The Impact of Content Familiarity on Reading Comprehension among Male and Female Students

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The current study investigated the impacts of content familiarity on the comprehension performance of male and female Saudi students. The study adopted the quantitative method and tested thirty-two male and female university students through two gender-neutral texts, one familiar and the other one unfamiliar. The outcomes revealed that content familiarity had meaningful influences on the students' comprehension performance. The study also showed a significant difference between male and female participants in terms of text familiarity with the familiar text. The case is quite similar to the unfamiliar text. The overall result shows that female students outperformed male counterparts in this comprehension test. Such results should be taken into consideration by the curriculum designers

1. INTRODUCTION

It's a fact that we have more proficient readers than others. For the majority of EFL and ESL students of English language, the process of reading comprehension does not only depend on the reading itself to acquire the meaning but it also depends at some other factors involved in getting the correct understanding. Reading skill is considered one of the most sensitive cases in academic life. Many studies and research papers tried and still trying to look for the elements that make the process of reading comprehension different from a reader to another like, gender, interest and prior knowledge. In this study we are trying to test the relationship between two important elements in reading comprehension culture; familiarity and gender and their influence on the process of reading comprehension. Regarding the first factor, it can be said that cultural familiarity or prior knowledge can be a major factor that influences reading comprehension Performance. The role of culture in reading comprehension is determined as cultural schema and can be explained as the part played by the culture to get the best comprehension of the text. Obviously, there is a positive relation between the text and its background in the aspect of understanding. There are assumptions that when the reader possesses that kind of background knowledge, he/ she becomes able more to comprehend and understand the text. Regarding the other factor, gender, many studies were conducted and much research was done to investigate how both males and females deal with the text. In short, we can say that those studies reached two different or even opposite conclusions. Some suggested that males do better than females in terms of reading comprehension and understanding while others suggested the opposite. Our study aims to find out if there are any differences between males and females and whether the familiarity of the contents plays a role in the process of comprehension or not?

1.2 Statement of the problem

Before we look at the concept of cultural familiarity, it is better to define the term 'culture' first. According to Zieghan (2001), the simplest definition of culture embodies the shared beliefs, values, and practices of a given group of people. Individually, these may vary slightly within a culture, but overall the group's worldview would be the same. She goes on to say that there are some key differences between cultures. One is that society might value the individual more than the whole or vice versa.

Cultural familiarity may refer to a person's familiarity with a variety of different cultural aspects (Freimuth, 2008). Existing research shows various examples of this. For instance, Brantmeier (2003) did her study on the familiarity of the topics in passages from short stories. Lazar (1993) gives numerous examples of cultural aspects in texts. In her list, she

included objects or products that are unique to a society.

Many studies showed that the familiarity of the content makes it easy to comprehend the meaning in the text. That means as much you have background knowledge, as much you score in reading comprehension. The problem being investigated here is the element of familiarity interacted with other variables like gender or interest. In fact, that can be very beneficial for educators who design and implement reading courses to consider these related factors.

1.3 Research Questions

In this study, the researchers are trying to examine the relationship between familiarity and performance on reading comprehension. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between text familiarity and better reading comprehension performance of second language reading?
2. Are there any gender differences?
3. How the two sexes are affected by the content familiarity in the aspect of comprehension performance?

1.4 Significance of the study

This study can propose some considerations of text-selection for teaching in the ESL and EFL classrooms such as the use of culturally familiar texts that have themes and subject-matter fitting the students' gender, general age, group and interests so that a more meaningful and effective interaction with the texts would take place. With known themes in the text, the students would be able to show more comprehension and will be more related to the text and closer to what is in the writer's mind. The findings of this study unearthed the students' perceptions and actual responses towards texts. Cultural familiarity with aspects in the text such as with the character, subject matter or language use did play a role in facilitating students' comprehension and enhancing transaction with the text (Zailin & Yusoff, 2004). This study can enrich and emphasize the role of motivation in learning by attracting the enjoyment factors to the learning process, especially in reading through studying text from the background of the student.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Schema theory

It's proved by theories and studies that very well readers build their comprehension of the text by referring to their background knowledge making a kind of connection or a link between the meaning and the text itself. By knowing the background of the text, the reader will be more familiar with what the writer is looking for or wants to say. This issue can be described by the schema theory to show the effect of content familiarity and the differences between males and females. In Schema Theory, we may find a good explanation for the effect of the culture or the background. Cultural schema with its role in comprehending the content of the text refers to that part played by the culture to give full or a sufficient understanding of the text. For example, Pulido (2004) did a study on university students: high intermediate L2 learners of Spanish. She focused on incidental vocabulary acquisition as well as the cultural familiarity of a text and found a positive co-relation between the two. Schema theory is needed to give general information and common concepts that help to understand the elements that affect the text understanding such as interests. According to the schema theory, all knowledge is arranged into sets and information is stored in these sets or units of knowledge. Therefore, the concept of schema can be used to refer to that collection or system which leads readers possessing it to the process knowledge understanding.

2.2 Content familiarity

One of the popular studies that focused on the issues of content familiarity and gender differences is under the titled "Gender Differences in Reading Comprehension Performance in Relation to Content Familiarity of Gender-Neutral Texts" by Al-Shumaimeri (2005) from which we are going adopt the style as well as the tools for our study. Her study results included that there are important and clear differences between females and males in the comprehension of foreign language using reading skill and their comprehension performances affected by familiar and unfamiliar text form. The relationship between gender and the familiarity of the content shows a great ability in effecting the performance of the readers fully comprehension for a neutral text. Al-Shumaimeri (2005) explains that in his study, males did better in dealing with neutral familiar and unfamiliar texts. In their study (1988), Hyde and Linn assumed that the reason or the rationale behind that gap and difference between male and female comprehension goes back to the nature of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) test which included a heavy content of reading materials. Many studies

were conducted to investigate the differences between males and females. For example, Dolittle and Welch (1989)reached a conclusion that different passages give different responses and also showed that females did better in humanities texts while the male participants did better in science text. Many studies indicate that the background knowledge of the readers affects the comprehension of any reading text. Alderson (2000) brought that concept of knowledge or schemata activation and that the reader's knowledge should be activates during the reading activity leading him/her to perform better. He claimed that the product and the outcome of the reading comprehension might differ from a person to another depending on the amount of their knowledge and experience. This might be because in different cultures you may find the word with the same spelling but with different meaning or expectation, which means that one word can refer to different things for different people. For example, the word wedding may different things for two persons from different cultures.

When the text is familiar, that reflects a positive influence on the performance of reading and comprehending. That happens by exploring the target culture with objective questions. This can be of a great help for the students to build their background knowledge and improve their reading skill.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1 Participants
The subjects of our study were 32 Saudi undergraduate English language students. They were male and female participants divided equally into four groups; two females and two males. They were from the department of English languages in the college of proprietary Year program, Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia. Since they were Saudi students, they, for sure, have strong relation to their culture which is considered as a very important thing here to be measured. The subjects of this study had been selected randomly from two different classes. Both male and female subjects were basically students in the same year of study and doing the same courses. All students must pass a proficiency test as an admission requirement according to the regulations of the ministry of higher education in Saudi Arabia and according to their scores in this proficiency test, they accepted in the college programs which means that all students are considered to be at the same proficiency level.

3.2 Research Design
By using the same texts for males and females, this study will try to examine the different in comprehending text by the tow sexes males and females according the familiarity of the content. To do this we formed, a 2 x 2 design for the subjects, two sides for one for the male and another one for females and two types of text familiarity one is familiar and another one is unfamiliar). The scores that we got from multiple-choice questions are the dependent variable, this way considered the most common way in testing reading comprehension.

3.3 Material data collection instruments
3.3.1 Two reading passages
In this research, two passages were used. They were adopted from the internet (websites related to the different cultures and background of Britain and Saudi Arabia with no sign that they are related in any way or have any relationship with males or females. We were tried to make sure that they are not gender bias. Also, the two passages can show a high degree of familiarity and unfamiliarity, and also show a descriptive top-level.

One of these passages contained 340 words, and it is titled as London Icons: The Red Telephone Box (Luxford, 2018). It is assumed to be the unfamiliar text in our study because it talks about the iconic red telephone box redundant the most enduring symbols of London and the United Kingdom today which it is unpopular and unknown to Saudi Arabian students and public. ARABIC COFFEE (GAHWA ARABI) in Saudi Arabia by (DJAMIL, 2016) is the title of the other text of this study talking about that popular tradition of serving this special type of coffee in Saudi Arabia. In contrast with the first text, it is considered as familiar to students as a part of their daily life. For the unfamiliar passage, we presumed that Saudi students would not have much or even zero knowledge about it because it represents a special case in a very far area. Also, it is considered unpopular since the red boxes do not exist anymore and became a part of the British memories only.

3.3.2 Multiple-Choice Questions
Every passage has a multiple choice question test consisting of ten questions. The students were required to answer the questions after they had read the passages. Clear and simple instructions were given to the students about the nature of the test. In fact, the test time was restricted by 25 minutes to be finished. Also, extra ten minutes were divided equally for the pre and post-tests. Finally, we expressed our thanks for the students appreciating their volunteering and participation.

3.3.3 Pre- and Post-Test Questionnaires

To achieve a kind of credibility regarding familiarity since it is one of the core issues in the study and to measure the familiarity of both texts to the students, two short questionnaires were designed including short Yes/No questions. As can be seen in the tables below, the Pre-test questions were aiming at measuring the student's familiarity of the two topics by asking them whether they have heard, read or watched the story. As a kind of reinforcement for the questionnaires, there was an extra questionnaire (the Post-Test) for both texts urging the students to compare the encountered information with their own knowledge.

Table 1: Pre and Post tests for the familiar passage (Gahwa Arabi)

Questionnaire Items	Gender	Response		
Pre-test		Yes	No	Not sure
1. Have you heard the name Gahwa Arabi?	Male	100.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
	Female	100.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
2. Have you heard the story of the Gahwa Arabi?	Male	72.5 %	15.5 %	12.5 %
	Female	81.5 %	5.25 %	13.25 %
3. Have you read any report about the Gahwa Arabi?	Male	71.25 %	9.25 %	19.5 %
	Female	83.25 %	8.25 %	9.5 %
4. Have you watched any documentary about the Gahwa Arabi?	Male	95.5 %	3.5 %	1.0 %
	Female	98.25 %	0.0 %	2.75 %
Post test	Male		Female	
Complete new knowledge	0.0 %		0.0 %	
Mostly new knowledge	0.0 %		0.0 %	
Have new and have old	12.5 %		8.0 %	
Mostly old knowledge	25.5 %		18.75 %	
Complete old knowledge	72.0 %		73.25 %	

Table 2: Pre and Post Tests for the unfamiliar passage (Red Box).

Questionnaire Items	Gender	Response		
Pre-test		Yes	No	Not sure
1. Have you heard the name Red Box?	Male	15.0 %	72.5 %	12.5 %
	Female	0.0 %	100.0 %	0.0 %
2. Have you heard the story of the Red Box?	Male	31.25 %	31.25 %	37.5 %
	Female	6.25 %	56.25 %	37.5 %
3. Have you read any report about the Red Box?	Male	31.25 %	62.5 %	6.25 %
	Female	12.5 %	68.75 %	18.75 %
4. Have you watched any documentary about the Red Box?	Male	31.25 %	25.0 %	43.75 %
	Female	25.0 %	62.5 %	12.5 %
Post test	Male		Female	
Complete new knowledge	40.25 %		37.5 %	

Mostly new knowledge	32.75 %	40.75 %
Have new and have old	12.5 %	12.0 %
Mostly old knowledge	10.0 %	8.75 %
Complete old knowledge	4.5 %	1.75 %

3.4 Procedures

The data collection was conducted on Saudi Bachelor degree students at Northern Border university. There were two groups for each gender. The first group was of 16 males who formed two groups in a random way. The other group of female students which was also of 16 was split up in the same way forming another two groups. The four groups performed comprehension tests. On the sake of this study purpose, two groups; one male and one female, performed the test on the familiar topic ARABIC COFFEE (GAHWA ARABI) and the other two groups did that on an unfamiliar topic (London Icons: The Red Telephone Box). The participants were given 35 minutes to finish the tasks including the pre and the post-tests which were given 5 minutes for each.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected was based on the students' performance based on their comprehension of the test questions. After having the data, we moved to the next step which is the analysis looking for the best possible techniques through which we can get a clear picture and manage to provide answers to the research questions. In order to achieve that goal, the famous two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used as the first step to provide us with some results and get us closer to understand the nature of the influence of our independent variables on the process of reading comprehension and understanding. For the second step which is considered as a complement for this study seeking to achieve the rest of the aims and answer the questions as clear as possible, we are using t-tests to be applied on each of the independent variables.

4.RESULTS

Gender and content familiarity were the two independent variables investigated in this study in order to see their influence as well as their importance to the readers in terms of achieving that goal of understanding and comprehension. The final scores of both male and female participants were put under observation and analysis they can provide us with the necessary information we need. As mentioned above, certain ways of analysis were used to investigate the main concerns of this study represented by the research questions. The first analysis through the two-way ANOVA testing systems was used to answer the first question that is considered as the core issue related to that influencing rule of both content familiarity and gender difference on the dependent variable (reading comprehension). (Table 3) explains that relation and influence in the language of numbers through the two-way ANOVA test.

Table 3: Two-Way ANOVA results for the effects of the IVs

			DF	MEAN SQ.	F	SIG.
Familiarity	U	4.43	1	28.125	5.243	.030*
	F	6.31				
Gender	M	4.75	1	12.500	11.798	.002*
	F	6				
Gender x Familiarity			1	10.125	4.247	.049*
Error			28	2.384		

The results showed remarkable differences in terms of text familiarity and its relation with the comprehension performance scores. That can be easily noticed from the means score which is noticeably different and higher for the familiar text with 6.31 than the unfamiliar one with 4.43. In other words, the participants performed better when the text was familiar. By having a close look, we can say that Table 3 reveals that the numbers are not even close in the case of male and female students' total

comprehension performance regardless the familiarity of the content. It can be seen clearly that males obtained 4.75 while females got 6 which shows that female participants performed better than male students.

That tells us that gender differences exist and that is a strong influencing factor in the process of comprehension. Moreover, it is noticeable that there is no remarkable interaction between the two independent variables and such thing does not affect the reading comprehension scores.

Table 4, which was designed for further analysis and to give us a closer look using t-tests testing system, measures independent samples to confirms that the issue of gender difference is an influencing factor in the process of reading.

Table 4: T-tests results for independent samples of Gender for each type of text

TYPE OF TEXT	GENDER	N	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	TVALUE	SIG. (2 TAILED)
Familiar text	Male	8	6.2500	1.48805	0.213	.835
	Female	8	6.3750	.74402		
Unfamiliar text	Male	8	3.2500	2.12132	2.582	.022*
	Female	8	5.6250	1.50594		

This table shows significant differences between male and female participants in terms of text familiarity with the familiar text which can be clearly notices at the alpha level of .05 (p = .835). In the unfamiliar text (London Icons: The Red Telephone Box), the case is quite similar. The number is different, but still there is a variation in terms of gender with the unfamiliar. The overall result shows that female students outperformed the male participants in this comprehension test, as it can be seen from the mean scores achieved.
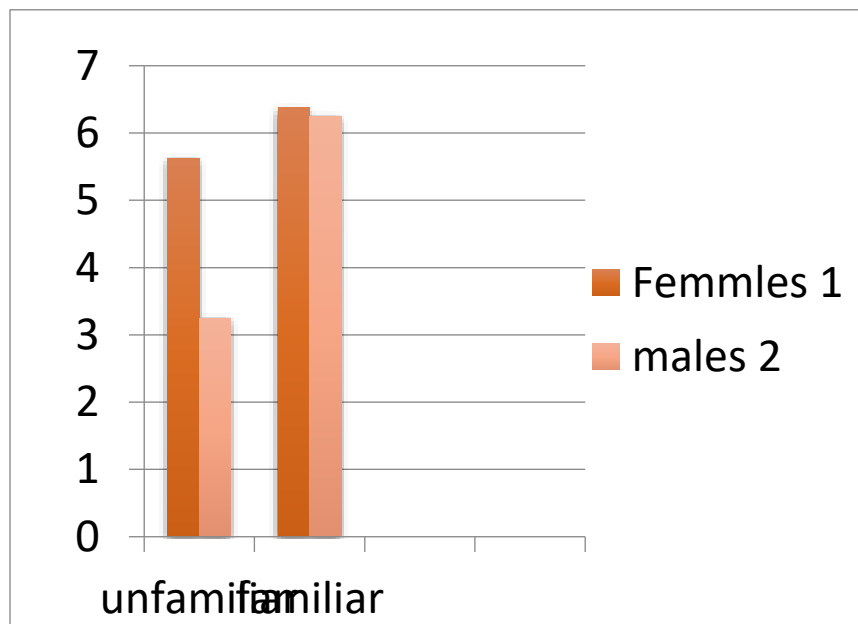

Figure 5: The responses of both male and female students toward the familiar and unfamiliar texts.

4.1 Limitation of the study
No English proficiency test was conducted for the student, and that might affect the accuracy of testing.

That might explain the wide differences between males and females in reacting to the two texts. The level of proficiency can interfere strongly in

answering the MCQs, which may lead to create a variety in comprehending the two texts and finally some answers appeared to be better than others.

5. CONCLUSION

The main concern of this work was to understand the nature or the influence both gender and familiarity, the independent variables in this study, have on the process of reading and on the way students interact with the text to achieve comprehension. To achieve that goal, two types of tests were conducted in an attempt to answer the three questions of this research. As has been mentioned above and after using two popular ways of analysis, the results showed that there were differences between the participants from both genders assuming that the issue of gender difference is really important to be taken into consideration. Moreover, the results confirmed those of previous studies that content familiarity plays the role of facilitating comprehension performance regardless gender difference. Since this research, like other research papers in the field of education, aims at the development of the educational system, it strongly recommends that gender differences should be taken into consideration by teachers and educators of all levels. This is important in order to fill this gender gap and to maintain equal opportunities for both genders.

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