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## EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The investigation of cultural background perception on reading comprehension ability: A case of intermediate EFL learners in Zanjan

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**Abstract:** Learners' perception of culture on receptive skills, more specifically on reading comprehension, has been an area facing a big challenge contemporarily. The current research aimed to investigate the cultural perception of Iranian EFL learners on reading comprehension ability. To conduct the study, an exploratory quantitative ex-post facto design (Dornyei, 2007) consisting of a questionnaire and interview study was used. Participants, 50 intermediate EFL learners (25 males, 25 females), were selected using the Oxford Placement Test. The participants were provided with two passages with different cultural contents (one containing Iranian culture and another containing culture of English-speaking countries). Then



Houman Bijani

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Houman Bijani is an assistant professor in Applied Linguistics (TEFL) from Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran. He is also a faculty member of Zanjan Islamic Azad University. He got his MA in TEFL from Allameh Tabataba'i University as a top student. He has published several research papers in national and international language teaching journals. His areas of interest include quantitative assessment, teacher education, and language research. He has published over 30 scholarly research articles, in ISI and internationally-known scientific research journals, mostly related to rater training programs. This research is a part of a research thesis investigating the impact of cultural integration in learners' perceptions of reading comprehension ability.

Houman Bijani was honored to supervise the research team including two other researchers, Mina Sahrayi and Salim Said Bani Orabah. Mina Sahrayi is an MA holder in TEFL from Zanjan Islamic Azad University. She has published a few research articles in recognizable ISC journals. Her area of interest is the implication of culture in second language acquisition.

Salim Said Bani Orabah is a senior lecturer of English and the Head of English Language Center at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Ibra, Sultanate of Oman. He has published some articles in valid international ISI journals. He got his doctorate from the University of Exeter, England. His areas of interest include teacher education and language research.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The purpose of this research is to investigate Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perceptions of culture on their reading comprehension. Therefore, an interview and a questionnaire, which had already been validated, were used. 50 participants including 25 male and 25 female intermediate EFL learners were homogenized using the Oxford Placement Test. Afterwards, the participants were given two passages with different cultural contents, one representing the Iranian culture and the other representing that of English-spoken countries. Then, the participants answered a number of questions presented through a questionnaire and an interview. The results indicated that the participants had similar cultural perceptions on reading comprehension; however, their gender and social class were not found to have any impact accordingly. The results also demonstrated that Iranian EFL learners had a positive attitude towards the integration of cultural materials into reading passages to better help language learners acquire the target language.

participants were required to fill in a Likert-scale questionnaire which was distributed through Google Form online platform. Also, an interview session was conducted to gather more detailed data. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to find common themes. Analysis of interview and questionnaire data showed that learners hold similar cultural perceptions on reading comprehension ability, yet gender and social class have no significant impact on learners' perceptions. The results of the study specified that Iranian EFL learners held a positive attitude towards the integration of cultural materials into reading passages to better comprehend the target language. Moreover, it was seen that gender and social class did not impact significantly learners' cultural perceptions of English reading comprehension. The findings imply that ESL students with various reading levels or capabilities can learn from materials that are culturally diverse, specifically the ones at higher reading proficiency levels.

**Subjects: Political Economy; Finance; Business, Management and Accounting**

**Keywords: Background or prior knowledge; culture; learners' perception; reading comprehension**

## 1. Introduction

Reading is one of the challenging language skills, especially in teaching a language in a second or foreign context. Also, it has been considered essential for academic success (Liu, 2015; Maher Salah, 2008). Yang (2017) regards reading as a mental complex process that creates an interaction between reader and author. In other words, it has been stated that comprehension of meaning and ideas is the final goal of reading skills (McNamara, 2007, as cited in Tavakoli, 2014). It is interesting to know that within this process of comprehension, complexity, and mentality there lies a crucial issue of culture. Language instruction in general and a second or foreign language, in particular, should also consist of some cultural features that the learners have to be acquainted with to facilitate this process (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Bedford, 1981; Carrell, 1983; Johnson, 1981). It is believed that second and foreign language teaching is a way to improve both language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and cultural competence at the same time (Yang, 2017). Background knowledge and understanding of the new culture are elements that can influence the comprehension ability of ESL students along with their linguistic ability (Afflerbach et al., 2020; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Johnson, 1981). For illustration, the complexity of foreign languages exacerbates the comprehension of texts for EFL learners. Foreign language complexity and lack of adequate background knowledge are causes of concern in choosing appropriate reading passages for EFL learners. Research in the reading comprehension of texts of a foreign cultural background has demonstrated that "discourse has a meaning of its own which determines the relative meaningfulness of groups of sentences which comprise it" (Johnson, 1981, p. 169). It is important to provide learners with reading materials along with integrating and using background knowledge to reduce the problem of incomprehensibility among learners. "Comprehension of words, sentences, and discourse could not be simply a matter of applying linguistic knowledge. Every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well" (Anderson et al., 1977, p. 369). Reading texts are full of culturally-based words and sentences. Separation of culture from reading is not easy; furthermore, it should be reiterated that comprehension without cultural background may not be fulfilled completely.

Despite previous research on cultural awareness (e.g., Wu, 2021), it seems that a large number of ESL learners are not sufficiently cognizant of the cultural components of the language they are learning. On the one hand, little is known about the misunderstanding of reading passages while

studying and also misinterpretation when communicating with other speakers of that language. On the other hand, it is still questionable whether the knowledge of cultural schema relating to specific reading texts might influence comprehension of English texts. There has been no research investigating the impact of the culture of the new language on language learning in a specific skill, and also, the texts which are used by ESL students do not consist of cultural elements of American English. Some students might claim that they are acquainted with that foreign culture (Englebert & Dong, 2004). But it should be mentioned that appropriate schemata and proper cultural background are the major factors influencing the learning and comprehension process. Culture as an interwoven element in a language is considered to be significant in language teaching and policy (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020). Therefore, language instructors must educate learners on cultural background knowledge, integrate culturally appropriate teaching approaches, and investigate culturally-based linguistics to encourage comprehension in the learning process. Regarding the above-mentioned point; however, there have been no controlled studies that discuss and explore the cultural perception and reading comprehension of language learners, especially in EFL contexts such as Iranian language classrooms. The research to date has tended to focus on cultural issues regarding learning language components. Thus, no study has been done exploring learners' reading comprehension as influenced by their cultural awareness. Consequently, by considering the aforementioned gaps, the present study explored cultural perception, reading comprehension, learners' comprehension of English texts, and cultural attitudes. Thus, the following research questions can be formulated:

*RQ1: What are the cultural perceptions of Iranian EFL learners on English texts?*

*RQ2: Is there any significant association among cultural perceptions of Iranian EFL learners on comprehension of English texts based on their social class?*

*RQ3: Is there any significant association between male and female Iranian EFL learners' cultural perceptions?*

## **2. Literature review**

Reading has been introduced as a cognitive and constructive process (Woolley, 2011). According to "Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics" reading is defined as:

The processes by which the meaning of a written text is understood. When this is done silently it is known as silent reading. The understanding that results is called reading comprehension. Reading employs many different cognitive skills, including letter and word recognition, knowledge of syntax, and recognition of text types and text structure. Comprehension that is based on clues in the text is referred to as bottom-up processing, and comprehension that makes use of information outside of the text is known as top-down processing. (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 483)

Johnson (1981) believed that language is complex and culture is one of the items that cause complexity in language learning and preparing appropriate passages and texts for EFL/ESL language classrooms. Therefore, integration of native culture in the reading materials might facilitate reading comprehension for language learners. There are three reasons, according to Rumelhart (1980), for readers' failure through the process of comprehension: 1) the reader might not have proper schemata; 2) the clues prepared by the author might be insufficient for activating those schemata; and 3) the reader might find a persistent interpretation of the passage however not the one meant. Comprehending reading materials of any kind has a direct connection with background knowledge.

As it was discussed earlier, schema theory illustrates the aspects of background knowledge in reading comprehension. In other words, readers' background knowledge has a key role in a better

understanding of reading texts (Yang, 2017). It has been declared that “there is something behind the eyes of readers while reading a text other than their linguistic knowledge for perceiving and comprehending a text” (Yang, 2017, p. 371). Carrell (1983) has referred to this as cultural background knowledge which might cause some problems in EFL/ESL classrooms. It can be stated that schema is different in every ESL/EFL student since they might be from different cultures. Therefore, learners might experience misunderstandings while reading foreign reading texts. Adequate cultural background knowledge in the form of learners’ perceptions, information in mind, emotions, and concepts can be effective in the reading comprehension process “when the cultural background is familiar and students can draw on cultural information in the decoding process” (Paulston & Bruder, 1976, pp. 5–6).

Language, food, clothes, literature, religion, values, traditions, and lifestyle have been considered components of culture or what a group of people shares in specific areas. However, it should be emphasized that the present study explored culture as background knowledge and a means of learning and facilitating reading comprehension. Knowing about other cultures is considered a way for better communication with individuals of that society, improving linguistic knowledge, and motivating learners in their learning process.

Regarding the importance of cultural background, Abdzadeh and Baker (2020) argued that using cultural materials in Iranian language classrooms influenced learners’ cultural awareness positively. They also believed that integration of cultural and intercultural instruction in the Iranian context which is culturally restricted can benefit learners in communication with individuals from other countries. Namaziandost et al. (2018) also emphasized the positive influence of cultural materials. They conducted a study to examine the impact of cultural materials on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. According to the findings from the posttests, it was found that participants’ performance was different; in addition, materials including cultural content had a significant impact on the improvement of learners’ listening comprehension. In a study, Liu (2015) investigated Taiwanese EFL junior college students’ reading comprehension. The researcher aimed to explore the feedback of learners about the impact of cultural and background knowledge on reading comprehension. According to the results from the Likert Scale questionnaire, students believed that cultural and background knowledge are useful for better comprehension of English reading materials. In another study, Yang (2017) discussed the importance of English cultural awareness and its impact on the reading comprehension of junior high school students; in addition, she proposed some techniques to improve the cultural background knowledge of students. According to Yang (2017), familiarity with cultural issues of English native speakers helps EFL students to better comprehend reading texts. Also, she introduced three principles, assimilative, comparative, and phasic, for teaching culture. She also emphasized that roleplaying, reading after class, and communicating with native speakers are useful ways for EFL students to learn English culture.

One of the things that foreign language teachers should pay attention to is being able to create positive attitudes in the minds of language learners with their creativity. These teachers should be able to teach cultural topics and issues to students in discussion-oriented formats. Indeed, in most cases, understanding the cultural similarities increases intercultural attractiveness. Cultural content can include anything useful in teaching a foreign language culture. Thus, the foreign language teacher should make as much use as possible of pictures, films, tapes, field trips, and texts concerning the history, geography, customs, and art of the people speaking the foreign language taught to the students (Clavijo, 1984).

Other issues can affect the formation of adolescent culture, so it cannot be denied. This is why parents have a very important role to play in their children’s future. Because they can show them the right way of life, and teach them how to enter society. If you are careful, parts of the student culture are formed at home and with the family. Students certainly need family support, especially in the cultural sphere, to be able to pursue an academic education (Coleman, 1996).

The level of knowledge of parents (their level of education) is another factor that greatly affects the process of learning and the formation of their child's behavioral personality, the results of which will surely be easily tangible in the future (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dearing et al., 2006; Nagin & Tremblay, 2001; Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

Indeed, parents, the broader family, peer groups, neighborhood influences, schools, and other bodies (e.g., clubs) are all implicated in shaping children's progress towards their self-fulfillment and citizenship. The children themselves, of course, with their unique abilities, temperaments and propensities play a central role in forming and reforming their behavior, aspirations, and achievements.

As mentioned before, another important issue in this research is the study of the effects of parental occupation on the formation of culture and personal thoughts. It may seem a little irrelevant at first glance because some people believe that since each individual has the power of perception and can use his or her intellect and logic in all things, s/he can address cultural issues and differences and s/he easily accept them and deal with them simply (Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020). At first glance, this process may seem pointless, but with a little reflection, the researchers realize that the formation of a person's culture can also be directly or indirectly rooted in the thoughts of his or her parents and, consequently, his or her parents' job. To examine this issue more closely, the researchers had to include another factor in this process, called the level of education of the parents (their level of literacy). The question may be asked, what is the relationship between a person's job and his level of education? Since this research has been conducted in the context of Iran, so it can be argued to some extent that the level of education and employment of the individual are hierarchically related to each other. As a result, the level of education of parents, and the occupation of parents are effective in shaping the culture of their children.

Another noteworthy point is that the background of this research is different in different countries. This means that the studies of other countries cannot be compared or generalized to Iran. Because the way jobs are valued is different in different countries (Yang, 2017). To clarify this issue, it is required to look deeper into this issue. In our country, unlike other countries, the working class (meaning those who do physical work) have a lower level of education than other classes and guilds, or at least a limited number of them have an academic education. In many developed countries, however, workers, like other sections of society, often have an acceptable level of education. Therefore, it is not possible to look at the value of jobs in different countries with one eye and compare them with each other. Because, for example, concepts such as worker and employee are different in different societies. But the point to be considered is the way people view their culture and life because concepts such as culture and cultural issues in many cases have little to do with literacy and education. Because the way people approach the issues around their lives can be different, in many cases, a person's level of education, especially academic education, has nothing to do with his or her view of culture and life (Davis-Kean, 2005).

In this research, the place of residence of language learners has also been studied. Because the researchers wanted to reveal some of the cultural unspoken to you. Many people think that people who live in affluent parts of the city have high culture and their views are different. But cultural poverty cannot be like that, because one's place of residence cannot cover or change one's cultural poverty. People's perspectives are directly related to culture, and their impact cannot be ignored. Life flows in every part of the city and every part of the city has its beauty, so terms such as urban or suburban cannot be attributed to the type of human thoughts and views. Of course, it is emphasized again that these results are specific to a city called Zanjan in Iran. Thus, these results cannot even be extended to other major cities in the same country.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 50 students learning English at intermediate and advanced levels in different language institutes in Zanjan, Iran. The students ranged in age from 16 to 40 with a mean age of 24. They were all Persian native speakers learning English as a foreign language beyond their formal school curriculum offered by the Iranian Ministry of Education. They were students of science and mathematics; however, they were studying English as a foreign language at language institutes beyond their standard educational curriculum awarded by the Iranian ministry of education. As the concentration of this study was on the cultural perception of students, they were selected from different institutes in various districts of the town including Jihad University, Parseh, Goyesh, Kish, and Alavi. Another important point is that both female (25) and male (25) students participated in the study. To ascertain that the participants were homogeneous in terms of language level, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered (<https://elt.oup.com/feature/global/oxford-online-placement/?cc=id&selLanguage=id>). The results indicated that all the participants were at an intermediate level. Also, it should be mentioned that the participants were selected through convenience sampling due to the rules of institutes for conducting interviews, selecting participants, and distributing questionnaires.

#### 3.2. Instruments

##### 3.2.1. Reading passages

To conduct this research, the researchers provided the language learners with two passages of different cultural contents. Different cultural contents indicate that one of the passages was related to the culture of their own country (Iranian culture), and the other text reflected the cultural content that was related to English-speaking countries. Furthermore, a separate time was allotted for reading each passage. Language learners were not allowed to use their mobile phones while reading these passages and could only use their dictionaries (using a dictionary means using a dictionary book). Another point was that for each student, a separate sheet was printed and the students of each group were tested simultaneously under the supervision of the researchers and their teachers in coordination with the institute management.

##### 3.2.2. Interview

Although it seemed sufficient to use a questionnaire to conduct this research, to examine this issue in more detail, it was decided to include an interview (See Appendix A) in the framework of our research. The purpose behind the interviews was to compile both qualitative and quantitative data by gathering accurate and specific information about the participants' views in the field of culture and cultural issues utilizing interviews and questionnaires. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) assert, interviews are purposeful conversations, where the goal is to gather meticulous as well as specific information from the interviewee. Indeed, two passages with different cultural content were given to the students to read. Then a one-on-one interview was conducted with the students for scrutinizing their beliefs and their opinions in the field of native culture and other English-speaking countries' cultures through learning a new language. To test the subject in more detail, it was decided to record all the interviews and then transcribe all the recorded audio files. The question may arise as to why the interview was used first and then the questionnaire. Our goal in implementing this method was to have a time interval between conducting the interview and conducting the questionnaire. The reason for this is to get the main views of the learners because if the interview and the questionnaire were done in one day, it would be possible for the learners to answer the questionnaire according to what they said in the interview. In that case, our research would not be of much value and would be more symbolic.

##### 3.2.3. Questionnaire

A Likert-scale (5-point) questionnaire (See Appendix B) was administered to all EFL students (N = 50). The questionnaire was designed by the researchers. This questionnaire was designed accurately for assessing cultural factors and their effects on learning a new language. Because this

research, in addition to conducting interviews, required more sensitive exploration for more accurate scrutiny. Given the critical situation around the world (Covid-19 disease), the researchers decided to provide an online questionnaire for the students. Therefore, this questionnaire was designed by Google Form and provided to learners as a link. To advance this issue better and more meticulously, a questionnaire link was sent to the students simultaneously. Since the number of questions in the questionnaire was 30, the students were given 20 minutes to answer it and the corresponding link expired at a certain time. For each statement in the questionnaire, the language learners (participants) were supposed to answer the items based on their own beliefs in the field of culture and cultural issues. To analyze the data collected from the questionnaire, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 22) was used.

### **3.3. Procedure**

For the present study, an exploratory quantitative ex-post facto design (Dornyei, 2007) was chosen for data collection. In other words, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. First, OPT was administered to make sure about the homogeneity of the participants. Then the researchers provided the aforementioned passages to the students followed by the questionnaire afterward.

To investigate the issue in more detail, it was decided to include the interview in the framework of the research. The purpose of the interviews was to compile both qualitative and quantitative data by gathering accurate and specific information about the participants' views in the field of culture and cultural issues. As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) assert, interviews are purposeful conversations, where the goal is to gather meticulous as well as specific information from the interviewee. Indeed, two passages with different cultural content were given to the students to read. Then a one-on-one interview was conducted with the students for scrutinizing their beliefs and their opinions in the field of native culture and other English-speaking countries' cultures through learning a new language. It was also decided to record all the interviews and then transcribe all the recorded audio files.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

The gathered data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. First, Cronbach Alpha was used to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. Second, to identify the determining factors influencing the learners' attitudes and perceptions about the use of culture in-class instruction, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used. Third, Chi-Square was then used to specify whether there existed any significant association among participants' responses to the questionnaire items. Then the researchers used the non-parametric method to find out how the relationship among the participants' answers to each item of the questionnaire were. Since the data of the questionnaire was nominal, our questionnaire was considered non-parametric.

Since social class and gender have been considered as the factors in this study, the researchers analyzed the data by considering those factors separately. After considering the social classes of the learners, the participants' responses to each item of the questionnaire were analyzed, and once again the researchers analyzed the participants' responses to each item according to the gender of the learners. There was no score in this questionnaire; thus, their Mean Rank in each section was calculated separately. It is worth mentioning that, since the method was non-parametric and the data were nominal, the Kruskal-Wallis method was used to analyze the data. By doing this, it was aimed to observe whether there was any significant association among participants' responses to each item of the questionnaire; this means that each item of the questionnaire was examined separately to see whether there was any significant relationship in the participants' responses. Finally, for identifying the structure of the relationship between the variables and the respondents, the researcher employed EFA using SPSS.

## **4. Results**

This research intended to investigate the cultural perceptions of Iranian EFL learners on reading comprehension ability. The outcomes of the data analysis are presented here. First, the reliability



**Table 1. Reliability statistics of the social class questionnaire**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.877	30

of the questionnaire was estimated. According to Table 1, the reliability of the questionnaire was  $\alpha \geq 87.7\%$  which is according to Cohen's Table of Effect Size considered much larger than typical.

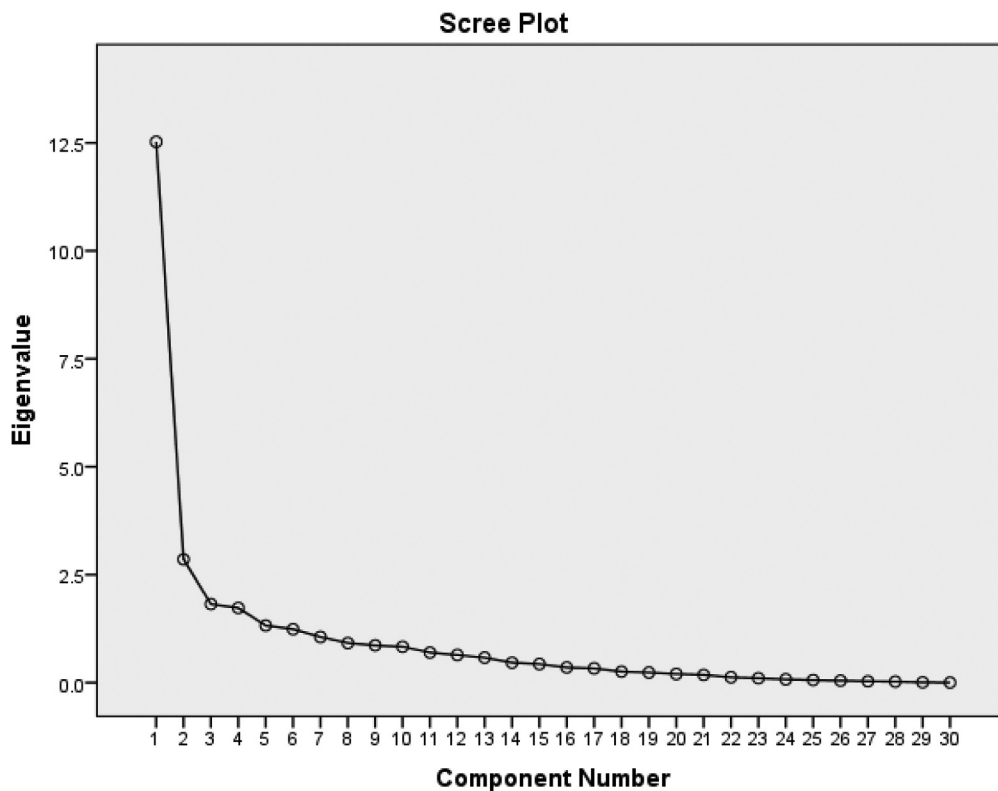
Also, to ascertain the validity of the questions, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was run, and the obtained model fit reflecting the result of CFA displayed NFI (Normal Fit Index) = 0.90, CFI (Comparative Fit Index) = 0.94, TLI (Tucker Lewis Index) = 0.92, SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) = 0.05, RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) = 0.047. All the obtained indices indicate the goodness of the model and confirm the validity of the questionnaire.

**4.1. Results related to research question 1**

*RQ1: What are the cultural perceptions of Iranian EFL learners on comprehension of English texts?*

To answer the first research question, the participants were provided with two reading passages. After teaching the passages, students filled in the questionnaire and were interviewed. To answer this research question, language learners' perceptions of cultural issues were analyzed to find the effective factors. To specify the influential factors influencing learners' perceptions of cultural issues, an EFA was used. The following graph (Figure 1) shows how many effective factors could be obtained from the questionnaire. Since the questionnaire has 30 questions (30 items), it was sought to examine how many effective factors there were in which students' views on culture and cultural issues could be loaded. According to the graph, as it turns out, a fracture occurred in the

**Figure 1. Scree plot representing the number of factors elicited from the questionnaire.**



fourth component. An elbow was obtained in the fourth component of the above-mentioned figure, so it can be said that four factors were influencing this research.

Table 2 represents the Pattern Matrix obtained from EFA depicting the significant factors under which the items of the questionnaire were loaded. According to the results, four significant factors were identified based on which the students' answers to the questionnaire reflecting their perceptions and attitude towards the use of culture were loaded (Table 2)

According to the table, questions 10, 18, 12, 20, 27, 11, 25, 28, 17, 5, and 29 were loaded under the first effective factor. Questions 5, 29, 24, 8, 7, 9, 16, 3, 26, 15, 23, and 30 were loaded under the second effective factor. Questions 5 and 29 were loaded under both the first and the second effective factors. But according to the existing laws and regulations, in such cases, a higher value should be considered for those items. In the next effective factor (the third effective factor), questions 21, 6, and 1 were loaded. Also, in the fourth effective factor, questions 4, 13, 14, and 2 were loaded.

**Table 2. Pattern matrix of the EFA analysis for culture questionnaire**

	<b>Factor 1</b>	<b>Factor 2</b>	<b>Factor 3</b>	<b>Factor 4</b>
Q10	.85			
Q18	.82			
Q12	.80			
Q20	.77			
Q27	.75			
Q11	.74			
Q25	.69			
Q28	.66			
Q17	.56			
Q5	.52			
Q29	-.48			
Q22				
Q24		.81		
Q28		.81		
Q7		.80		
Q9		.80		
Q16		.77		
Q3		.74		
Q26		.73		
Q15		.54		
Q23		.40		
Q30		.40		
Q21			.70	
Q6			.68	
Q1			-.47	
Q4				.73
Q13				.70
Q14				.51
Q2				.42
Q19				

By examining the questions related to the first effective factor, the researchers named this effective factor “accepting and understanding of cultural associations between the source language and the target language”. By investigating the questions related to the second effective factor, this factor was named “the direct connection between learning the language of a country and learning the culture of that country”. By scrutinizing the questions related to the third effective factor, it was named “the existence of concerns due to misunderstanding in learning the culture of the target language”. By reviewing the questions related to the fourth effective factor, the researchers named it “reacting quickly and being under the influence of a new culture”. In other words, learners’ perceptions by comparing the questionnaire and interview studies showed that most learners regard learning culture as motivating through reading original texts. Also, it was found that cultural understanding increases better comprehension. Some learners believed that culture is important but communication is the main purpose of language learning. Overall, learners’ perception regarding the cultural background and its relationship with reading comprehension showed better comprehension of culturally-based texts.

To answer the first research question, many studies were conducted (e.g., Afflerbach et al., 2020; Davis-Kean, 2005; Johnson, 1981). As mentioned earlier, the level of language learners was controlled in this study because all the participants were selected meticulously and had an advanced level of English language proficiency. As mentioned in the previous discussions, two different texts were given to the learners, and the content of the texts was quite different in terms of culture and cultural issues. Consequently, first, the results of interviews and questionnaires were compared. Of course, it should be noted that the purpose of comparing the results of the interview and the questionnaire was to compare and contrast the results obtained in the interview section with those obtained in the questionnaire section for each individual. Then, the results of all language learners’ interviews, as well as the results of their questionnaires, were examined separately.

The interview began after the students had read both texts. All language learners, without exception, believed that the concept of the first text was much simpler and more understandable than the second text. Therefore, the researchers based the main focus of the research on the interview for the second text. Therefore, the main focus of the research was based on the second text interview. The number of language learners in this study was 50. Then, after analyzing all the cases and data, it was found that about 52% of the learners had ambiguities in understanding the main concept of the second text and did not understand some parts of the text well, but the rest of them, incorporating 48 percent, had no problem understanding the second text. After reviewing other questions of the interview as well as analyzing the results of the questionnaire, it was realized that in order to learn a new language and understand it accurately, it is necessary but not adequate to learn words, grammar, and other general aspects of the target language. After scrutinizing all the answers and results, it became clear that culture is an integral part of a language, which cannot be ignored. To find the root of this issue, the results had to be reviewed several times. The researchers finally realized that the main problem is that culture and cultural issues are not taught while learning a new language (here a new language means English). A question may be raised asking why the rest of the students had no problem understanding the main meaning of the story which was descriptive narrative. To answer this question, it should be said that these language learners are accustomed to reading original language books to improve their language skills. Because they believed that doing the mentioned work is necessary over the course of learning a new language. They stated that learning a new language should not be limited to what is taught in institutes. Because they argued that in order to improve language knowledge, one has to communicate with that language. It is not possible to master a new language just by reading the textbooks taught in language institutes. Yet, it is crucially vital that students both read original language textbooks that represent a target culture regularly and continuously to achieve their goals. A combination of both textual and audio-visual materials will better assist students to learn the new target language and the culture of which.

#### 4.2. Results related to research question 2

*RQ2: Is there any significant association among cultural perceptions of Iranian EFL learners on comprehension of English texts based on their social class?*

Regarding social class, the learners were divided into three categories: high, middle, and low. To gain information on the social class of learners, they were required to give responses to the questions regarding their parents' jobs and education, their neighborhood, and their family income. Then learners' responses to the questionnaire were compared with their social class status. In the next three tables (Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5), Chi-Square depicts whether there exists any significant association among learners in answering the questions of the questionnaire in terms of different social classes or not.

According to the analyses given in the above three tables (Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5), which were analyzed based on the social class component, it was found that there existed a significant

**Table 3. Chi-Square analysis exploring the learners' responses to the questionnaire based on their social class**

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Chi-Square	7.987	.883	.201	.721	.678	5.701	.002	.000	.121	2.534
Df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.018	.643	.904	.697	.713	.058	.999	1.000	.941	.282

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Social Class

**Table 4. Chi-Square analysis exploring the learners' responses to the questionnaire based on their social class**

	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20
Chi-Square	1.060	3.346	7.142	.791	5.244	1.600	.105	.379	4.646	3.454
Df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.589	.188	.028	.673	.073	.449	.949	.827	.098	.178

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Social Class

**Table 5. Chi-Square Analysis exploring the learners' responses to the questionnaire based on their social class**

	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30
Chi-Square	5.790	5.736	3.976	.119	3.775	1.947	2.534	5.447	.408	4.903
Df	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.055	.057	.137	.942	.151	.378	.282	.066	.815	.086

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Social Class

association among high, mid, and low social classes only in questions 1 and 13. Because, among these 30 questions, only in questions 1 and 13 the values obtained were below 0.05. By looking at the previous tables, it is clear that in each question, there is a separate mean which is obtained for each of the high, mid, and low social class groups. But the question that arises here is what was special in questions 1 and 13 of the questionnaire and what the text of these questions measured? This is due to the fact that the mean of high social class learners in both of these questions was higher than the mean of mid and low social class learners. On the other hand, the question arises as to why there existed no significant association among the learners' answers to the other questions (in the 28 remaining questions).

To answer the question, of why language learners with high, middle, and low social classes differed in question 1 of the questionnaire, it can be said that since all the language learners were residents of Zanjan, they could all speak Persian and Turkish languages, so English was considered as their third language. After operating meticulous investigations, it was realized that in some families, language learners used only Turkish language to communicate, some others used only Persian language, while the remaining others used both Turkish and Persian languages in their communication with their family members. To scrutinize this issue, the researchers had to involve their social class in this process once again. After accurate investigations, it was found that some families spoke Turkish to their children since childhood, but other families communicated in Persian to their children. This is why there were discrepancies in terms of their attitudes towards target language instruction. Overall, those language learners whose first language was Persian considered that the introduction of the target language was of paramount importance, while a majority of the ones with Turkish first language believed that the introduction of the target language was not so important.

Rather, to answer the question, of why language learners with high, middle, and low social classes differed in question 13 of the questionnaire, it can be said that some language learners were strongly in favor of reading books (especially reading books in the main language). Because they believed that nothing could replace a book in the course of learning a new language. On the other hand, some of them believed that the best way to learn a new language is to be in the native environment of that language, so they believed that the best way in such a situation, where it is not possible to be in an English-speaking country, is to learn the language through reading original authentic target language text materials.

#### **4.3. Results related to research question 3**

*RQ3: Is there any significant association between male and female Iranian EFL learners' cultural perceptions?*

To respond to the third research question, the questionnaire data were analyzed and compared considering gender as the main independent variable. To estimate the association based on gender, a Kruskal-Wallis test was employed. The outcomes of the test are illustrated as follows:

According to the values attained in each question (Table 6, Table 7, and Table 8), it was seen that only in question 1 of the questionnaire, there was a relationship between all men's and women's opinions. This means that women and men differ very little in cultural attitudes according to this study. Women and men think about culture and cultural issues almost identically. Of course, care must be taken because the results of this study cannot be generalized to all people. It is noteworthy to indicate that the obtained value related to question 1 is on the borderline of significance; thus, reports must be given with care.

**Table 6. Chi-Square analysis exploring the learners' responses to the questionnaire based on their gender**

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Chi-Square	3.842	.110	2.589	1.567	.212	.014	.078	.066	.257	.083
Df	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.050	.741	.108	.211	.645	.904	.780	.797	.612	.773

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Gender

**Table 7. Chi-Square analysis exploring the learners' responses to the questionnaire based on their gender**

	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20
Chi-Square	.340	3.063	.002	.204	.002	.953	.000	.360	1.632	.024
df	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.560	.080	.964	.651	.962	.329	1.000	.548	.201	.876

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Gender

**Table 8. Chi-Square analysis exploring the learners' responses to the questionnaire based on their gender**

	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30
Chi-Square	.410	.093	.270	1.114	2.864	.993	.749	.712	.218	.426
df	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Asymp. Sig.	.522	.760	.603	.291	.091	.319	.387	.399	.641	.514

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Gender

## 5. Discussion

The present research intended to investigate the cultural perceptions of Iranian EFL learners on reading comprehension of English texts. The data were gathered by using interviews and questionnaires. According to the findings, it was found that perceptions of learners towards the integration of cultural materials into reading passages and the language learning process were positive. As the results showed, the most perceived factors by learners were cultural concepts which could cause better understanding in language learning. Learning cultural traditions of language under study is important; however, it should not affect an individual's other aspects of his/her lifestyle. Also, it was emphasized that learning culture through texts is different from learning it in real-life situations. Regarding the participants of the present study, it should be mentioned that learners were from an EFL context in which exposure to English language and communication with native speakers almost did not exist at all. Learners were not exposed to real-life confrontations with English native speakers. There were no physical materials around to bring them in touch with English language and culture except televisions or social media. Language learners specified that they could just read textbooks of

language institutes once they were accessible. There was evidence that only a few learners had access to original textbooks. Despite lack of exposure to real-life experience and culture of the target language, learners mostly indicated that culture teaching plays a key role in learning language and the comprehension process.

The mentioned findings were in line with what Abdzadeh and Baker (2020) discussed in their study. They also believed that using cultural materials in Iranian language classrooms influenced learners' cultural awareness positively. They also indicated that integration of cultural and intercultural instruction in the Iranian context, which is culturally restricted, can benefit learners in communication with individuals from other countries. This factor was also found, in the present study, as the second effective factor. Findings from Namaziandost et al. (2018) also were in parallel with the findings of the present study. According to the findings from the posttests, it was found that participants' performance was different. In addition, materials including cultural content had a significant impact on the improvement of learners' listening comprehension. In similar findings, Liu (2015) argued that students believed that cultural and background knowledge are useful for better comprehension of English reading materials. According to Yang (2017), familiarity with cultural issues of English native speakers helps EFL students to better comprehend reading texts.

Another outcome of this research was related to the cultural perceptions of learners by gender. Overall, it was deduced that there was no significant association between male and female learners' perceptions. It seems that both male and female learners regarded the role of culture in language learning important approximately equal. Also, learners' cultural perception based on social class did not suggest any significant association among high, medium, and low classes. Regarding the social class factor, it was found that there was no significant association among low, medium, and high classes; however, there was a slight relationship between questions 1 and 13. Concerning the variation in question 1, it can be said that since all these language learners were residents of Zanjan, they could all speak Persian and Turkish languages, so English was considered their third language. After operating meticulous investigations, the researchers realized that in some families, language learners used only Turkish language to communicate and speak with their family members, while others used only Persian. And the rest of them used both Turkish and Persian languages in their communication with their family members. So this might be a reason that language learners differently considered the introduction of the target language is of paramount importance in question 1. To discuss the next variation among learners based on social class, in answer to question 13, it should be taken into account that some learners in the high and medium classes of both Persian and Turkish-speaking families had more access to facilities such as original target language books. This accessibility to such facilities might be the reason for different perceptions among learners.

## 6. Conclusion

Cultural perception as an influential factor in language learning is one of the key issues that need to be investigated by researchers in the field of second or foreign language learning. In the EFL contexts such as Iranian schools and institutes where exposure to real-life experience and native speakers is very low, being aware of EFL learners' cultural perceptions can assist English teachers, instructors, syllabus designers, and even school administrators to take into account their learners and students' needs for better learning and understanding of target language. This study indicated that Iranian EFL learners held a positive attitude towards the integration of cultural materials into reading passages to better comprehend the target language. In addition, it was seen that gender and social class did not influence learners' cultural perception of English reading comprehension significantly. In line with the findings of this study, the following implications are suggested based on the conclusions: 1) ESL students with various reading levels or capabilities can learn from culturally diverse materials, specifically the ones at higher reading proficiency levels; 2) familiar and unfamiliar cultural materials can be both useful for ESL students; 3) the difficulty level of reading texts could not be a factor influencing the reading comprehension of ESL students,

especially the juniors; and 4) the suitability of reading materials cannot be guaranteed only by readability statistical formulas. Nevertheless, a number of suggestions can be given to the researchers enthusiastic about following similar research. This research explored the effect of cultural background on reading comprehension. This variable can affect the performance of language learners on productive (encoding) skills. Thus, it is suggested that future researchers study the effect of cultural background on EFL learners' writing and speaking. Also, in this research, as already indicated, the participants' majors were mathematics and science at school, and they were going to learn English language at institutes. Thus, the outcomes might be various for the students of other majors. Consequently, future researchers are strongly suggested to replicate this research with the other participants.

### 7. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

The results of this study may not be generalizable to other studies. Because in this city, language learners have not been in direct contact with English-speaking people. Moreover, since the language learners of this city are mostly bilingual, learning English is considered learning their third language. For this reason, they cannot be expected to be familiar with the culture of English-speaking countries. It seems wiser that, first of all, they learn the culture and cultural issues related to Persian language and Turkish language well so that they can get acquainted with the culture of English-speaking countries and understand the cultural differences of these societies. The passages selected for the study were based on the survey of participants. Other passages for this study were rotating around topics such as holidays, events, occasions, etc. Thus, the application of other similar but related passages to American culture might yield different results. Therefore, results may not be generalizable to other culturally related passages.

Moreover, the findings of the study can be replicated by using different research methods such as qualitative by concluding interviews or mixed-methods design. Indeed, further research can be performed to integrate learning strategies into classroom instruction. The teacher may provide some techniques for applying various strategies to different skills. Furthermore, future researchers are suggested to replicate the study by employing participants with various levels of English command. They are also suggested to compare the impact of cultural background on language learners to make sure if it has the same effect on the reading comprehension of EFL learners with general language proficiency.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions about the Influence of Culture on the Learning Process**

- (1) During reading the story, was understanding ambiguous or not?
- (2) How much does being confused in understanding the story bother you? In the other way does it eliminate the pleasure of reading?
- (3) Reading stories or in general, the books that show different cultures, how much can influence a person? Or cannot he judge it until he is in that real environment?
- (4) Has it ever happened to you to sacrifice the beauty of the concept of a story to the negative characters of that story during reading the story? And have you changed your mind about that beautiful story?
- (5) What conclusion could you draw after reading the story?
- (6) Do you think that learning culture can help you understand the language?
- (7) Do you learn their language effectively if you do not like their culture?
- (8) Is it necessary to teach you cultural issues?
- (9) Do you compare your culture with western culture?
- (10) Do you feel any challenges in learning the language when you are reading their book?
- (11) Will learning be challenging for you when you compare their lifestyle, habits, and life?

## **Appendix B**

### **The Effect of Culture on Teaching Questionnaire**

Note: All the items of the questionnaire are on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”

- (1) Introducing the target language in the lessons is very important during language learning.
- (2) Speaking is just the purpose of language learning. Learning cultural topics is not important in effective learning.
- (3) Cultural topics must be mentioned during the learning of a language.
- (4) Prevailing Western culture by teaching English language can be a threat.
- (5) Students should learn cultural concepts in order to understand the language better.
- (6) According to the age of the students, cultural concepts should be inserted.
- (7) In language, culture can be the main subject so its teaching is very essential.
- (8) In order to learn a daily language and its real acquisition, learning cultural topics is very important.

- (9) Students can raise their interest in language learning through education of culture.
- (10) By learning a language, students can develop their language experience.
- (11) In language learning, it is important to understand the national customs and traditions of English countries.
- (12) Learning the culture of a country should not affect the individual.
- (13) A person can be affected by reading origin language books.
- (14) The reader's or viewer's opinion about that book can be completely changed by negative characters in a story.
- (15) Having difficulties in understanding a story or book can be due to the lack of enough knowledge of cultural issues.
- (16) Learning cultural issues can be as important as learning the four main skills.
- (17) Understanding culture in real life is much different from comprehending it by reading a book.
- (18) Having enough knowledge of the target culture should be a way that frees us from confusion and challenges of culture.
- (19) Comparing cultures with each other even without specific criteria can help to have progressed in the knowledge of the language.
- (20) The customs and culture of any country are respectable, if not agreeable to my beliefs.
- (21) I prefer to experience the culture of a country up close rather than reading about that culture.
- (22) Differences of opinion and beliefs in different cultures should not change my opinion about that country or its people.
- (23) Observing the lifestyle and customs of some countries encourages me to learn the language of that country more.
- (24) Cultural issues should be taught in school classrooms.
- (25) I like the culture of different parts of the world because it helps me know the phenomenon, events, and the environment around me.
- (26) Culture and language are inseparable, but none of them should be devoted to the other.
- (27) Dominating over the original language and its culture is effective in learning a language.
- (28) Logic sometimes may be on the opposite side of customs, it means that they agree with each other.
- (29) Practicing culture and customs is more important than human life.
- (30) Studying the culture of origin and target language can reveal many different details of it and finally can answer all of our questions logically.



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