

Since EFL learners in Iran do not have the opportunity of being exposed to the foreign culture outside the classroom, it is one of the implications of this study as such that learners should learn language and culture simultaneously by reading diverse culture-embedded texts and by having enough opportunities in classroom to adjust to the target culture. By orientation and exposure to different types of culture-embedded texts, learners will become familiar with the beliefs and lifestyle of the people whose language they are learning. This familiarity makes them more interested in reading and helps them form their own personal responses to texts. By authentic reading, they will go further than studying just instructional books. They will read texts from different genres and in this way will develop their interlanguage.

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In Hudson's (1982) study in which he explored the effects of different treatments on students from different proficiency levels, it is concluded that at the beginning and intermediate levels, pictorial context cues greatly aid comprehension. The result of Hudson's study is consistent with that of Omaggio (1979) in which she found that the visual information was significantly facilitative for readers at the lower proficiency levels. To benefit from the results of those studies, the current study used pictorial aids to help students use their illustrative and visual memory.

Another study which compared the effect of different kinds of pre-reading activities on reading comprehension was conducted by Taglieber, Johnson and Yarbrough (1988). These authors concluded that visual materials and pre-questioning techniques were more effective in comparison with the vocabulary teaching technique. In a similar study with ESL readers, Johnson (1982) concluded that background knowledge enhanced comprehension more significantly than did knowledge of vocabulary. These results are consistent with the results of the present study which used vocabulary teaching in the control conditions. The results indicated that providing learners with the vocabulary knowledge is less effective than pre-questioning and pictorial aid treatment.

Regarding the schema theoretic accounts of reading comprehension, studies done in this area along with the results of the present study support the

conclusion that culture is one of the major areas in second language acquisition. In EFL classes where learners may suffer from comprehension gaps caused by lack of cultural schemata, they should be assisted through pre-reading activities in class which can include culture notes, pictorial aids and pre-questioning techniques.

Conclusion and implications of the study

We can conclude from the results of the present study that pre-reading activities aid learners in the sense that they construct and activate the necessary cultural schemata to enhance their comprehension of the text. Several studies have been conducted which are similar in terms of their treatment and results to this study. These studies show how L2 readers' background knowledge is represented in the reading process and how that representation facilitates comprehension depending on the content of the text.

Most EFL learners fail to get an adequate comprehension of culturally unfamiliar materials, for they lack cultural background knowledge. In the present study, there was a positive effect of cultural schematic knowledge on Iranian students' comprehension of culture-embedded texts. In other words, when learners become familiar with the values, beliefs, norms, viewpoints and thoughts of native speakers, they performed better in the multiple choice reading tests.

a dictionary; however, they are unable to “demessage” it, namely they fail to reach the scriptural, schematic and pragmatic levels of comprehension (Varzegar, 1995, p. 112). The results of the study showed that when the schematic knowledge exists learners use that knowledge to predict the meaning simultaneous with using the text-based information.

Findings of the present research support the results of several empirical research studies that have also underlined the idea that language and culture are inseparable in L2 teaching and that giving enough cultural content schema facilitates to a great extent EFL learners’ reading comprehension. As Chastain (1988) asserts prepared students are more confident, more highly motivated and more enthusiastic to do the reading task in the second language. The results resonate well with that of Omaggio’s (2001) conclusion that the visual and pre-questioning treatments produced a deeper and more active involvement of the subjects prior to reading and that might have been the reason for their better comprehension.

The pre-reading activity that was used in the present study asked the learners to compare and contrast L2 and L1 cultural points. As Alptekin (1993) states the process of culture acquisition through reading culture-embedded texts is a transition from familiar to unfamiliar schematic data. The pre-reading activity was an attempt to build conceptual bridges between the culturally familiar

and unfamiliar information. Using this technique, learners were enabled to match similar items of their own culture with those of the foreign culture. On the other hand, they faced some cultural concepts which were very different from their own culture. This difference was not prohibiting but rather facilitative in the sense that, it created a positive tension for comprehension. Thorp (1991) discusses the issue of cultural differences and asserts that if language teachers in EFL classes have a good understanding of cultural differences and help learners to increase their awareness of themselves as cultural beings this can help them to learn L2 cultural concepts. In this study, the teacher attracted the students’ attention to the differences and helped them understand the differences in the right way. The results of the tests in the experimental sessions showed the efficacy of the pre-reading technique that was used.

The result of this study might indirectly support the claim that pre-reading activities are most beneficial when L2 learners are in a lower level of proficiency. The intermediate level subjects are still limited in their proficiency and so need to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies which cause comprehension problems by the cultural schemata they receive through pre-reading activities. This is consistent with Adams’ (1982) experiment results stating that the script activators were most beneficial to second language readers with lower proficiency.

to linguistic aspects such as new vocabulary items and grammar. The culturally specific topics covered in these sessions were Saint Patrick's Day, Easter Day, and Halloween. The sessions were scattered over one semester with two weeks intervals between them. In the experimental and control sessions, the subjects were supposed to read the texts and answer the comprehension questions.

Results

In order to collect empirical data from Iranian students regarding their reading comprehension of culturally embedded texts, the researchers used six reading comprehension tests. The null hypothesis (H0) stated that there was no relationship between using pre-reading activities and students comprehension of culturally unfamiliar materials. Paired t-test was used to compare the means of the experimental and control conditions in order to test the null hypothesis. The results are reported below: Table 1

As can be seen in the table with the *t-observed*- 22.21 and 28 degree of freedom, the probability level is lower than 0.01 and so the null hypothesis can be rejected. In other words learners in the experimental condition outperformend those in the control conditions.

The above result provides evidence for the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that the reading comprehension of the learners who received culture-awareness pre-reading activities differed significantly from the conditions under which the same learners received language-focused pre-reading activities. In other words, raising awareness about cultural schemata was effective, because it served as an advance organizer which activated the relevant elements of memory.

Discussion

The outcomes of the present study seem to support the notion that cultural content schema affect EFL learners' reading comprehension. 'Schema' which, according to Bartlett (1932) refers to an organized unit of memory can help learners predict the meaning simultaneous with using the text-based information. The study tried to base its claims on the importance of schematic knowledge in reading comprehension in the sense that readers were expected to actively participate in the reading task, by incorporating their background knowledge in the comprehension of the text. EFL learners are typically able "to decode the message" (i.e. understand the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence) with the help of

Table 1: Test of the mean difference between the experimental and control conditions

| Condition | N | df | T | sig | Mean | SD |
|-----------|----|----|--------|------|-------|------|
| CC | 30 | 28 | -22.21 | 0.01 | 12.19 | 0.38 |
| EC | | | | | 14.4 | 0.38 |

They were identified through establishing inter- subjectivity between the researcher and two MA students. The approved items were used as the basis for designing comprehension questions. The passages along with comprehension questions were given to five intermediate level EFL learners to examine whether the tests functioned as was expected or not. In this way the tests were piloted. To measure the reliability of test scores, the KR-21 method was used which showed an appropriate level of reliability for test scores. Learners received one score for each of the items. No penalty was given to the participants for wrong answers.

Procedure

The subjects attended six instructional sessions. These sessions were held alternatively as experimental and control sessions. In the three experimental sessions, pre-reading activities were carried out before the text was being read. As an advance organizer, students were given some culture notes to explore the target cultural points. Some pictures borrowed from the internet were added to these texts. Then, the teacher explained and elaborated on some points orally, asked students some questions and answered to their questions to ensure that they had been acquainted with the cultural points. The teacher compared the foreign cultural points with the corresponding Iranian ones in order to bring the gap between the two cultures and thereby help learners in their comprehension process.

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Similarities and differences between the two cultures helped learners in the meaning making process. While the teacher was explaining the cultural points the students were allowed to take notes in Farsi, English, or a mixture of both languages. Then the students who were supposed to have gained enough familiarity with the cultural points were asked to read the main text. To help students become more interested in the new culture and have a more contextualized experience of reading CETs, the teacher encouraged them to pursue their study about the target cultural topics by having some reading on their own. This was done to make learners interested in the foreign culture. The culturally specific topics in the experimental sessions were the Memorial Day, First Communion, and Hazing.

Three sessions were held as control sessions in which students read a culture-bound text with pre-reading activities which were not related to cultural points embedded in the text. These activities were specially related

at helping learners in their individual cultural journey. The purpose was to highlight information that often skips the mind of reading teachers and curriculum planners and to suggest that for reading to be appropriate for student needs and institutional expectations it should be seen in the light of insights from the research on cultural issues in reading comprehension. The view of reading advocated reveals the complex nature of reading and the many factors that must be taken into account when assessing students' needs and planning meaningful reading instruction.

Method *Participants*

A sample of 30 students was selected from among 60 students studying English at the institute of Jehady Daneshgahi-Tarbiat Moallem University at the intermediate level. The subjects were chosen based on their scores on a proficiency test-KET test, given to ensure their homogeneity. The researchers decided to choose the students whose scores in the reading and writing section of KET were between 50 to 60. The reason for this decision was that with this range of scores, one could make sure that the subjects of the study had reached at the right level of language proficiency to take part in the study, and that the proficiency level of all the students would not differ significantly from each other before the treatment. This point should also be considered that all the subjects received

the treatment simultaneously. Adopting a repeated measure design, the researcher divided the sessions into control and experimental ones. The subjects were all females with the age range of 20 to 26. In terms of background knowledge, as the results of the questionnaire used in the present study showed they were almost at the same level in that none of them had attended in an English native environment, read or heard about the cultural topics chosen for the present study.

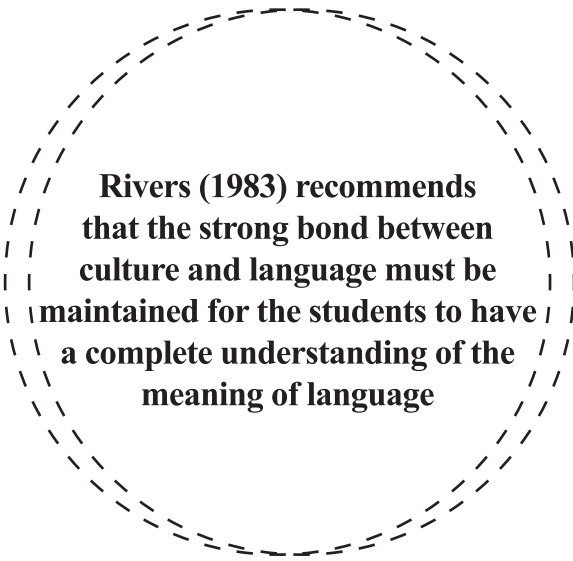
Instrumentation

The materials used consisted of six passages with the length of 250 to 350 words. The mean readability for selected passages was 4 based on Fry readability formula (see Farhady, Jafarpoor & Birjandi, 2003, p. 317). The passages were selected from among weblog texts. They were suitable for intermediate level students. The texts were checked in terms of their difficulty level and the number of new words. The topic of the texts was also checked to make sure that their comprehension would mostly be dependent to cultural points. The culturally specific topic were: Halloween, Easter Day, First Communion, Hazing, Saint Patrick's Day and Memorial Day. The texts were used both for teaching reading comprehension and for testing the students' text comprehension.

Each passage followed by 10-15 multiple choice questions. To develop multiple choice items, first the cultural points were elicited from the passages.

supposed to acquire their underlying cultural system. As this underlying cultural system is not already available to the learners, lack of cultural and social knowledge is regarded as an important factor in causing readers to misinterpret meanings in reading words or texts associated with the L2 culture (Kramsch, 1983; Steffensen, Joag-dev, & Anderson, 1979). Alptekin (1993) also asserts that as a natural tendency, the learner wants to assess a novel stimulus with respect to one's own cultural system. Regardless of how much explanation is provided, the reader may still fail to perceive the cultural issue in the same way a native speaker of English does. Each one of us as L2 readers would always create our own unique meaning based on our differing experiences. In other words, comprehension may be "culturally based and culturally biased" (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983, P. 554).

The process of culture acquisition through reading culture-embedded text is "transition from familiar to unfamiliar schematic data" in which readers "build conceptual bridges" between the culturally familiar and the unfamiliar, in order not to give rise to conflicts in the "fit in their culture-specific aspect of cognition" (Alptekin, 1993, pp. 141-142). For this reason foreign language educators have reached consensus that culture needs to be an integral part of foreign language teaching at all levels. Formerly thought of as the fifth language skill, culture was viewed as information



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conveyed by the foreign language rather than as a part of the foreign language itself. However, if one views language as social practice, culture becomes the core of foreign language instruction (Kramsch, 1998).

The process of second or foreign language is fraught with intercultural misunderstandings and certain levels of ethnocentrism. This implies that the connection between language and culture should not be underestimated. By knowing about a different culture, language learners develop self-awareness and gain cultural intelligence as a basis for examining their position in their own culture and the world as a whole. In this process, students gain a new lens through which they will be able to deal with their own ethnocentrism and form a personal response to what they see. Drawing on the inherent and undisputed link between language and culture and the obvious differences between the local and target cultures, the present study aimed

new information appearing in written discourse to their existing knowledge. The design of many of these pre-organizers reflects Ausubel's (1960) definition of readiness. The purpose of their use is to create a mind-set prior to reading. Since schema theory requires schema activation or background knowledge support before starting to read in order to comprehend the text better, reading activities, especially pre-reading activities, play a vital role in schema theory-based reading models (Chen and Graves, 1995). Activating prior knowledge and previewing will not only prepare learners for the topic to be introduced, but will also make comprehension of the text go smoother. After previewing a topic, students will be able to pay more attention to the essential facts of the discourse rather than being distracted by words that they were not ready for (Grabe, 2009). All this supported by the schema theory research which has provided strong evidence for the effectiveness of pre-reading activities.

Language as the principal means for communication in social encounters is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. To be meaningful, language must be culture-bound and culture-specific. Culture is deeply ingrained in the very fiber of our being, and language, the means for communication among member of a culture is the most visible expression of that culture. From a sociolinguistic perspective, culture is considered to be inseparable from language and communication in social

contexts. Competence in language use is determined not only by the ability to use language with grammatical accuracy, but also to use language appropriate to particular contexts (Tseng, 2002, p. 11). Thus, successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies language. Rivers (1983) recommends that the strong bond between culture and language must be maintained for the students to have a complete understanding of the meaning of language. She believes that differences in values and attitudes are one of the main sources of problems learners face in learning a foreign language. The individual's personal and cultural knowledge is associated with participation in home and neighborhood activities and social organizations. This means that learners' L1 cultural knowledge is tightly enmeshed with a fabric of inter-subjective relations. Reading a text embedded in a different culture creates insurmountable problems due to the fact the learners lack the necessary cultural knowledge due to the absence of opportunities for its accumulation through participation in the target culture.

Most EFL textbook writers are native speakers who consciously or unconsciously transmit their views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of their own English speaking society, usually the United States or the United Kingdom (Alptekin, 1993, p. 136). So, when learners are involved in the process of studying these textbooks; they are

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complex process that can fail for a host of possible reasons, and no clear ‘poor comprehenders’ profile has emerged yet (Nation et al., 2004), a growing body of research has identified a certain type of poor comprehenders who have the meanings of separate words to arrive at the meaning of an entire sentence or of the whole text. Presumably, such ideas have motivated Stahl and Nagy (2006, p. 10) claim that “the knowledge of individual words is simply the tip of the iceberg... it is the rich, interconnected knowledge of concepts that really drives comprehension”. Schema theorists view reading comprehension from a cognitive perspective. They perceive schema or cognitive structures as in-the-head representations of something out there in the world. Readers can draw meaning from the texts by accessing background knowledge, or “schema”, which is a technical word coined by Bartlett (1932) referring to an organized unit of memory

and prior experiences along with prior knowledge of language.

The past 20 years of research into the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension has often concentrated on three general categories; formal schemata, linguistic schemata, and content schemata. Formal schemata are higher order structures containing knowledge of rhetorical organization structures, including knowledge of the general properties of text types and differences in genre (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Formal schemata have frequently been explored in conjunction with content schemata, as the two interact simultaneously during the L2 reading process. As with formal schemata, linguistic schemata which include knowledge of the target language have primarily been investigated in relation to other schemata in the interactive reading process. The content schemata which a reader brings to a text are informational clusters in the reader’s mind that pertain to ideas, experiences or contextual clues found within the text. Content schemata can be classified into different types. One which has attracted growing interest is the “culture-specific content schema”, (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) including knowledge about people, the world, culture, and the universe. Among the three types of schemata, the majority of studies have investigated strategies for developing and activating content schemata.

Pre-reading strategies have been developed to help students relate

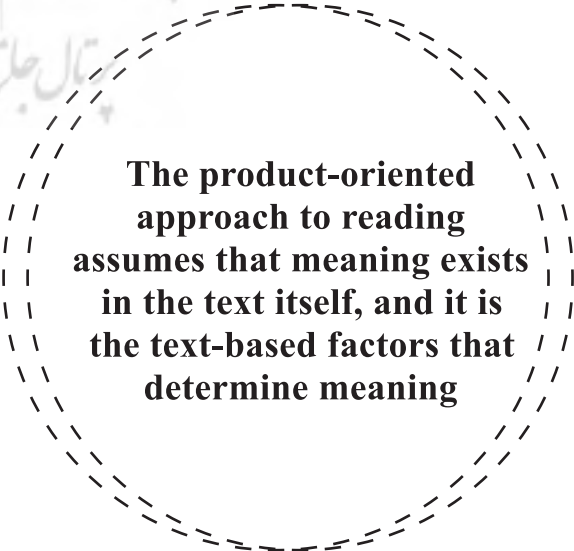
To deal with the reading process, Barnett (1988) postulated three reading models (bottom-up, top-down, and interactive models) that are frequently referred to in explaining the reading process in the second language. Metaphorically, bottom-up models suggest that all reading follows a mechanical pattern in which the reader creates a piece-by-piece mental translation of the information in the text with little interference from his/her own background knowledge. Based on this extreme view, the reader processes each word letter-by-letter, each sentence word-by-word and each text sentence-by-sentence in a strictly linear fashion.

Top-down models assume that reading is primarily directed by the reader's goals and expectations (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Again, such a view is general and metaphorical. According to top-down models, the reader is characterized as someone who has a set of expectations about the text information and samples enough information from the text to confirm or reject these expectations.

Based on the interactive model, which combines elements of both models, readers incorporate background knowledge and such text-based information as vocabulary, syntax, and content. So, bottom-up and top-down processes occur simultaneously. That is, readers not only recognize words very rapidly and keep them active in their memories, but also analyze the structure of sentences. They make clause-level meaning, build main ideas, monitor comprehension and so

on simultaneously. In this model, readers are seen as active participants in the reading process, and their experiences and knowledge play a crucial role in their reading comprehension.

Research in L2 reading comprehension has recently paid more attention to the readers' prior knowledge and their cognitive approach to the texts on the basis of the schema theory (Barrett, 1988; Goodman, 1967). The assumption here is that reading is the process of making sense of a text by guessing, making predictions, and making inferences about word meanings. That is why research into the psychological processes involved in comprehension has been carried out by cognitive psychologists. Their view of successful comprehension is that it depends on two key factors: linguistic knowledge and the skills to put the knowledge for text-meaning construction into use (Koda, 2005). While it must be acknowledged that reading comprehension is such a



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Introduction

EFL learners inevitably face specific challenges when they are exposed to highly culture-specific content. Iranian EFL learners might have more problems with culture-specific texts since they are not typically exposed to the culture of the target language mainly because they study English for personal academic goals in a non-native environment. Under such circumstances, Iranian students are assumed to have problems in comprehending texts embedded with norms, beliefs, values, and rhetorical patterns different from those of Iranian culture. The proposition is that cultural misunderstanding can be avoided through a culturally informed approach to text comprehension.

Since reading comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world which may be culturally-based and culturally-biased and cultural schemata are most often not available to the learners of English as a foreign language, supplying appropriate contextual information (background knowledge) to EFL/ESL students is a prerequisite for comprehending passages in the second language. It was the purpose of the study as such to examine the effects of activating and supplying cultural schema through pre-reading activities on learners' reading comprehension.

Background

Reading comprehension is one of the main purposes of L2 teaching and learning and is defined as the most

important academic language skill (Grabe and Stoller, 2001). The two main approaches to reading according to Alderson and Urquhart (1984) are the product-oriented and the process-oriented ones. The product-oriented approach to reading assumes that meaning exists in the text itself, and it is the text-based factors that determine meaning. In this view, pre-reading activities rely mostly on clarifying the meaning of difficult words or complex structures. Whereas for the second process-oriented approach to reading, meaning is obtained through successful interaction between the reader and the text, and it is inside-the-head factors that play an important role in comprehension. Accordingly background knowledge is assumed to be of primary importance for L2 readers, and pre-reading activities should be used for activating and constructing such background knowledge.

Wallace (1992) reports that researchers of both first and second language reading have argued against the view that texts are self-contained objects, and that the reader's job is merely to recover meaning. This potential is realized only through interaction between the text and the reader. That is, meaning is created in the course of reading as the reader draws both on existing linguistic and schematic knowledge and the input provided by the printed or written text. The ability to read requires that the reader extracts information from a text and relates it to his or her background knowledge as appropriate (Goodman, 1967, Grabe, 2009).

The Effects of Cultural Schemata on EFL Students' Reading Comprehension



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چکیده

نقش حیاتی خواندن و درک مطلب در یادگیری زبان دوم به‌طور روزافزون مورد تأکید قرار گرفته است. به‌علاوه، در مورد نقش طرح‌واره‌های دانش زمینه‌ای در درک مطلب نیز اتفاق نظر وجود دارد. زبان‌آموزان ایرانی احتمالاً در خواندن متون وابسته به فرهنگ زبان دوم با مشکلات فراوانی مواجه می‌شوند که دلیلش می‌تواند هدف یادگیری زبان دوم باشد که عمدتاً ناظر بر هدف‌های آکادمیک شخصی در محیط زبان خارجی است. در چنین شرایطی، زبان‌آموزان در درک متونی که مبتنی بر هنجارها، باورها، ارزش‌ها و الگوهای بیانی فرهنگی به جز فرهنگ ایرانی باشند، مشکل خواهند داشت. مقاله حاضر بر این فرض مبتنی است که با انتخاب رویکردی که از فرهنگ وام گرفته شده باشد، می‌توان از سوءبرداشت‌های فرهنگی در خواندن متون جلوگیری کرد. از آن‌جا که خواندن و درک مطلب، دانش فرد را که پایه‌های فرهنگی دارد و در مواردی نیز بر پیش‌داوری‌های فرهنگی استوار است، درگیر می‌کند و هنگام خواندن متون زبان دوم طرح‌واره‌های فرهنگی زبان دوم نیز در دسترس خواننده نیستند، ارائه دانش زمینه‌ای متناسب با متن در کلاس‌های زبان برای درک متون ضرورت دارد. هدف طرح پژوهشی موضوع مقاله حاضر آن بوده است که تأثیر فعال کردن طرح‌واره‌های فرهنگی زبان دوم را بر درک مطلب زبان‌آموزان ایرانی بسنجد. کلیدواژه‌ها: درک مطلب، طرح‌واره‌های فرهنگی، رویکرد فرایند محور-رویکرد نتیجه محور، فعالیت‌های قبل از خواندن، متون وابسته به فرهنگ زبان دوم

Abstract

The critical role of reading comprehension in L2 learning has been widely acknowledged. There is also consensus over the role of schema in the comprehension process. This article reports on a research designed to determine the effect of cultural background knowledge on EFL learners' comprehension. To this end, 30 intermediate level students who were selected based on their performance on a language proficiency test attended six sessions which were held alternatively as control and experimental ones. In the control sessions, subjects did pre-reading activities focusing on linguistic aspects of the texts. In the experimental sessions, subjects were provided with activities intended to activate cultural schemata. Comparison of the mean score of the control sessions with the mean score of the experimental sessions showed that subjects performed significantly better in the experimental sessions. The article concludes by suggesting that providing readers with appropriate cultural schemata before reading culture-embedded texts can improve their comprehension.

Key Words: product-oriented approach, process-oriented approach, cultural schemata, pre-reading activities, culturally-embedded texts