to addressing the challenges posed by unfamiliar cultural references in reading materials.

The findings of Asmari and Javid (2018) further demonstrate the value of supplementary materials in enhancing cultural awareness. The current study's results show that nearly half of the instructors frequently use supplementary materials to support comprehension. It aligns with Asmari and Javid's assertion that such resources can activate content schemata and improve students' understanding. Asmari and Javid (2018) identify brainstorming, questioning, and classroom discussions as key strategies for activating cultural knowledge. These strategies are echoed in the responses of the instructors in the present study. The effectiveness of supplementary materials in nurturing cultural awareness is further validated by the significant percentage of respondents who rated these materials as "very effective." However, the moderate effectiveness rated by 47.4% of the respondents underscores the fact that supplementary materials alone may not always be sufficient. As noted by Asmari and Javid, factors such as students' English proficiency, the quality of materials, and the alignment

between resources and students' needs can limit their effectiveness. This resonates with the barriers identified in the present study that while supplementary materials are useful, their impact is subject to a variety of contextual factors.

63.2% of the participants indicated the need for professional development workshops in the present study. The suggestion supports the idea that enhancing cultural awareness and pedagogical strategies should be an ongoing focus for language teachers. This finding aligns with the broader literature on the importance of continuous teacher development (Abraham, 2002; Chen, 2003). Professional development opportunities provide teachers with the tools and knowledge necessary to address the cultural challenges inherent in teaching foreign language content. The instructors' strong belief in the value of professional development workshops suggests that such initiatives are instrumental in refining teachers' approaches to activating cultural schemata.

One important observation in the current study is the recognition by instructors that the gap between students' cultural background and the content of English literature is a major challenge. This issue is pointed out in the work of Sheraz, Kazemian, and Mahar (2015), who emphasize the role of language in transmitting culture. Their findings state that to enhance reading comprehension EFL learners must not only master language structures but also understand the cultural context in which those structures are used. The instructors' responses in the current study support this notion. When students' existing cultural knowledge aligns with the material, their comprehension improves. This aligns with the ideas of Zhang (2008), who suggests that structured rhetorical patterns and formal schemata can aid in the recall and understanding of a text. The understanding and comprehension particularly improves when students are familiar with its cultural context.

In light of these findings, the importance of schema activation and cultural context in teaching reading comprehension is further emphasized. The instructors' use of supplementary materials and their belief in the value of professional development workshops suggest that teachers are seeking effective ways to bridge the cultural gap and enhance their students' comprehension. However, as the study by Asmari and Javid (2018) suggests, more support and resources are needed to maximize the impact of these efforts. The limitations posed by students' proficiency levels and the availability of adequate resources suggest that a more comprehensive and resource-rich teaching environment is essential for promoting effective cultural comprehension. This include more targeted professional development programs that focus not only on pedagogy but also on cultural awareness. It also calls for an increase in the availability of high-quality supplementary materials that cater to students' diverse needs.

Finally, Abraham (2002) and Chen (2003) advocate the integration of schema theory into teaching practices. The idea that activating students' prior knowledge, both linguistic and cultural, is key to successful reading comprehension. Teachers must help students recognize their existing understanding of a text's topic and context and support them in connecting this knowledge to the material at hand. Teachers can help students navigate the complexities of foreign cultural content by employing strategies that address both cultural context and language skill. This will ultimately result in improving their overall reading comprehension and language proficiency.

In conclusion, the findings from the present study demonstrate the critical role that cultural schemata play in reading comprehension which aligns with previous researches in the area. Teachers' use of supplementary materials, pre-reading activities, and professional development workshops points out the importance of equipping students with the cultural knowledge necessary to engage with foreign texts effectively. The research points to practical strategies and interventions that can help enhance students' understanding and overall language learning

experience by bridging the cultural knowledge gap. These insights offer valuable implications for future teaching practices, emphasizing the need for a more holistic approach to language instruction that prioritizes both linguistic and cultural awareness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the significant role of cultural schemata in enhancing reading comprehension among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The findings underline that activating cultural background knowledge enables learners to better understand and engage with culturally unfamiliar texts. The results are consistent with previous studies and demonstrate that cultural schemata bridge comprehension gaps by providing context and relevance to reading material.

The responses from ELT instructors validate the importance of integrating cultural awareness activities into reading comprehension lessons. Nearly 90% of the participants rated this integration as "quite important" or "imperative." This reflects the widespread acknowledgment of cultural understanding as a crucial component of effective reading instruction. Instructors emphasized that pre-reading activities, such as cultural discussions and multimedia supplements, play a pivotal role in helping students grasp the underlying meanings of texts embedded within foreign traditions or social norms.

The study also identifies challenges that deter the effective implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies. These include students' limited English proficiency, insufficient access to culturally relevant teaching materials, and a lack of professional training for educators to address cultural gaps in the classroom. The reliance on teachers to independently develop or source supplementary resources underlines the need for systemic support to address these issues comprehensively.

Recommendations for Practice

Curriculum developers should prioritize creating culturally inclusive materials that expose students to a wide range of cultural contexts. Incorporating texts that balance familiarity and novelty will not only improve comprehension but also foster intercultural awareness. Pre-reading activities should become a standard component of reading lessons. Teachers can employ brainstorming, cultural discussions, and visual aids to activate students' prior knowledge. Educators need targeted training on integrating cultural schemata into reading instruction. Workshops and professional development programs can equip teachers with practical strategies for schema activation, such as designing culturally enriched lesson plans and addressing diverse classroom needs. Training should also focus on overcoming challenges like language barriers and limited resources. Teachers should encourage peer discussions and group activities that allow students to share their cultural insights. Collaborative tasks, such as analysing culturally diverse texts or creating cross-cultural projects, can enrich learning experiences and promote a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. Digital tools and platforms can serve as valuable resources for schema activation. Online cultural databases, e-learning applications, and multimedia content provide students with interactive and engaging ways to explore cultural contexts. To address language barriers, teachers should offer scaffolded instruction that simplifies text complexity without diluting cultural content.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the effectiveness of schema activation strategies in diverse cultural and linguistic settings. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustained impact of integrating cultural awareness into reading instruction. Such research can provide valuable insights into the long-term benefits for students' academic performance, language proficiency, and intercultural competence. Examining teachers' experiences with schema activation can

reveal practical challenges and opportunities for improvement. Understanding their perspectives can inform the development of training programs and classroom resources that address specific needs.

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