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Title

Investigating the Role of Cultural Awareness in Facilitating EFL Student's Reading Comprehension

The Case of Third-Year EFL Students at Biskra University

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Foreign Languages as Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Sciences of Language

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Declaration

I, **Hamzaoui Zoulikha** do hereby declare that this submitted work is my original work and has not previously been submitted for any institution or university for a degree. I also declare that a list of references is provided forward indicating all the sources of the cited and quoted information. This work was certified and completed at Mohammed KHEIDER University of Biskra.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to

My husband who was my first supporter to accomplish this work

To my little children Joud El Hachemi , Ismail Mohamed Abd Eldjabar and my little daughter Farah

To my dear parents who have always dreamed of this moment

To my sisters and brothers

To my father- in- law « May God have mercy on him » , my mother in law ,and to my sisters and brothers in law

For all those who encouraged me and give their help and time to attain this success

Thank you

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Abstract

The present research attempts to investigate the role of cultural awareness in facilitating EFL students' reading comprehension. Further, it is hypothesized that when EFL students' possess a strong cultural background about the target language, this will facilitate their process of comprehending cultural and literary texts. Hence, a descriptive method was conducted with 32 EFL students at Biskra University, who have participated in this study. The qualitative method (descriptive) has been used. As data gathering tool in this study, the researcher used a questionnaire submitted to a third year EFL students at Department of English at Mohammed Kheider University of Biskra. The analysis of the obtained data from the questionnaire brought evidences to confirm our hypothesis. Moreover, the findings of the chosen data tool revealed that prior knowledge activation through teaching cultural awareness incorporates in facilitating EFL learners' reading comprehension as stated in the hypothesis. The main results of this research are: there is a positive relationship between the two variables (reading comprehension and background knowledge), and the integration of cultural aspects with language instruction in foreign language learning classroom was recommended in this study. On the basis of these findings, a set of recommendations and solutions were offered aiming at a better implementation of culture among third year classes.

List of Abbreviation and Acronyms

CA: Communicative Approach

CLL: Cooperative Language Learning

EFL: English as Foreign Language

FL: Foreign Language

LMD: License, Master, Doctorate

n.d: No Date

TBLT: Task-Based Language Teaching

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General Introduction

Introduction

English has become an international language in the way it is the first widely used foreign language in the world. Learners of the English language learn it to achieve a good level of proficiency that will facilitate their communication or interaction process with native and/ or non-native speakers of English language for different purposes and in different life situations. They cannot attain this good level of proficiency unless they have a good fluency and accuracy in the productive skills (speaking and writing). This requires them to be exposed to the native English language through their receptive skills: listening and reading. This latter skill plays a great role in helping students comprehend what they learn and use the language appropriately according to the context in which it occurs.

Through reading, they will grasp various language structures and they will build a good knowledge of others' cultures especially, the English language culture. The different linguistic structures will help them use correct language forms while the knowledge of the different socio-cultural contexts and the different cultural norms will help them comprehend what they learn and how to use it appropriately. In other words, they will know: What to say?, To whom?, How to say it? When? And where? This is the core of a successful communication without breakdowns and misunderstandings.

1. Statement of the Problem

The main purpose from teaching and learning any language is to use it as a means of communication. In this process, learners need to use and to comprehend different types of discourse (spoken or written discourse). Through this study, the researcher focuses on the comprehension of the written discourse because she observed that comprehending any English written discourse is not an easy task for all EFL students at Biskra University. Many of them find this difficult even though they have been learning English for a long

time and they may have a good knowledge of the different linguistic aspects of the English language.

These EFL issues may be the result of the lack of owning an efficient cultural background concerning the language learned. This can affect their reading comprehension in the sense that sometimes when it comes to read some cultural or literary materials for pleasure or in order to analyze them, they cannot achieve a comprehensible reading or they may fall in misunderstandings. This may be due to the lack of knowledge about the cultural contexts in which the different types of discourse occur and the different cultural aspects of the English societies.

2. The Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Is cultural awareness essential in the process of comprehending English cultural or literary texts?

RQ2: Does the lack of cultural awareness contribute in the occurrence of EFL learner's reading comprehension difficulties?

RQ3: What can EFL teachers do to help students' overcome their lack of knowledge about the English language culture?

3. The Research Hypothesis

In conducting the present study we hypothesise that:

- When EFL students possess a strong cultural background about the target language, this will facilitate their process of comprehending cultural and literary texts.

4. The Research Aims

The present study aims to:

- Know if cultural awareness is essential in the process of comprehending English cultural or literary texts or not from teachers' and students' perspectives.

- Explore whether the lack of sufficient cultural knowledge can contribute in the occurrence of EFL learner's reading comprehension difficulties or not.

- To identify the main strategies that EFL teachers use to help students' overcome their lack of knowledge about the English language culture.

5. Significance of the Study

The majority of the previous studies that were conducted about reading comprehension in the department of English at Biskra University tackled either its relationship with the different linguistic aspects or its impact on one of the productive skills such as the study of Mimoune (2015), Seddik (2017) or the one of Mebarki (2021). Moreover, it is known that having a good knowledge about the target language (TL) culture can contribute in facilitating the way comprehending others' speeches and the way of conveying comprehensible speeches to others who are not from the same culture.

For this, the present study is important because it will spot the light on one of the most ignored factors that may affect the process of reading comprehension. Through this study, the researcher tries to show the effectiveness of having a cultural knowledge in the process of learning a foreign language. More specifically, it highlights its contribution in facilitating EFL students' comprehension of a cultural or literary text.

6. Research Methodology

The present study takes the form of a qualitative method in order to describe the relationship between cultural awareness and reading comprehension. Regarding this nature, this researcher gathers the needed data through one questionnaire, which is designed and distributed to a sample of third-year EFL learners and teachers. As a last step the data are analysed and represented descriptively.

7. Review of the Previous Literature

On account of the importance of this study in addition to the interrelationship between having a cultural knowledge and EFL students' reading comprehension, many studies has been done in this regard. Firstly, talking about cultural awareness and reading comprehension lead us directly to discuss the schema theory.

Many researchers in this area agreed upon the fact that when students are familiar with the topic of the text, they are reading (i.e. possess content schema), in addition to the formal and language schema; they will be more lucky to succeed in comprehending the reading material. What support that is Ahmad's study (2006) in which he made a collection of studies about schematic knowledge and its relationship with reading comprehension. All of these studies emphasized the fact that the ability to understand a text is based not only on the reader's linguistic knowledge, but also on general knowledge of the world and the extent to which that knowledge is activated during processing.

As a conclusion Al-Issa (2006) state that:

According to schema theory our background knowledge (schemata) and its relevancy to the text that is being read, determines the ease or complexity of understanding that particular text. In other words, no matter how well a reader may

know a language, he or she cannot read in that language with good comprehension if the subject matter or the content of the text is one he or she knows absolutely nothing about (p. 41).

On the other hand, based on the results of Yusuf's study (2012), which was about the influence of background knowledge and cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. He gave two texts, one of which was based on authentic culture and the other on the nativized version. After making tests, the results of this study made clear that nativisation of short stories from the target language culture into Turkish culture facilitated Turkish EFL students' comprehension of the stories and the vocabulary of the nativised versions.

Moreover, Davoudi and Ramazani (2014) conducted a study about the role of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. They gave two equivalent groups a short story; the story of the experimental one was illustrated with more information about the topic; while the controled group was not. As it was expected the experimental group scored significantly higher in their test than the controlled group. The results reviled that when there is a familiarity with culture of the target language the reading comprehension will be facilitated.

Furthermore, in their study Yousef, Karimi and Janfeshan (2014) which was about the relationship between cultural background and reading comprehension, they stated that: "The ability to understand a text is based not only on the reader's linguistic knowledge, but also on general knowledge of the world and the extent to which that knowledge is activated during processing". This conclusion was after testing forty-five Irannian language learners from three ethnic groups, through various provinces. In two reading comprehension sub-test in which one was with culturally known topics while the other was with a culturally foreign topics, absolutely, the first group scored higher.

Through this research work, the researcher investigates how the good knowledge of the different socio-cultural contexts and the cultural norms can facilitate English language learners (ELL) process of comprehending the English language especially the one they read.

8. The Structure of the Dissertation

This work is divided into two main parts: the first part is devoted to the literature review. It is composed of two chapters. The first chapter provides an overview and a historical background of reading comprehension, its definitions, types, etc. The second chapter is about cultural awareness: its definitions, its functions, its importance, etc. However, in the second part of the work, the researcher is going to describe, analyse and discuss the all the data gathered through a questionnaires for both third-year EFL teachers and learners at Biskra University.

Chapter One: Reading Comprehension

Chapter One: Reading Comprehension

Introduction

The following chapter offers a brief theoretical background of our chosen topic; it is divided into two parts. The first part includes a brief introduction to reading skill and its types: intensive, extensive, reading aloud and silent reading. This study aims also to tackle the components of reading skill and its purposes. However, the second part explores the reading comprehension; its definition, its strategies and its principles. As the chapter develops, it highlights the factors that affect reading comprehension skill and its background in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, it provides the role of the linguistic knowledge and then, it ends with the importance of genre background knowledge in reading comprehension.

1.1 Definition of Reading

Reading is a fundamental language skill in learning a foreign language (FL). Defining reading is not a simple task; however, it can be generally defined as the process of recognising what is written and getting meaning from it. Many theorists and researchers attempted to define the term 'reading' based on various perspectives. One of the definitions that mostly common among linguists is Grabe's definition (2002) that says "reading is the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately" (p. 3). From another point of view, Pang et al., (2003) added a distinct definition:

> [The] ability to read opens up new worlds and opportunities. It enables us to gain new knowledge, enjoy literature, and do everyday things that are part and parcel of modern life, such as, reading the newspapers, job listings, instruction manuals, maps and so on." (p. 6).

All in all, reading equals the ability to extract meaning from written discourse and meet with new knowledge. Reading is a complicated process that involves the contribution of many aspects including: word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation Leipzig (2020, para. 1). According to her, in order to read, one is required to:

- Identify the words in print – a process called word recognition

- Construct an understanding from them – a process called comprehension

- Coordinate identifying words and making meaning so that reading is automatic and accurate – an achievement called fluency.

1.2 Types of Reading

It is important to know and understand the different types of reading. When the students read, they do not read the same way every time, but instead they adopt a reading style, which depends on what they want with the target text or content. In this sense, Patel and Jain (2008) listed and explained the following types of reading:

1.2.1 Intensive reading

For Patel and Jain (2008), intensive reading or sometimes called 'narrow reading' means in-depth reading as the term states; this reading method is used when students read selections of texts by the same author or various texts about the same topic, the learner; therefore, gain knowledge or specific information. According to them, this type of reading has indeed beneficial to language learners as it helps them to focus on gaining vocabulary and different idioms under the teacher's guidance; thus, it is teacher-centered where the classroom is under his/her supervision. As Richards et al.,(2002, p. 299) described it "In intensive reading, instruction is more teachers –centered in that teachers are more center stage in what is happening in the classroom. They do lots of talking and decide what skills or strategies to teach". Not only that, it also develops their linguistic knowledge. Patel and Jain (2008, p.119), summarized the benefits of intensive reading as follows:

- This reading helps learners to develop active vocabulary,
- Teacher play main role in this reading,
- Linguistic items are developed,
- This reading aims at active use of language,
- In intensive reading, speech habits are emphasized and accent, stress, intonation and rhythm can be corrected.

1.2.2 Extensive reading

This type of reading is considered as a language learning tool where the students are expected to read more than one page or text for global comprehension (Brown, 2003). The purpose of adopting this method is to enjoy the reading experience for educational purposes without the teacher's supervision. It focuses mainly on the content rather than the

language; the reader wants to know about something without paying attention to details (Jain & Patel, 2008).

1.2.3 Reading aloud

Reading aloud is one of the most important reading types in building the students' comprehension abilities; this process can be applied in EFL classes either reading the text by the teacher or students can listen to their teacher while reading loudly or between peers (Jain & Patel, 2008). Through it, students will improve their vocabulary, develop background knowledge, increase comprehension skills and foster critical thinking. Moreover, (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) offered another advantage; according to them, readers can listen on a higher language level than they can read, so reading aloud makes complex ideas more accessible and exposes readers to unfamiliar vocabulary and language. This helps them understand the structure of books when they read independently (as cited in Gold & Gibson, 2018, para. 10).

1.2.4 Silent reading

Silent reading is an important type of reading comprehension that enables students to concentrate and read between the lines; it also helps them to pay attention on more important details of the text. This learning tool occurs without the vibration of vocal cords, thus, ideas and meanings are directly transmitted without passing via the vocal stage (Alshumaimeri, 2011).Within the same line, Carrasquillo (2002) identified this activity in classrooms as "Guided silent reading provides an opportunity for students to work at high cognitive levels by identifying cause- and- effect relationships, making inferences and prediction, and applying other critical thinking skills as their comprehension is also supported" (p. 99). This means that reading silently can reinforce the students' critical thinking and make them use their brain to manipulate the information in order to create the connection between words, sentences and paragraphs of the text.

1.3 Components of Reading

As mentioned earlier, reading requires the contribution of some components. According to Gough and Tonmer (1986), reading involves two main components, decoding which is related to word recognition and linguistic comprehension.

1.3.1 Decoding words

This component refers to the ability to recognize words patterns and to extract a representation for written or printed messages, in which it gives an access in the mental lexicon. To clarify, an example was suggested by Bader (2007, n.p): "recognition draws a connection between graphically based coding of letters and the mental lexicon that permit the process of retrieving semantic information based on the word level". To put this differently, decoding links what is written with what the reader knows about it (background knowledge).

According to Spencer (1998),word recognition is a vital component of reading, it is considered as a major struggle for the beginners of reading due to the inability to recognize words automatically and rapidly; however, advanced readers tend to use a variety of orthographic data in order to meet with the linguistic units such as words stem, morphemes and word patterns (as cited in Spencer & Zwicky, 2001).Further, to explain the word recognition process, Hillinger (1980) suggested two major types of mechanisms: phonological coding and direct access. The former type is the process of mapping letters onto spoken words that are established on cipher knowledge, which capture letter sounds based on the rules of language. The second one is direct access; it allows the reader to memorize the words' graphical representation into its mental lexicon representation.

1.3.2 Linguistic comprehension

According to Gough (1990), linguistic comprehension is the process of interpreting spoken language, phrases and discourse; meanwhile, reading comprehension mainly relies on the printed/written materials. Furthermore, linguistic comprehension is the process in which the reader extracts the meaning from written texts; unlike reading comprehension where the reader only seeks at obtaining specific information, details, or skimming.

Generally speaking, reading has two claims; the first claim is, reading consists of two components (word recognition and linguistic comprehension); while the second claim denotes that both components are necessary elements for reading and they complete one another.

1.4 Purposes for Reading

Before starting to read, it is necessary to know the reading's purpose behind the message it conveys; that is to say, knowing why the reading is being done boosts the effectiveness of it. Taking the case of reading a newspaper, when we read a newspaper, we firstly pay attention to the front page with some combination of search processing, general reading comprehension and skimming. The front page usually gives us the important information that we expect to be there; through it, we will decide whether we continue reading the whole article for further details or either we stop reading it (Grabe, 2002).

Grabe (2011) classified reading purposes under four headings and explained them as follows:

1.4.1 Reading to search for simple information and reading to skim

Reading to search for simple information is a common reading ability among researchers who see it as an independent cognitive process. It is used in reading to scan the text for specific words, information or sentences, in reading to skim where the important might be in the text and in reading for general comprehension (Grabe, 2011).

1.4.2 Reading to learn from the text

Reading to learn takes a place in academic and professional settings in which the reader needs to learn a significant amount of information from a text; its reading rate is lower than general reading comprehension due to the number of ideas and details in the text that the reader needs to grasp (Grabe, 2011). The goal of this step is to memorize the main ideas and some supporting details, In addition to rhetorical frames and to link the text to the background knowledge.

1.4.3 Reading to integrate information, write, critique texts

Reading to integrate information mainly means selecting the information, evaluate it and then decide what information to integrate and how. Additionally, reading to write and critique texts are considered as a part of reading to integrate information, both of them requires the reader to be able to select, critique and compose information presented in the target text.

1.4.4 General reading comprehension

General reading comprehension is considered as the basic purpose for reading. As the name shows, note that 'general' does not necessary mean simple, but it is more

complex than it is assumed. Students of second language find it difficult in becoming fluent readers of lengthy texts in restricted time, because they give much attention thinking if they are fluent or not; unlike fluent readers in which it occurs automatically; that is, reading for general purposes requires rapid and automatic processing of words, ability to form the general meaning and representation of the main ideas and efficient ability to coordinate many processes within limited time constraints.

Grabe (2011) described two terms used to characterize the reading activities: skills and strategies. According to him, skills refer to "the linguistic processing abilities that are relatively automatic in their use and their combinations, for example, word recognition, syntactic processing. However, strategies are defined as a set of abilities under the conscious control of the reader" (p.8).

From another point of view, Harmer (1991, as cited in Chouaf, 2009) grouped the reading purposes into two broad classifications, namely reading for usefulness and reading for interest. He explained them as follows:

- **Reading for usefulness**

This category covers two main objectives; the first one is seeking for information to employ it in specific task and the second is to get the information for its sake (Harmer, 1991 as cited in Chouaf, 2009).

- **Reading for interest**

Reading for interest also refers to reading for pleasure. This category is about reading to satisfy the inner desire, the learner here reads enthusiastically and for the sake of enjoying reading and not for the sake to gain new information. Thus, readers are not concerned with getting information but rather to read for enjoyment, be it intellectual or emotional (Chouaf, 2009).

1.5 Reading Comprehension

1.5.1 Definition of reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is commonly defined as the skills needed to understand the meaning from written language and interpret it appropriately (Grabe, 2011). However, Pang et al (2003) described reading comprehension as an active process. According to them, when the reader engages with the text, s/he will be able to build up meaning from it.

This process involves two main aspects: the use of prior-knowledge and drawing inferences from the different words and expressions, in order to transmit the ideas and viewpoints of the writer (Pang et al, 2003).

Moreover, Oakhill, Cain and Elbro (2015) illustrated that reading comprehension is reading with the goal of extracting meaning from written material. Besides, in order to grasp the information in the text, the reader needs to have the ability to go further with the written language (McNamara, 2007). Thus, the reading comprehension mainly consists of three components: the reader, the written content and the process of reading (Reading Study Group, 2002).

To sum up, reading comprehension relies on two interconnected abilities: being able to decode the symbols on the written passage and being able to understand the content in relation with the context. When we read a text, we make a meaning out of it, we do not only remember the words and sentences, but rather we form a meaningful whole, as Dolores (1980) wrote "if there is no comprehension, there is no reading".

1.6 Reading Strategies

Learning to read is challenging for many EFL learners and is more so when the process of comprehending a text is unclear. Learners will be unable to acquire the necessary skills to read without effective reading strategies. Many researchers identified vast number of comprehension strategies to help struggling readers to improve decoding and reading comprehension skills. For instance, Grabe (2009, pp. 218-219) suggested twenty reading comprehension strategies. They are listed in table (1.1). However, in this study, we will deal only with some of them.

Table 1.1: Twenty Major Reading Strategies (Grabe, 2009, pp. 218-219)

A. Empirically validated reading comprehension strategies	B. Indirectly supported reading strategies used in validated multiple-strategy instruction
1. Activating prior knowledge	11. Clarifying
2. Answering questions and Elaborative Interrogations	12. Establishing goals for reading
3. Constructing mental images	13. Inferencing (using context)
4. Forming questions	14. (Mental) translating
5. Making associations (mnemonic support)	15. Paraphrasing
6. Monitoring	16. Predicting
7. Previewing	17. Rereading
8. Summarization	18. Reading aloud (for modeling, for fluency)
9. Text-structure awareness and story grammars	19. Synthesizing information
10. Using graphic organizers	20. Taking notes

1.6.1 Summarizing

This strategy is about the reader's ability to take selections of texts, pull out the information in the text and then rewrite them using his/her own words, making sure to include the main details and the general idea of the topic. This strategy is highly fundamental because it helps learners to recall the information and hence, improve their understanding of the text (Henouda, 2020, p. 57).

1.6.2 Activating and using background knowledge

This strategy is based on activating the prior knowledge and using it in understanding the written passages, such as headings, pictures and titles (Henouda, 2020, p. 57). According to Anderson (1987), the ability to understand what the learner is reading based on the existing knowledge, which is seen as critical process.

1.6.3 Comprehension monitoring

This strategy is used to monitor whether the text makes a sense for the reader or not. According to Dole (1991), comprehension monitoring "is the process that enables the learner to create a form of meta-cognitive use. Skilled readers are aware of this and monitor their own thoughts as they read, in contrast to unskilled readers" (Henouda p. 62). This strategy consists of number of other strategies under it and is required to be carried out together. The table below classifies these strategies as follows:

Table 1.2. Strategies Used for Comprehension Monitoring (Grabe, 2009)

1. Has a reason of reading and is aware of it
2. Recognize text structure
3. Identifies important and main idea information
4. Relates text to background knowledge
5. Recognizes relevance of text to reading goal
6. Recognizes and attends to difficulties
7. Reads carefully
8. Clarifies misunderstanding

1.6.4 Inferencing

Making inferences is one of the reading strategies, in which the readers attempt to understand the written passages by forming a personal conclusion or meaning. They make inferences by activating their prior knowledge and relate it with the new information to draw a conclusion i.e., making the linkage between the background knowledge with the current in the text (Grabe, 2009).

1.6.5 Using graphic organizer

Graphic organizer is learning tool strategy that is used to help learners plan and structure their ideas in very organized manner; thus, it helps learners to write well-organized summaries and construct meaning of a text. Some examples of this visual strategy can be classified as follows: story maps, concept maps, tree diagrams, Venn diagrams, and semantics maps (e.g. mind maps, spider maps) (Henouda, 2019).

1.7 Principles for Effective Reading Comprehension

Harmer (2007, p. 201-202) suggested six main principles for effective reading comprehension that should be applied in EFL classrooms:

- **Principle 1:** Encourage students to read as often and as much as possible.

Learners who read so often and as much as possible tend to be better at understanding the written language comparing to those who do not. Therefore, it is important for the teachers to depend on extensive reading rather than intensive reading.

- **Principle 2:** Students need to be engaged with what they are reading.

Students need to enjoy reading during the lesson but at the same time the teachers should make sure that students are engaged with the topic and the lesson activities.

- **Principle 3:** Encourage students to respond to the content of a text (and explore their feelings about it), not just concentrate on its construction.

It is important to teach students reading texts in class by including how to use language, number of paragraphs and type of sentences; however, teachers should also pay attention to give their learners the chance to respond to the message given in the written language through discussing the topic.

- **Principle 4:** Prediction is major factor in reading comprehension

It is necessary for the teachers to use some hints so that learners use them to activating their prior knowledge. This latter guides their understanding and improve their reading comprehension of the written passage.

- **Principle 5:** Match the task to the topic when using intensive reading text.19

In this principle, the teacher is required to be aware of his/her students' level, be intelligent and systematic in selecting the appropriate topic, reading tasks, useful activities before during and after reading.

- **Principle 6:** Good teachers exploit reading texts to the full.

Good teachers make the text more interesting and can bring it to life and this by using interesting topics, further tasks, or any other opportunities that may provoke to get useful feedback.

1.8 Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension Skill

According to Dennis (2008), reading comprehension is complex process between the written language and the interpreted meaning of it. However, this process can be affected by some factors, they are: complexity of the text, environment conditions, anxiety, interest and motivation, decoding or word recognition speed, and limited vocabulary knowledge.

1.8.1 Complexity of the text

Complexity of the text is one of the factors that impacts students' reading comprehension. It is affected by the strength and fluency of the student in the target language, and their understanding of its distinct meanings and applications. If the learners are poor in using the language and its applications, the text will be complex and difficult for them when they read it and vice versa. Dennis (2008) added another element that helps to identify how skillful the reader is: Oral abilities. Oral abilities assist students to gather range of vocabulary when they hear words; a great deal of vocabulary helps the learners to be aware of the meaning of the unknown words; thus, the level of the text will be easier.

1.8.2 The environment conditions

For Dennis (2008), reading a written passage can be also affected by the environment conditions. Learners who read in unsafe, noisy and uncontrolled place may lose their concentration in understanding a text and will be unable to focus on their readings; unlike those who read in quiet and safe place.

1.8.3 Anxiety

The third factor is related to anxiety. Situations like examinations, homework or class work can put learners on edge, some readers with anxiety will not fully understand the text effectively and this may lead to poor reading comprehension (Dennis, 2008).

1.8.4 Interest and motivation

The fourth factor is interest and motivation. Learners who have strong interest in reading a material, they will be motivated to read it; however, learners with lack of interest and motivation will struggle in understanding the text. This factor plays important role in reading, through it; learners can easily grasp the information and can remember it clearly (Dennis, 2008).

1.8.5 Decoding or word recognition

Beside the up mentioned factors, Dennis (2008) added another element which is decoding or word recognition. The relation between decoding and word recognition gives learners the ability to recognize the familiar words quickly and to identify the unfamiliar words in the text, because having enough vocabulary can help in comprehending the meaning faster and clearly; meanwhile, learners who experience problems with both skills –decoding and word recognition- read slowly and find it more difficult to understand the given text.

1.8.6 Limited vocabulary knowledge

The last factor concerning reading comprehension problems is limited vocabulary knowledge. Several studies showed that vocabulary is an important variable in improving reading comprehension. Thus, having limited vocabulary may hinder students from comprehending the meaning of the given written passage(s) (Chou, 2011). According to Qian (2002), "having a larger vocabulary gives the learner a larger database from which to guess the meaning of the unknown words or behavior of newly learned words" (as cited in Chou, 2011, p.3).

1.9 Background in EFL Reading Comprehension

As it is previously mentioned, reading comprehension is an important language skill that EFL learners should efficiently learn. Therefore, number of researchers is devoted to defining reading comprehension as an interaction between the reader and the text. This interaction plays a fundamental role in comprehending the written material. From this interaction, the reader can meet with various sources or strategies to construct meanings from the information in reading such as, prior-knowledge, comprehension monitoring, summarizing…etc (Connor & Al'Otaiba, 2008).

Accordingly, background knowledge has strong linkage with reading comprehension, because each reading material has its own prior-knowledge. Whenever the students read a text, they will use what they already know about the topic, that is, they will use some clues and the stored information in their minds in order to break-down the complexity of the text to extract the required meaning (Irvan, 2020).

Within the same context, Neuman, Kaeferand and Pinkham (2014) believe that "background knowledge is essential to reading comprehension; the more you know about a topic, the easier it is to read a text, understand it and retain the information" (2020, p. 2). Unlike Browson (1988), a reading specialist, who noted that students have difficulties with understanding the written language because the topic they read might be unfamiliar to them. When they are unfamiliar with the text, they will struggle to comprehend the idea of the topic correctly (Irvan, 2020).

All in all, comprehending any text depends on the learners' background knowledge. Having a prior knowledge about the topic of a text helps learners comprehend what they read ; however, learners with less prior knowledge about a specific topic, cannot extract the meaning from the.

1.9.1 The role of linguistic knowledge

The ability to use the language and understand it in communication means the ability to comprehend the linguistic codes in the produced sounds. Therefore, linguistic knowledge can be defined as follows "it is represented as a system of constraints, a grammar, which defines all and only the possible sentences of the language" (Gibbs, 2021, para. 5). Being able to read specific content and to understand the conveyed meaning is the topmost block that supports reading comprehension. Insufficient linguistic knowledge and decoding makes the reading more difficult (Gibbs, 2021) ; knowing how words are related to one another and how language rules functions can form a whole meaning of the reading material (Angel, 2005).

1.9.2 The importance of genre (text types) background knowledge in reading comprehension

Any piece of writing has a specific message to convey; therefore, writers recommended readers to respect specific rules. Among these rules is genre or as it is called text types, each type of text has certain objective to achieve. The method the text is written

with, its style and characteristics differs from one another. Genre is term that can be defined as "genre is quite easily used to refer to a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspiration" (1990, p. 33).

EFL teachers are required to teach their students the different types of text, because having knowledge about each kind of text can help and guide learners to identify the function of each one and figure out the markers for each type, taking the example of expression 'once upon time' usually refers to the narrative language. Additionally, each genre has its own opening or introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. All of these varieties of text contribute in scaffolding the reading comprehension of students.

1.9.2.1 Genre (text types)

There are five main types of text that are as follows: expository text, narrative text, descriptive text, argumentative text and compare and contrast text (Gangal, 2011, p. 221).

- **Expository text:** this type contains facts and information in which the subjectivity of the author is absent. It is characterized by: it uses the simple present tense since it provides actual information, it facilitates the communication with the reader by employing simple words, it starts with anecdote or saying to motivate the reader to continue reading till the end and finally, each paragraph of it covers one particular idea (Gangal, 2011, p. 222)

- **Narrative text:** this type is about telling a story or recalling an experience or an event. To call it narrative text, there are set of questions to be answered: What happened? When did it happen? Who was involved? Where did the event / experience happen? How did it happen? Why did it happen?. Narrative text is characterized by: the organization of events and incidents in chronological order, the use of transitional expressions to indicate time order, adding essential background information of the incident to the reader to make it clearer (Gangal, 2011, p. 222).

- **Descriptive text:** the third type is descriptive text in which the writer provides his/her audience with comprehensible description of an object, phenomenon or event. It is characterized by: the writer selects a particular person or phenomenon in order to write about it and then, s/he shows the reasons behind choosing it as well as the details should be enough to make a

fruitful and meaningful description. This type is written in simple present tense (Gangal, 2011).

- **Argumentative text:** the fourth type is argumentative text in which the writer presents arguments to convince the audience. This type gives the reader an overview of the topic by covering all the needed facts, but at the same time it attempts to persuade the reader of the writer's view point (Gangal, 2011).

- **Compare and contrast text:** the last type of text is compare and contrast, in which the similarities and differences of particular two things or more are explored. It uses specific words to make the differences and similarities, for example, for differences: but, although, whereas, in contrast, however..etc; whereas, for similarities the words used are: additionally, also, as, similarly…etc (Gangal, 2011).

1.9.3   The importance of cultural familiarity in reading comprehension

According to Hinkel (2001), the term "culture includes speech acts, rhetorical structure of texts, socio-cultural behaviors, and ways in which knowledge is transmitted and obtained" (Demir, 2012, p.2). Culture in reading comprehension plays vital role to extract the correct meaning of the text.

In the same sense, the amount of ideas and information, attitudes and beliefs, that the reader already has in mind, and then relates it to text in order to get the meaning out of it, is the interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world. This relation is called "schema". Widdowson (1983) defined schemas as "the cognitive constructs which allow for the organization of information in long-term memory" (as cited in Ramezani, 2014, p. 2), that is, schema is more about relating the new information with the stored knowledge in mind.

Schema theory is about the reader's ability of combining between prior knowledge and the new information of the text. Both types of schema (content and formal) are essential in EFL classrooms and teachers should make their learner more familiar with people's different cultural background, as Davoudi (2014) supported "since culture affects all aspects of life, it certainly has a major impact on all elements of reading" (p. 3).

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the reading skill and reading comprehension at hand, presenting some definitions, types and components. Additionally, it mainly talked about reading comprehension in specific way. The researcher, further, highlighted significant definitions about reading comprehension and its strategies, following with factors affect the reading comprehension skill and the importance of genre background in reading comprehension. In the forthcoming chapter, an account would be given to cultural awareness.

Chapter Two: Cultural Awareness

Chapter Two: Cultural Awareness

Introduction

The relationship between culture and language has been the focus of many scholars in the field of foreign language learning and teaching for many years. According to them, integrating culture in language teaching can help learners develop their cultural awareness as it helps them understand the meaning of the text. Therefore, the present chapter deals with the issue of teaching culture and the importance of cultural awareness in learning/teaching process. To start with, the researcher provides definitions of the term 'culture' alongside with its characteristics. It also reviews the relation between language and culture as well as the importance of culture in language teaching. It sheds light on the techniques and modern approaches that can be used to teach the culture in EFL classes. Additionally, it deals with cultural awareness, its development, and its different levels; beside, the influence of culture and background knowledge on reading comprehension. At the end, it ends up with a conclusion.

2.1. Definition and Characteristics of Culture

2.1.1 Definition of culture

Defining culture is not a simple task to do. Originally, the word culture derives from the Latin word "Cultura" which means "the cultivation of the land" (Krauskopf, 2015). According to this meaning, Warren (1997) illustrated that the root meaning of culture was "the growth and tending of crops and animals" (p. 11). However, later, this meaning has extended to the growth of human faculties. Other researchers recognized two main sides of culture. According to Tomalin and Stempleski's culture dimension (1993), the first side is called "culture with a Capital C" which refers to "the achievement culture" as for instance literature, music, art, and history. However, "culture with small c" includes the 'behavioral culture' such as everyday patterns.

Another supporting detail, Guirdham (1999) called the big "C" with deep culture, in which the great achievements of certain group of people are reflected in their literature, works of arts, architecture and history. On the other hand, small "c" is seen as surface culture, in which it includes routine aspects of people's life such as knowledge, beliefs, customs… etc.

Scholars of culture today see it as "a complex notion that it may be neither possible nor desirable to arrive at an all-encompassing definition of it" (Duranti, 1997, p. 49). It refers to the lifestyle of group of people, their behaviours, beliefs, values, traditions, food and the way they dress that pass from one generation to another. As Hammer (1985) supported "culture is a system of concepts, behaviors, values, and an approach to life and it is developed throughout the history of people" (p. 53). According to Taylor (1871), culture is "complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 01). This definition asserts that culture is the sum of social behaviors, norms, knowledge and capabilities that an individual adopts from the society and the society is considered as a source of any culture.

For Hofstede (2001, p. 5) culture refers to "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". That is to say, each community has its own cultural features that are different from one category of people to another. However, Corbett (2003) sees culture as a study subject of various studies in different fields such as ethnography, cultural studies, and anthropology. Ethnography deals with speech systems and behaviors of group of individuals in which they are associated with their beliefs and their social structure. Cultural studies deals with how members of certain community represent themselves through means of cultural output such as poems, songs, etc. however, anthropology examines the relationship between group of people in certain society and their sets of behaviors (Corbett, 2003).

2.1.2 Characteristics of culture

Although there are several definitions of what culture actually means, many scholars agreed on set of basic traits that can signify the various layers of culture's meaning that are shared among human societies. Researchers such as Haviland, Prins, McBride and Walrath (2010) advocated that culture have certain characteristics; namely, It is learned, shared, based on symbols, integrated and dynamic.

To this point, the first characteristic of culture is that it is learned. The Dutch psychologist Greert Hofstede (1991) asserted that:

Every person carries within his or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout his or her lifetime. Much of these patterns are

acquired in early childhood, because at that time a person is most susceptible to learning and assimilating (p. 32).

That is to say, culture is not genetically transmitted, but acquired throughout communication, both at the conscious and unconscious level (Gallois, Volcic & Liu, 2014).

Culture, according to Daniels (2004), is learned through socialization, because any individual is not born with culture nor inherited it but instead it is acquired through learning and interacting with the environment s/he lives in. To exemplify, children learn culture from many sources such as watching their parents and family, encountering different cultural rules and values, and copy several behaviors. Not only these, but also institutions, media and other people can be means of socialization (Touhami & Sebbat, 2020). This process of learning culture is called 'enculturation'. This term can be more explained by Reisinger and Dimanche (2010) as follows:

Enculturation refers to the learning of what is contained in culture. It is the process of learning the accepted norms and values of the culture or society in which the individual lives, what is and is not permissible within that society's framework, and the individual role within society (p. 77).

The second characteristic is that: culture is shared. Members of the same cultural environment share the same traditions, values and norms. In this sense, Asimov (2009) supported "the key elements of culture values, ideas, and perception must be shared by all members of the culture" (p. 36). This means, individuals share culture with other members of the same group through interaction. They always transfer their ideas, attitudes and behaviors by sharing, as Van Oudenhoven (2011, p. 3) asserted "culture is a shared system of values, norms, ideas, attitudes, behaviors, means of communication and the products of these". Culture is a learned behavior; it is not a property of an individual or a group of people, but it mainly belongs to every single member of society and it is embedded in their lives (Haviland et al., 2010).

The third characteristic of culture is that it is based on symbols. Symbols according to Haviland et al. (2013b, p. 264) are "signs, sounds, emblems, and other things that represent something else in a meaningful ways". They further added that culture is transmitted from one generation to another through different experiences and interpretations of symbols. For example, in some countries the 'okay' sign using the thumb

and index finger are an indication for agreement (Karp & Yoels, 1998). By contrast, in other countries, this gesture is quite offensive.

Ferraro (2008) made a clear explanation of the relationship between culture and symbols when he prescribes, "symbols tie together people who otherwise might not be part of a unified group" (as cited in Asimov, 2009, p. 37). Further, language can be a means of transmitting culture from one generation to another, because it is considered as symbolic characteristic, in which individuals use it to interact with others and share their perceptions, emotions and knowledge (Haviland et al., 2013a).

The fourth characteristic is that culture is dynamic. For Corbett, (2003, p. 20) culture is not static, but rather it changes over time, because "norms, beliefs, practices, and language of any group are not static but dynamic". That is, culture changes due to the exchange of people's ideas and knowledge with other cultures in the world; when variety of cultures are in contact, cultural change may take a place (Galois, Volcic & Liu, 2014).

The fifth and the last characteristic is culture is integrated. Culture is a complex system, formed in various parts that are interconnected. As Haviland et al., (2013a) supported, it is "a structured system made up of distinctive parts that function together as an organized whole" (p.34). This signifies that all cultural aspects of any community such as the way people greet each other, their eating and drinking patterns etc., are related and integrated one to another.

These characteristics would truly help learners to understand the culture and learn to give meaning to their actions and others' too. Therefore, understanding these characteristics can make human beings equipped to communicate successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds (Fujishin, 2009).

2.2. Relationship between Culture and Language Teaching

It is strongly essential for language teachers and learners to be aware of the relationship between language and culture. Learning a second language does not only mean acquiring the alphabet, grammar rules and vocabulary but it also implies learning values, customs and behaviors of the society that speaks the language.

There is a strong relationship between language and culture. Kuang (2007) describes the relationship as "language is a carrier of culture and culture is the content of language" (p. 75); however, Brown (2000) explained in his definition that:

> A language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven, so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. In other words, language and culture cannot be separated (p. 177).

For them, separating language and culture is an impossible matter since one aspect cannot survive without the other, and if anyone attempted to do so, either culture or language loses its value.

Back to the 1980's, Fishman (1986 as cited in Risager, 2006, p. 13) put more efforts on the relationship between language and culture, and through his studies, he extracted three main principles that link one with the other; they are classified as follows:

- Language is considered as a part of culture,
- Language takes the role as an index for culture,
- Culture is symbolized by language

In another attempt, Liddicoat (2009, pp. 130-131) provided a brief explanation concerning the interconnection between language and culture in his quotation, which appears as follows:

> Communication is not simply the creation of messages using the available lexical and grammatical items of a language. Rather each lexical item and their grammatical arrangements invoke cultural knowledge which is always present and which is intrinsic to rather than additional to the meanings communicated. Meanings therefore reside both within and outside language, but the boundaries between what is in and out are extremely fuzzy.

At this point, communication and culture are related. The culture in which the individual socialize affect the way people communicate and hence, their way of communication can change their shared culture over time (Gudykunst & Toomey, 1996).

2.3. The Importance of Teaching Culture in EFL Classes

As previously noted, language and culture are interrelated concepts. Language is used as a medium of interaction in which people express their cultural thoughts, beliefs and communicate. Therefore, in the process of teaching the foreign language, an attention was directed towards incorporating culture as a fundamental element in language classrooms. Thus, teachers now are becoming conscious of the importance of providing learners with cultural knowledge about the target language. In this sense, Stern (1992) stated "culture is the necessary context for language use" (p. 205). His quotation confirms that it is impossible to teach the foreign language without its culture.

2.4. Modern Approaches to Teach Culture in EFL Classes

As it is discussed earlier, teaching culture is an essential component in foreign language learning and teaching process. Scholars and researchers are still interested in identifying significant methods and approaches to incorporate culture in foreign language classrooms. Damen (1987) advocated that "there are almost as many ways to bring cultural instruction into the classroom as there are students to teach" (p. 279). The following are the most commonly used approaches by EFL teachers:

2.4.1. The communicative approach (CA)

Communicative approach (CA) in language learning is an approach that is used in learning the second language or foreign language that emphasizes on the improvement of communicative ability. That is the ability of applying the language principle in order to produce grammatical sentences and understand 'when, where, and to whom' the sentences used" (Richard, 1997, as cited in Irmawati, 2012, p. 90). The main aim of the communicative approach is to develop the learners' ability to use the language in social and cultural settings. This approach suggests placing the target language teaching in social and cultural situations alongside with social linguistic settings.

According to Canal and Swain (1980, pp. 1-47), CA involves four components: linguistic competence, discourse competence, socio-linguistic competence, and strategic competence. Linguistic competence has to do with the stable, correct use of the levels of language: phonology, morphology, lexis, semantic and grammar rules. Discourse competence is the ability of language users to combine the meaning with the form. Socio-

linguistic competence is the ability to use the language in appropriate contexts in order to achieve communicative goals. Strategic competence is the competence to overcome the problems that arise in the communication process, and in the same time, the effectiveness of communication is improved (Canal and Swain, 1980, pp. 1-47).

Regarding the sociolinguistic norms of certain society or native speaker model basis, it seems that the explanation of communicative competence has a narrow view according to the intercultural communication's perspective, and this is because such model neglects the social identity in communicative contexts (Byram, 1997). According to Littlewood (1981, p. 20), there are two types of activities in communicative language teaching: 'social interaction activities' and 'functional communication activities'. The former involves conversations, dialogues and role-plays, simulations and skits, and discussion; however, the latter includes activities such as marking the differences and similarities, ordering the events in set of pictures, map games, drawing a shape or picture according to the given instructions.

2.4.2. Cooperative language learning (CLL)

Cooperative language learning (CLL) means ensuring to engage all learners in different classrooms activities in language learning. These activities allow students to use their understanding, strengthen the relationship between group members, and improve the sense of membership in the learning environment. As Murphey and Asaoka (2006, pp. 2-12) asserted:

> Cooperative language learning forms a more effective 'classroom culture', in which participation and collaboration towards a common emergent goal plays a significant role in the students' emotional and linguistic development as legitimized members of a social learning community. More than simply a way for language teaching, CLL is a methodology of encouraging students to continue the cooperative learning process well beyond the classroom and school context into the greater society around them.

Overall, cooperative language learning is a method in which students work together in small groups to achieve a certain goals. It provides learners with more opportunities for communication and teaches them how to use the knowledge in practice to share thoughts and ideas.

2.4.3. Content-based language instruction (CBI)

Content-based instruction (CBI) is a teaching approach that is based on learning the foreign language through content. Although CBI is not a modern approach, there has still been an increased interest in it due to its effectiveness in ESL and EFL syllabus around the world.

CBI is "an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 204). To put it differently, CBI includes integrating learning the language alongside with learning the content, the content, here, refers to the academic subject matter such as science, math, or social studies. In this approach, language is used as a mean of teaching the subject's content (Mohan, 1986).

However, Met (1991) suggested that "content in content-based programs represents material that is cognitively engaging and demanding for the learner, and is material that extends beyond the target language or target culture" (p. 284). That is, teachers may use visual and printed materials in classrooms in order to promote a real acquisition of language and its culture.

2.4.4. Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

Task-based approach (TBA) is a teaching method that implements the use of authentic materials. This approach aims to provide students with opportunities to participate in the target language's activities (Douglas & Kim, 2014, p. 4). On the other hand, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) developed an activity called "culture composition" in which writing skills and the cultural artifacts' recognition are developed. The Council of Europe (2001) proposed that TBLT aims at using language as a mean of interaction in real settings: "in Task-Based language Teaching (TBLT), learning is fostered through performing series of activities as steps towards successful task realization; the focus is away from learning language as a vehicle for authentic; real-world needs" (p. 22).

2.5. Techniques of Teaching Culture in EFL Classrooms

Researchers and textbook planners developed a great variety of techniques and activities to translate the purpose for teaching culture into classroom practice. These

techniques are grouped according to some principles. Lightbown and Spada (1993) asserted that:

> …Not all language classrooms are alike. The conditions for learning differ in terms of the physical environment, the language and the motivation of the student, the amount of time available for learning, and many other variables. Classrooms also differ in terms of the principles, which guide teachers in their language teaching methods and techniques (p. 72).

Stern (1992, pp. 223-232) also presented different techniques that are classified as follows:

- Creating an authentic classroom environment (techniques include, for example, displays and exhibitions of realia);
- Providing cultural information (for example, cultural aside, culture capsule, and culture cluster);
- Cultural problem solving (for example, culture assimilator);
- Behavioral and affective aspects (for example drama and mini-drama);
- Cognitive approaches (for example student research);
- The role of literature and humanities (for example, literary readings and watching films);
- Real-life exposure to the target culture (for example, visits to the class by native speakers, pen- pals and visits to other countries);
- Making use of cultural community resources (for example, when a foreign language learning takes place in the target-language community, the everyday environment can be used as are source).

To sum up, a great variety of techniques, ranging from short to time-consuming activities, allow language teachers to bring the culture into practice. Using these techniques successfully can make the teaching of culture a better experience for both teachers and learners.

2.6. Definition of Cultural Awareness

Foreign language educationalists and teachers emphasized on the effectiveness of integrating culture in EFL classrooms. Their constant attempt to promote learners' language proficiency and cultural competence has led to the emergence of new concept in

foreign language teaching called 'Cultural Awareness'. This newly discovered concept has attracted researchers' attention and has earned a remarkable place in their different works. Therefore, integrating culture in EFL classrooms helps learners to be culturally and linguistically competent alongside with cultural awareness.

Scholars in different domains such as anthropology, ethnography, cultural studies, and psychology presented various definitions of cultural awareness. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), cultural awareness refers to "being aware of members of another cultural group: their expectation, their perspectives and values. It also means attempting to understand their reasons for their actions and beliefs" (p. 217).However, Baker (2012) believed that cultural awareness "is a conscious understanding of the role culture plays in language learning and communication (in both first and foreign languages)" (p. 65). Briefly, culture and language are interrelated. This correlation between these two concepts can be brought to practice on any language or culture in the world.

Cultural awareness mainly focuses on the learners' attitudes towards the members of the target society. In this regard, Byram (1997) confirmed that cultural awareness is not only concerned with the foreign culture, but also with the home culture. He added that "cultural awareness brings an understanding of the relative nature of culture norms… it is the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own cultures and countries" (1997, p. 101). That is to say, before discovering the target culture, one's need to be knowledgeable enough about his/her own culture patterns first. Therefore, cultural awareness is about "gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a curiosity in how cultures both connect and differ; such awareness […] can facilitate international communication" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5).

Following this view, cultural awareness offers for language learners and language teachers the opportunity to develop the ability to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds through determining the meaning of the text in relation to its context settings (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993, p. 5).

2.6.1. Cultural Knowledge versus cultural awareness

Cultural knowledge and cultural awareness are closely related; however, there are slight dissimilarities between these two notions. To start with, cultural knowledge is the

common facts and information about the native culture or the target one. By contrast, cultural awareness is mainly based on one's own perception of his own culture beside other's culture. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004, p. 13) highlighted the differences between cultural knowledge and cultural awareness as follows:

Cultural knowledge (facts) is:

- External: it is given to us by someone else,
- Static: cannot be modified or changed from experience,
- Articulated: it is reduced to what words can express,
- Stereotypical: it refers to general perception rather than specific patterns,
- Reduced: it contains all the general information available, without variations and exceptions.

That is to say, people generally obtain the information in form of: facts, general information, statistics, and examples. Cultural knowledge is concerned with the understanding of oneself and other group of people.

Cultural awareness is mainly about perceptions; these perceptions are summarized by Saniei (2012), as follows:

- Internal: it develops in our minds,
- Dynamic: it is constantly being added to and changed,
- Variable: it is modified from experience,
- Multi-dimensional: it is represented in people's minds through: mental pictures, mental connectedness, associations…etc,
- Interactive: it is exchangeable among people.

According to Fenner (2000), cultural awareness is "based on knowledge of the foreign culture, but also on the knowledge of one's own culture, and that any process of comparison, or contrasting has its starting point in the learner's pre- knowledge" (pp.144-145).

Ultimately, cultural knowledge and cultural awareness are important for language learning and teaching environment. The former is about credibility and the latter is about empathy and sensitivity. Both of them help learners to acquire good comprehension of

lifestyle and develop positive attitude towards the foreign culture society (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 24).

2.7. Developing Cultural Awareness

The awareness of cultural diversity has become the central focus of modern language education. It is a shift that reflects a better understanding of interaction between language and culture. Further, language users recognize that cultural diversity affects the communication process among interlocutors who have different cultural background. Therefore, it is important for language learners to be aware of these differences.

Building on Gaston' (1984), Hanvey' (1992) and Oxford' (1994, p. 33) studies, cultural awareness is developed through series of levels (as cited in Boudhous & Abdi, 2019, p. 34). These are listed as follows:

- No understanding: this stage represents students who do not have any knowledge about the foreign culture and its people.
- Superficial understanding: at this level, most students are aware of superficial aspects of culture, frequently very negative aspects. They know a few basic facts, which serve as the basis of stereotypes and common cultural myths, containing a grain of truth but typically exaggerated.
- Growing awareness and possible conflict: The students are aware of some subtle traits. They understand very little about what these traits and differences really are. They typically believe that their culture is superior. This thinking may lead them experience some cultural conflict.
- Greater intellectual awareness: At this stage, FL students start to understand the target culture intellectually but not emotionally. They go beyond level three. In other words, they initiate an understanding of the aspects of the target culture, appreciate them, and eventually accept them.
- True empathy and respect: When the students understand the culture both intellectually and emotionally, they can feel what members in the culture under question feel. However, this does not mean to toss aside their primary culture, but simply to promote the understanding of other cultures. This level can only be reached if the student lives in the foreign country.

2.7.1. Some keys for developing cultural awareness

The understanding of a foreign language can be accomplished through the understanding of its cultural context where it is practiced. Brown (1987, p. 123) illustrated that "misunderstandings are…likely to occur between members of different cultures…differences are real and we must learn to deal with them in any situation in which two cultures come into contact" (as cited in Byram, 1994, p. 11).

As previously stated, culture is set of beliefs, values and norms. These norms vary from culture to another. This variation between cultures can lead the participants who have different cultural backgrounds to encounter communication failure, prejudices and stereotypes; as Smith (1985) supported "the presentation of an argument in a way that sounds fluent and elegant in one culture may be regarded as clumsy and circular by members of another culture" (p. 2).

Several methods and techniques can be used in EFL classes to develop learners' awareness of the foreign culture. In this respect, Çakir (2006) proposed that one of the practical techniques is the use of role-plays in language learning. He believed that using role-plays in EFL classrooms have a significant effect on the process of acculturation. Through it, learners will be able to overcome cultural problems as well as it helps them to practice their communication in motivational way (p. 157). Among other techniques that can provide great opportunities for EFL learners to develop their cultural understanding are reading, films, culture games, and culture assimilators (Chastain, 1988, as cited in Çakir, 2006, p. 157).

Following this point, Rivers (1982 as cited in, Çakir, 2006, p.158) asserted that learners should be able to:

- Understand that people act the way they do because they are using options the society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs;
- Understand that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence affect the way people speak and behave;
- Demonstrate how people conventionally act in the most common mundane and crisis situations in the target culture;
- Be aware that culturally conditioned images are associated with even the most common target words and phrases;

- Evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture in terms of the amount of evidence substantiating the statement;
- Develop the skills needed to locate and organize material about the target culture from the library, mass media, and personal observation;
- Possess intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy toward its people.

The aforementioned points are listed to be the sum of skills that learners need to acquire in order to be capable of communicating with people from different cultural background; besides, helping them to be culturally conscious when interacting with members of the same group. That is to say, even individuals with the same cultural identity may differ in their traditions, beliefs and behaviors.

2.8. Different Levels of Cultural Awareness

According to Center for Intercultural Learning (n.d), through the stages of adjustments, one's cultural awareness increases. This understanding develops through four levels that are listed as follows:

- **Unconscious incompetence:** the individual is unaware of the cultural differences, and they are unconscious that they may fall in cultural breakdowns or misinterpreting the people's behaviors of different cultures.
- **Conscious incompetence:** is also called 'awareness'. Individuals, here, realize the differences between the local behaviors and people's behaviors. In this stage, the learners also realize that there is problem but not sure about their instincts, they as well know there is something that is not understood.
- **Conscious competence:** the individual, here, is conscious with the cultural differences and knows about what these differences are, and then, they adjust their behavior accordingly. The participants have to make conscious efforts to behave in culturally appropriate way.
- **Unconscious competence:** the individual has had enough practice with the skill that it turned into "second nature".

2.9. The Influence of Culture on Language Skills

Teaching the language involves teaching the four skills. The main objective of teaching English language is to enable learners "acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)" (Ur & Alhaisoni, 2013, p. 114). To begin with, listening plays an essential role in both communication and learning. It has been confirmed that this skill is widely used in daily communication (Rost, 2002) and people can learn the foreign language or second language effectively through it (Oxford, 1990; Al-Khresheh, Khaerurrozikin & Zaid, 2020).

People around the world have different cultural backgrounds and speak different languages. When group of people interact with a certain language, it means interacting with its culture. listening, here, without having knowledge of the target members' language makes the understanding impossible, because the listening process equals organizing what is heard into certain lexical components in order to construct a meaning (Goss, 1982). Therefore, the application of listening skill in second language needs understanding the language of the speaker (Nowrouzi et al., 2015). Richards and Schimdt (2010) summarized the link between listening and culture as follows:

> The study of listening comprehension processes in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic (p. 344).

On the other hand, culture affects communication as well. When interacting with people from different cultural background, it creates relationship and collaboration with others (Fantini, 2020). To communicate with others who are different in culture, it is important to be knowledgeable and culturally aware of the communication process (Council of Europe, 2001). Following this idea, culture has shown effect on reading comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Weber, 1991). The familiar content of a text is easier to read and understand than the unfamiliar one (Bernhardt, 2005).

Anderson and Pearson (1984) confirmed that readers with familiar content schema do fully understand the text if they have sufficient knowledge about the text. That is to say, the ability to comprehend a text is based on the learners' linguistic knowledge and their general knowledge of the world, which makes reading comprehension easier. Briefly,

background knowledge determines how well the reader knows a language and how good his/her comprehension of the topic matter.

2.9.1. Culture and reading comprehension

Jalilifar and Assi (2008) asserted that if non-native readers fail to activate their prior knowledge, this may result miscomprehension of the meaning, because "a text by itself does not carry meaning, but rather guides readers in retrieving meaning based on their own prior knowledge" (Kim, 2010, p. 36). This means that each word associates with its own meaning. Readers, therefore, direct their prior knowledge to connect it with the meaning they are constructing when reading a text (Logie, 1995).

Moreover, culture and reading comprehension are two interrelated concepts. Texts cannot be understood successfully without the reader's background culture. Thus, researchers claimed there are two factors that affect reading comprehension; namely, degree and speed of brain's perception of words symbols (linguistic knowledge) and the second one is "something behind the eyes" and it refers to the cultural background knowledge (Yang, 2017). Paulston and Burder (1976) believed that learning to read is not difficult as long as "the cultural background is familiar and students can draw on cultural information in the decoding process" (pp. 5-6). On the other hand, Heilman et al., in 1986 suggested that culture "can be thought of as an individual experiential/conceptual background for (1) written text (word recognition capabilities, concept of print, understanding word order, and understanding word meanings) as well as for (2) the content of what s/he is reading" (as cited in Heilman, 1999, pp. 25-32).

To conclude, nowadays the importance of teaching culture is increased in teaching English as foreign language and the cultural awareness became a basic goal in teaching/learning settings.

2.9.2. Background culture in reading comprehension

Many researchers have conducted about the role of cultural knowledge in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension as vital language skill for both first and second language is greatly affected by several factors. Among these factors is the role of cultural background in reading comprehension.

Reading, according to Lu (2018), is the interaction between the reader and the text and "learning to read means learning to identify words" (p. 46). However, Anthony views reading as "a process producing meaning by making use of the readers' previous knowledge" (as cited in Lu, 2018, p. 46). On the other hand, reading comprehension is defined as reading the text with understanding, this understanding is obtained when the reader makes an interaction between the words they read and how they trigger knowledge outside the text (2018). Further, readers' ability to understand can be largely affected by characteristics of text. The cultural background of the subject matter and the level of vocabulary hardness in certain text can also influence reading comprehension (Johnson, 1982).

Readers when engage in reading process, they are more likely to pass through an active process (Anderson, 1999). This process requires some background knowledge about the subject of the text. Anderson (1999) explained this point as follows:

Reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page. … Synergy occurs in reading, which combines the words on the printed page with the reader's background knowledge and experiences (p. 1).

Ajideh (2003) argued that in reading process, readers create a meaning depending on the textual clues; they understand what they read because the ideas and information the readers bring are already stored in their memory. This prior knowledge will be developed as they read; however, if readers do not have sufficient cultural background knowledge, they will not realize that there are cultural differences in the language they are learning. That is to say, without cultural background knowledge, it would be impossible for them to understand the language in reading (Lu, 2018).

Furthermore, Steffensen et al., (1979) demonstrated that learners with familiar cultural norms perform better interpretation of the text; unlike, learners with unfamiliar cultural norms tend to have poor interpretation of the text. Within the same line, the place of background culture in reading comprehension has been discussed in schema theory (Bartlett, 1932; Carrel & Eisterhold, 1983). Schema theory deals with "pre-existing knowledge structures stored in the mind" (Nassaji, 2002, p. 444) and "how readers combine their previous knowledge with the text" (Erten & Razi, 2009, p. 61).This schema

generally has three types: formal schema, content schema and cultural schema that are related to reading comprehension (2009).

Formal schema or textual schema is concerned with knowledge of language conventions (Singhal, 1998), content schema is concerned with knowledge of the content and is divided into two types: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge (Carrel, 1983). However, the last type cultural schema which is more relevant to this work refers to the "cultural familiarity" that "helps readers to reconstruct the story line through referring to more personally and culturally relevant scripts" (Erten & Razi, 2009, p. 61).

Overall, the relationship between background culture and reading comprehension is inevitable and inseparable. Background knowledge determines whether understanding the text is easy or complex. In other words, even if the reader knows the language and the meaning of its words, s/he cannot read the language with good understanding since the topic s/he reads knows nothing about.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present chapter has dealt with the concept of culture as an important element in foreign language teaching and learning. This concept has been defined according to various educationalists and researchers. They strongly believe that culture and language cannot be separated and none of them can survive without the other; in other words, language is not only about teaching linguistic aspects, alphabets and grammar rules, but also must be taught in relation with culture. The emphasis of this chapter also was on its characteristics and the importance of teaching culture in EFL classes. Many researchers developed certain techniques and approaches for integrating culture in foreign language classrooms in order to enhance the learners' cultural awareness and obtain positive attitudes towards other cultures. Hence, developing learners' cultural awareness in relation to reading comprehension should be one of the main goals that language teachers should take into consideration in order to overcome the problems when reading a text.

Chapter Three

Fieldwork and Data Analysis

Table of Content

Introduction

The aim of this study is to highlight the role of cultural awareness in facilitating EFL learners' reading comprehension. In this work, the questionnaire was dedicated to EFL students at Biskra University in order to support our research. Within the same vein, the researcher attempts to describe, analyze and interpret the results from the students' questionnaire, because it helps us to emphasise our hypothesis. Finally, the researcher provides recommendations for the future researches.

3.1.   Research Methodology: Theoretical Background

Research methodology refers to the scope of how to conduct any piece of scientific study. Broadly speaking, it aims to solve problems, answer questions, and reviews knowledge. More precisely, a research attempts "to reduce the complexity of problems, discover the relationship between seemingly unrelated events, and ultimately improve the way we live" (Marczyk et al., 2005, p.1). Within the same vein, according to Rajasekar et. al. (2006), "research is a logical and systematic search for new and useful information on a particular topic" (as cited in Goundar, 2012, p. 2).

Ultimately, Hoadjli (2016) proposed a conceptual framework, which can help to illustrate the relationship between the variables of this research and provide an overall picture about this study. Therefore, this conceptual framework is classified as the following:

1- Research approach,
2- Research strategies and,
3- Data collection methods.

3.1.1. Research approach

A research design is a mapping strategy which is essentially a statement of the object of the inquiry and the strategies for collecting the evidences, analyzing the evidences and reporting the findings (Kumar, 2006, as cited in Chekkal, 2018, p. 63). There are three types of methodologies designed to conduct research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods. Quantitative research focuses on collecting numerical data; however, qualitative research is designed for collecting data without formal measurements (Hoadjli, 2017). According to Tashakkori and Creswell (2007), mixed-

research is designed for collecting data using both quantitative and qualitative methods in single study.

3.1.1.1 Quantitative approach

It is an approach that is concerned with the area of assumptions of experimental paradigm (Creswell, 2003, as cited in Williams, 2007). It devoted to seek answers on the relationship between variable in order to find explanation and prediction of certain phenomena (Leedy, 1993).

According to Kumar (2006, p. 104), quantitative approach is characterized by:

- Enough details about the study design can be provided replication for verification and reassurance,
- More clarity and distinction between design and methods of data collection,
- Research respondent concordance does not occupy an important place,
- Ability to produce findings that can be replicated and retested.

3.1.1.2 Qualitative approach

Qualitative approach is based on developing explanations of the social aspects (Hancock, Ockleford & Windridge, 2009). Another definition was provided by Creswell (2003 as cited in Williams, 2007), qualitative approach is "based on qualitative variable, which vary in quality of type. These variables cannot be measured on a scale or in any units" (Master of Philosophy, n.d, p. 7).

Accordingly, Hoadjli (2016, p. 33-34) summarized the main characteristics of the qualitative as follows:

- Emergent research design: the emergent research design means a qualitative research study is kept open and flint so that it can respond in a flexible way to new details or opinions that may emerge during the process of investigation.
- The nature of qualitative data: qualitative research work with a wide range of data, including interviews, documents, and even images.
- The characteristics of the research setting: because of the quantitative approach nature that seeks to describe social phenomena as they occur naturally, qualitative

research take a place in natural setting, without any attempts to manipulate the situation under study.

- Insider meaning: qualitative research is concerned with subjective opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals. In this respect, the goal of qualitative research is to explore the participants' views of the situations being studied.

- Small sample size: qualitative research typically relies on the necessity to use smaller samples of participants.

- Interpretive analysis: qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive, which means that the research outcome is ultimately the product of the researcher's subjective interpretation of data.

3.1.1.3 Mixed-methods approach

Mixed-methods can be defined as "the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data" (Doyle, Brady, & Byrne, 2009, p. 176). It aims to compensate strengths and weaknesses; to aid the chosen sampling and obtain more thorough picture of the study (Hoadjli, 2020).

On the other hand, the main characteristic of this type of approach are as the following (as cited in Chekkal, 2018, pp. 63-64):

- Expanding the understanding of a complex issue: a mixed-methods approach would broaden the scope of the investigation and enrich the researchers' ability to draw conclusions about the problem under study.

- Corroborating findings through 'triangulation': the use of different data sources, investigators, theories, or research methods generates multiple perspectives on a phenomenon. Such as an effective strategy ensures research validity.

- Reaching multiple audiences: because of the combination of the methods in mixed methods research, the final results can be more palatable for certain audiences than outcomes of mono-method study (Hoadjli, 2016).

3.1.2. Research strategy(ies) / Design(s)

Unquestionably, in any research, conducting research is not only concerned with collecting data about the research problem, but it is also about knowing the basic steps in the research process. Selecting the appropriate research design would generate adequate

and thorough answers to the research questions. Research strategy(ies) can be defined as, "a procedural plan that is adopted by the researcher to answer questions validly, objectively, accurately and economically" (Kumar, 2011, p. 96); however, by Selltiz (1962) as, "A research design is the arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure" (as cited in Kothari, 2004, p. 31).

Research strategies can be classified into eight research strategies and they are as follows (Dörnyei, as cited in Sabri, 2017):

- Case studies,
- Ethnographic studies,
- Phenomenology,
- Experiments,
- Grounded theory,
- Action research,
- Longitudinal studies and,
- Mixed-methods.

3.1.3. Data collection methods

Undoubtly, any research requires the necessity of specific data collection methods. The data collection methods are used to collect the needed data from different sources through several instruments such as: questionnaire, tests, observation and interviews.

3.1.3.1. Questionnaire

Questionnaire is considered as useful data collection tool when conducting a research. It is a valuable instrument for gathering a wide range of information from a large number of respondents, often measured data, can be administered without the researcher's presence, and it is consistent and coherent for analysis (Wilson & Mclean, as cited in Cohen et al., 2007).

There are several advantages of the questionnaire that can be summarized as follows (as cited in Chekkal, 2018, p. 66):

- They can supply considerable amount of research data for relatively low cost in terms of time, money and materials.

- They are simple and easy to administer.
- They provide standardized answers.
- They allow the speedy collection and analysis of data.

3.1.4. Research Sampling

In any study a researcher wants to conduct, it is a must to select adequate instruments, convenient methodology, and an appropriate chosen sampling strategy in order to achieve credibility and quality of research (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Research sampling consists of population and sample. The former refers to items, objects or people who will be analyzed, asked questions, or observed; however, the latter is the group or small number of selected participants. Further, choosing the technique of sampling can prevent the researcher from encountering some issues such as time and money, because studying the entire population is impossible and impractical without sampling (Sign, 2006, p. 81).

3.2. Research Methodology for This Study

3.2.1. Research approach

In this study, the researcher opted for qualitative approach in order to investigate the role of cultural awareness in facilitating students' reading comprehension at Biskra University. The qualitative approach was adopted because it serves the nature of the present study and its objective.

3.2.2. Research strategy

The research opted for the case study as a research strategy to investigate a small number of EFL learners. Moreover, the obtained results are not generalized.

3.2.3. Data collection methods

The present research relied on questionnaire as data collection method for third year EFL learners, in order to investigate the students' views and opinions about the role of cultural awareness on the reading comprehension.

3.2.3.1. Students' questionnaire

3.2.3.1.1. Aim

The aim of the students' questionnaire is to investigate students' different perspectives and thoughts towards the role of cultural awareness in reading comprehension. It also attempts to show how EFL students at Biskra University deal with this problem.

3.2.3.1.2. Structure and content

The questionnaire consists of (17) questions divided into three different sections. The first six questions include the general background about the learners' gender, their choice of learning English and their attitude towards one of the four skills. The second section is about students' attitude towards reading comprehension. However, the last section was allocated to ask about the students' attitude towards the role of cultural awareness in EFL classes.

3.2.4. Population and sampling technique

In the current research, the chosen population is third year EFL learners LMD at Biskra University. The number of the population is estimated to be (276). In order to carry out this study, the researcher opted for random sampling; however, our sample is (32) who answered the questionnaire.

3.2.5. Data collection procedures

For the questionnaire, the researcher distributed the questionnaire online to the sample due to the limited time. The respondents answered the questionnaires in their free time.

3.2.6. Data analysis procedures

The obtained data from the questionnaire were analysed through the descriptive method and represented in tables, figures and pie charts.

3.3. Analysis of the Students' Questionnaire

Section One: General Background

Item 1. Students' Gender
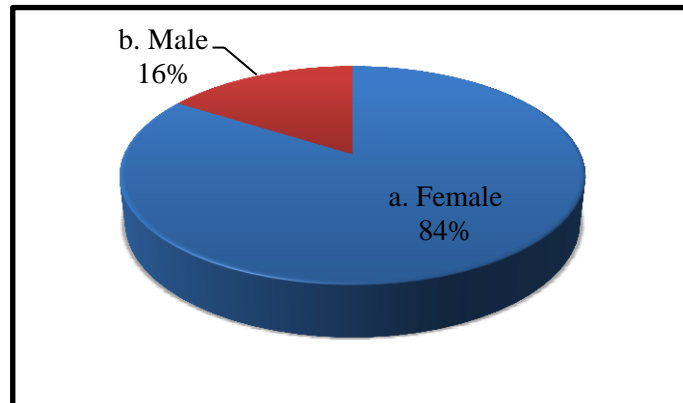
Figure 3.1: Students' Gender

A quick glimpse at the figure above reveals that the majority of participants are females, who represent (84%) from the whole population; whereas, males represent the minority of this population with percentage of (16%). This may indicate that females are more interested in studying English as foreign language than males who may prefer the scientific branches.

Item 2. Learning English at university was:
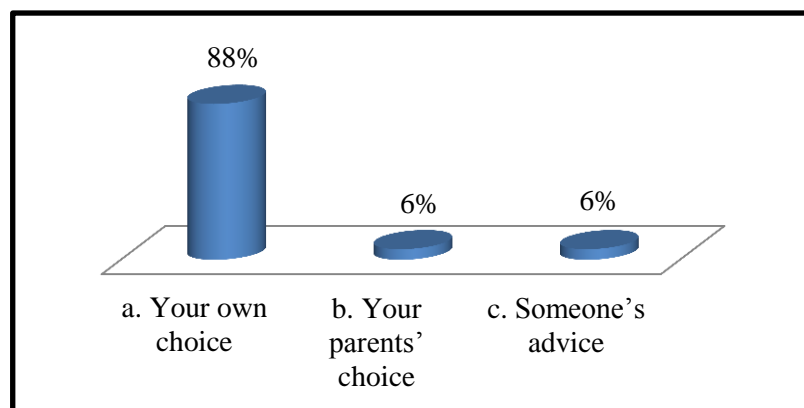
Figure 3.2: Students' Choice of Learning English

The displayed results reveal the students' choice of learning English. The majority of participants (80%) declared that their registration at the English Division at Biskra University was personal. This reveals their interest and willingness to learn English;

however, (6%) of the students were obliged to learn the English language because their parents forced them to choose it as their career. The remaining (6%) chose English because someone else advised them to study it.

Item 3. Which of the following language skills is important for you to learn English? You may choose more than one option?

Figure 3.3: The Importance of Language Skills

The above figure represents the importance of language skills according to students. The results reveal that the vast majority of respondents with a rate of (56%) chose 'more tha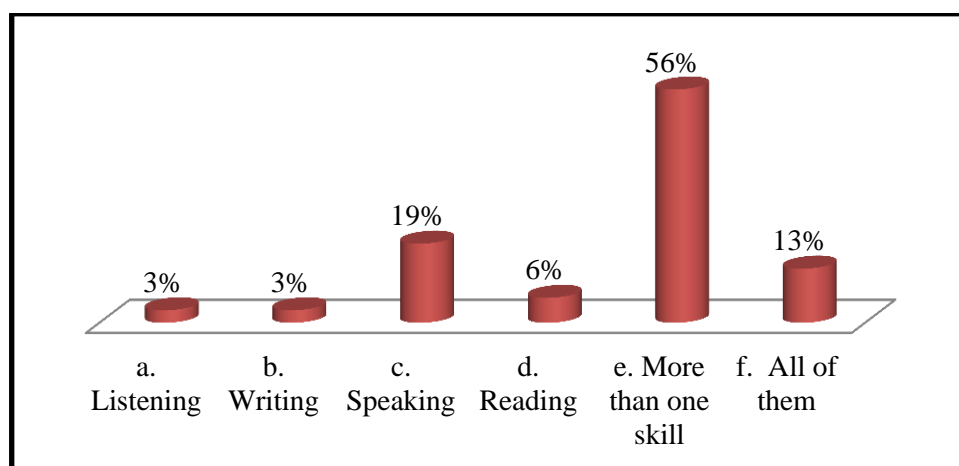n one skill', because for some of them, speaking and listening are important skills in language learning since they are interrelated, according to them,. On the other hand, speaking comes in the second place with percentage of (19%). The reason behind their choices is because speaking helps learners to use the language through communication.

Additionally, (6%) and (13%) option were devoted to: reading and all of them respectively. The former is considered as a bridge to other skills; whereas, the latter indicates that all of the mentioned skills are important and they cannot be learnt separately, as one participant confirmed and we quote "I have built my vocabulary from all of them". Following these details, (3%) goes for: writing, in which it helps to express one's knowledge, ideas and perspectives, and listening, in which it helps learners to enrich their vocabulary.

Item 4. How often do you read in English?
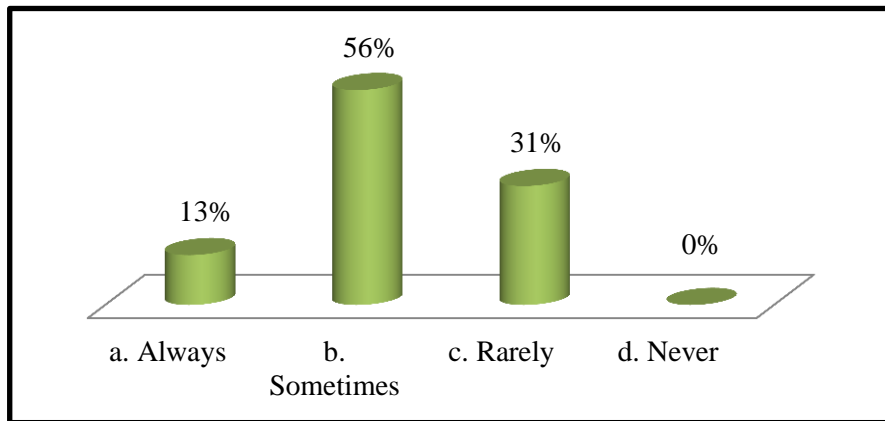
Figure 3.4: Frequency of Reading in English

The figure above shows the frequency of students' reading in English. More than a half of the participants (56%) stated that they sometimes spare their time to read in English; however, ten participants who represent the rate of (31%) chose the option "rarely" and the remaining (13%) opted for the answer "always". Further, it is important to mention that none of the participants ticked the option "never".

Item 5. Do you read for:
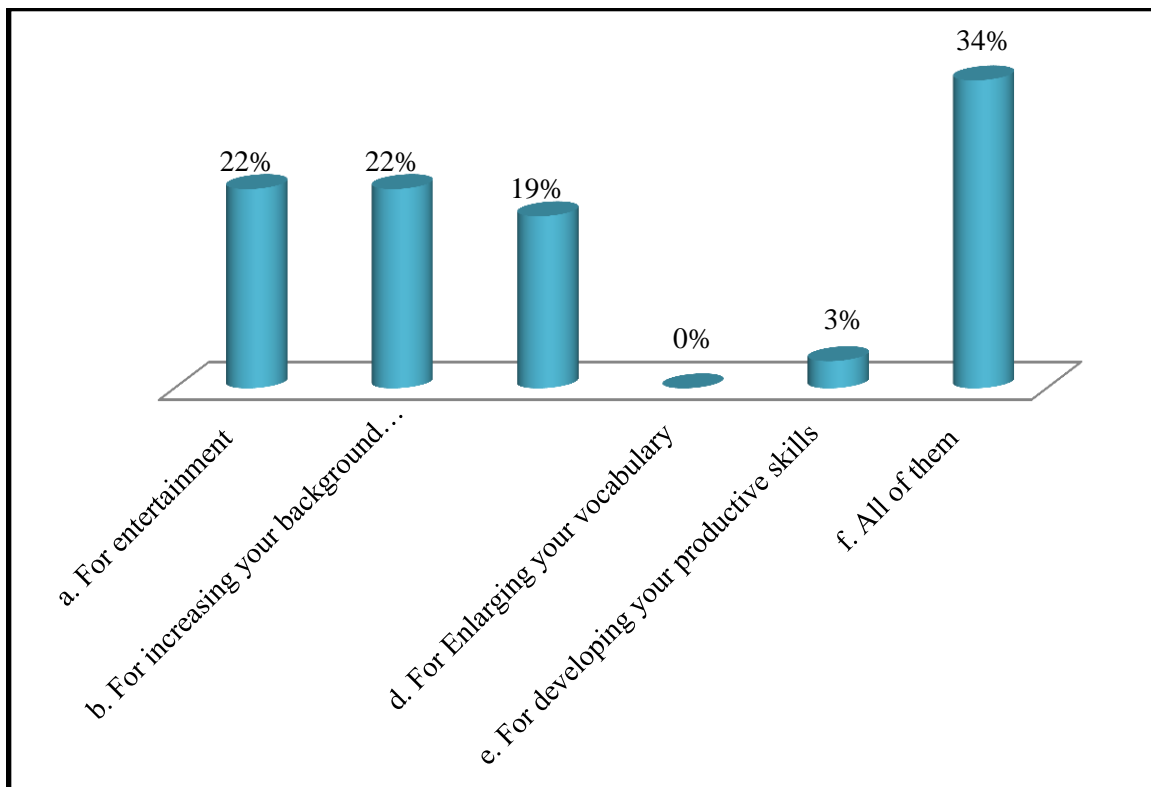
Figure 3.5: The Reasons of Reading

This question aims to identify the reasons behind students' reading in English. From the figure and the figure shown above, one can see that the option "all of them" scored the highest percentage (34%); on the other hand, both reading for entertainment (22%) and for increasing the background knowledge (22%) come at the second place. The least percentage refers to the "for succeeding in your academic courses" (19%); while, only (3%) of the sample opted for "developing your productive skills".

Item 6. How do you evaluate your reading ability of English texts?
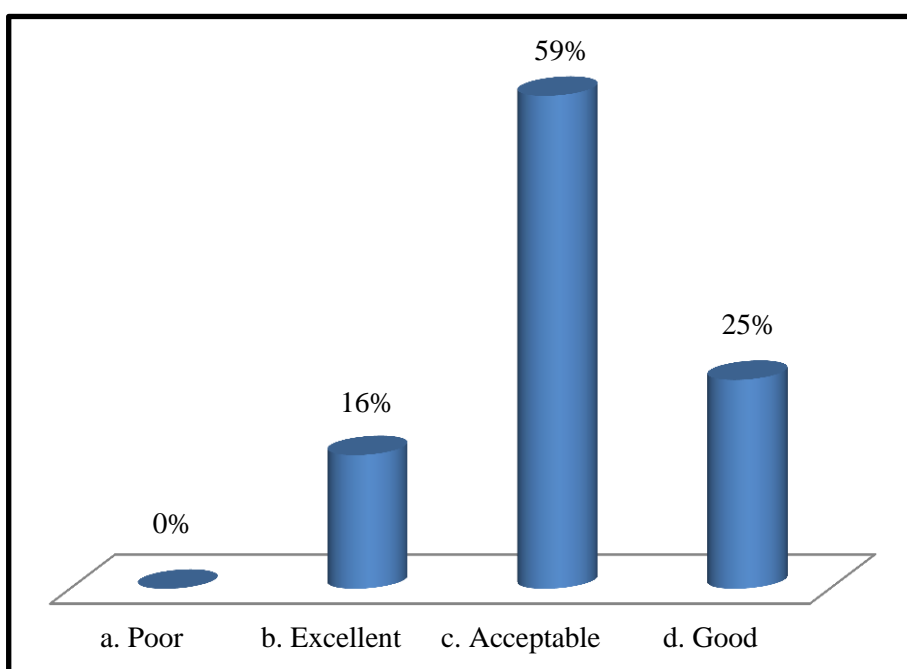
Figure 3.6: Students' Level in Reading English Texts

This figure reveals that the vast majority of the respondents (59%) evaluated their level in reading English texts as "acceptable". On the other hand, a number of respondents (25%) chose the option "good" and finally the option "excellent" scored the lowest percentage with a rate of (16%). This may indicate that they share similar learning experience.

Section Two: Reading Comprehension

Item 7. Do you have any reading comprehension difficulties?
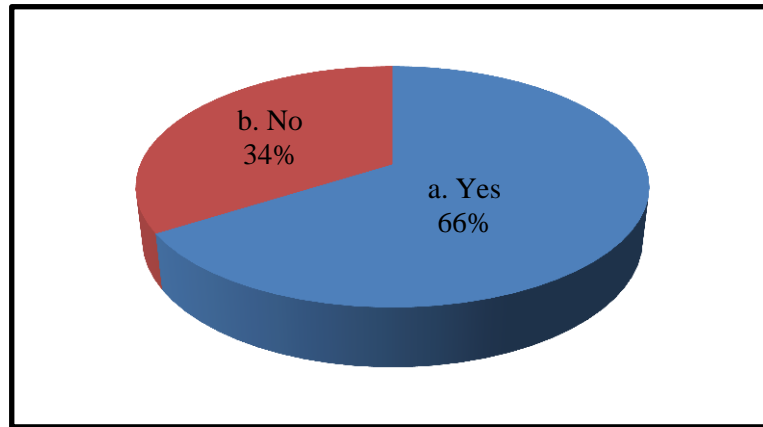
Figure 3.7: Reading Comprehension Difficulties

This part measures the students' reading comprehension difficulties. According to the above pie chart, out of 32 participants, 21 (66%) of them encounter difficulties to understand English texts; in contrast, the remaining of respondents (34%) have no reading comprehension issues.

Item 8. What kind of reading comprehension difficulties do you face?
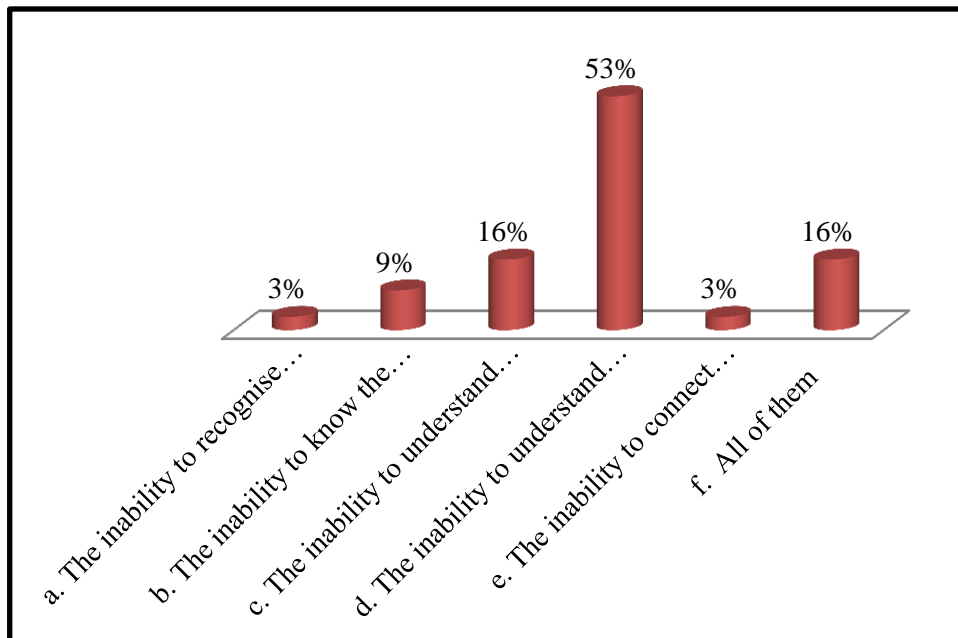
Figure 3.8: Types of Reading Comprehension Difficulties

This question is sought to identify the main types of reading comprehension difficulties. Over half of the participants (53%) classified "the inability to understand new vocabulary" as the most difficult reading comprehension factor; however, sum of (16%) for "all of them" and "the inability to understand complex language forms (words, sentences…). On the other hand, sum of (3%) have problems in understanding the English texts due to the inability to recognise the type of text and/or the unfamiliarity with the topic of the text. Another sum of (3%) encounters difficulties to connect ideas of the text with each other and/or background knowledge with new one. The last percentage (9%) goes for "the inability to know the writer's intentions". One can notice that all of the selected sample encountered at least one of the aforementioned difficulties in reading comprehension.

Item 9. Would you specify the main reasons for students' reading difficulties? (you may choose more than one answer)
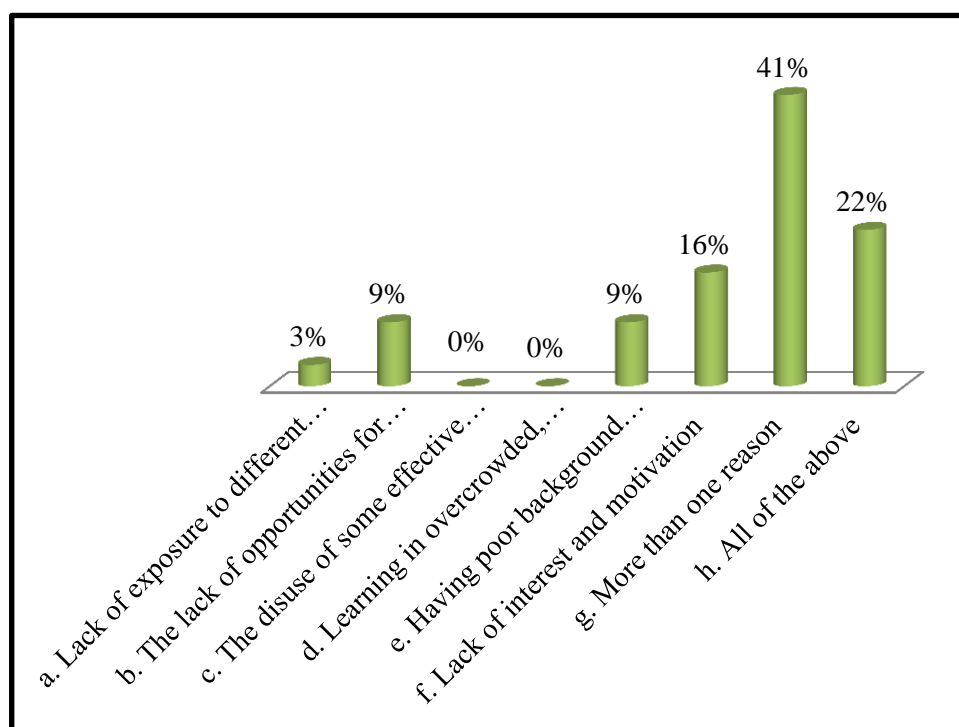
Figure 3.9: The Reasons behind Students' Reading Difficulties

The above figure denotes that a remarkable quantity of participants opted for more than one reason behind their reading difficulties, in which they form the average of (41%). Whilst, only a single participant (3%) declared to have lack of exposure to different text

genres and to different text structures, and those who have lack of interest and motivation represent the percentage of (16%). What comes next is: "having poor background knowledge", who represent (9%) out of the whole sample, "the lack of opportunities for practicing reading", with the same percentage (9%) and "all of them" with (22%).

Item 10. How much do you agree that background knowledge has great importance in reading comprehension?
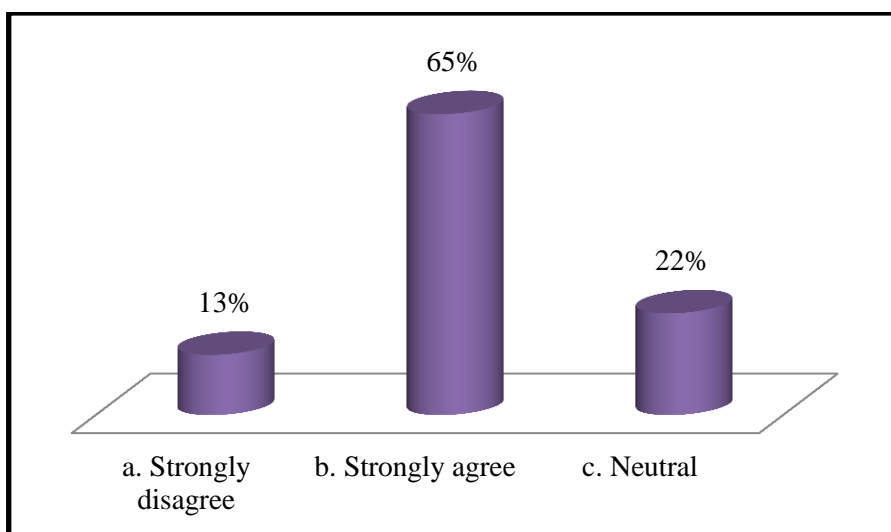
Figure 3.10: The Importance of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

This question is sought to know the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension. Considering the respondents' answers, (60%) of them strongly agree that prior knowledge has an integral role in comprehending the text. However, (13%) of them strongly disagree and (22%) of them are neutral with the idea. Hence, in order to the reasons behind the students' agreement and disagreement, the participants were asked to justify their answers.

For strongly agree, the students explained their positive agreement towards the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension. According to them, the presence of rich knowledge of certain topic gives the reader a greater chance to build a strong understanding of the text they read. As one participant exemplified and we quote "if learners have background information about the US history, it will be difficult for them to understand a text of that kind". Therefore, being familiar with the text can help students relate the new information with the prior knowledge and hence, comprehend the text.

However, for those who opted for "strongly disagree", understanding a text does not only depend on the prior knowledge, but even using one's imagination in a certain situation and understand more the events or dialogues, learners will not encounter difficulties. Accordingly, the reason behind those who chose "neutral" option explained that background knowledge is not always the most important factor in reading comprehension. It is helpful to obtain certain amount of knowledge on different topics, but having no background knowledge would make reading comprehension more challenging.

Section Three: Cultural Awareness

Item 11. Do you think that teaching culture is important for English language teaching?
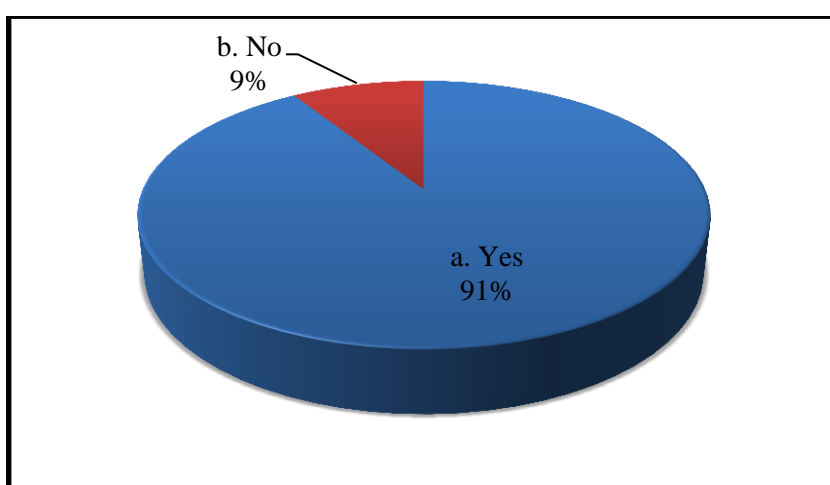
Figure 3.11: Students' Attitude towards the Importance of Culture in English language Teaching

The obtained results from this question show that (91%) of the participants showed their positive attitude towards considering teaching culture as an integral of English language teaching; whereas, (9%) of the participants answered the opposite. In order to know the reason behind their choices, the students were asked to justify their answers. The participants who opted for "yes" option declared that any language has a cultural background and studying it is obligatory to involve in the language, because it makes the learning the language easier.

Some of them added that teaching culture in EFL classes will enhance and improve the students' language skills, and facilitate the reading comprehension. That is, learners will be able to understand the English texts easily comparing to those who are not exposed to it, as one participant supported and we quote "you can never teach language in isolation". For example, "Malaysia, for example, prohibits wearing yellow clothes because

it incites demonstrations and riots. If a person is not aware of these prohibitions, he may expose himself to penalties without the slightest awareness.... Teaching culture is crucial there no playing with that concept".

On the other hand, the participants who said the opposite explained that integrating culture as a part of the learning process is not important because learning the English language can be done everywhere, every time, and in any speciality, there is no relation between them. However, another participant added that learners need to learn about the language not the culture.

Item 12. Do you think that there is a relationship between having a good cultural awareness and reading comprehension?
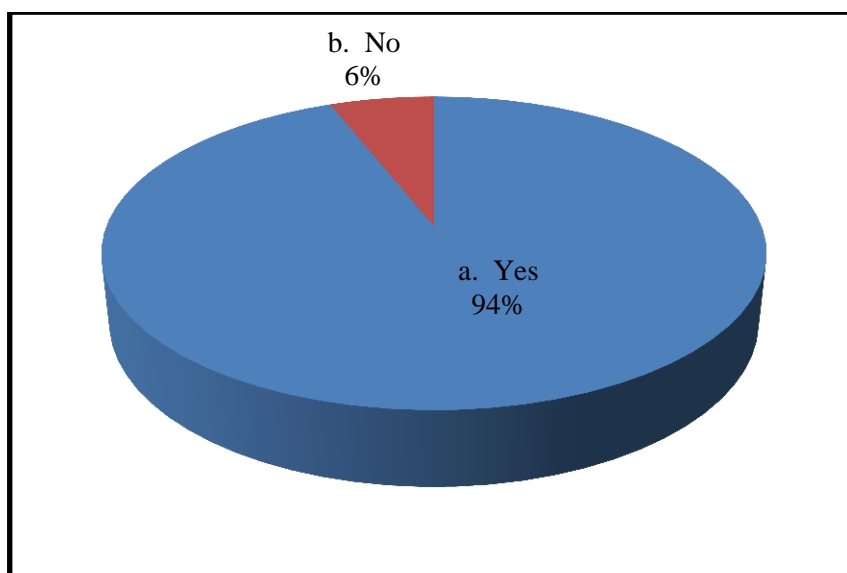
3.12: The Relationship between Having a Good Cultural Awareness and Reading Comprehension

Statistically speaking, the difference between the participants who showed positive attitude towards the relationship between having a good cultural awareness and reading comprehension and the others who do not is quite immense. The former represents the percentage of (94%); whilst, the latter represents the average of (6%).

If yes, what kind of relationship?
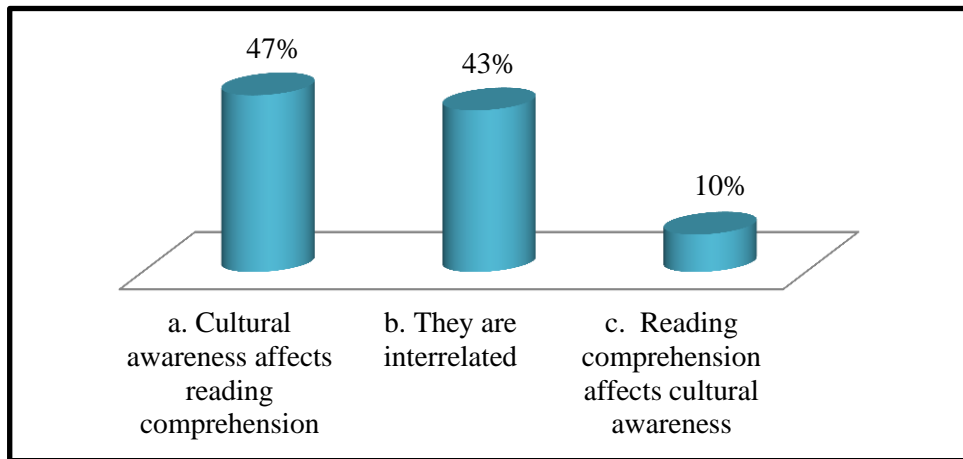
Figure 3.12.1: Kind of Relationship

This question aims at identifying the type of relationship between cultural awareness and reading comprehension. Out of 32, 14 of participants (47%) confirmed that cultural awareness affects reading comprehension; however, (43%) of them opted for "they are interrelated". On the other hand, only three participants with an average of (10%) picked the choice of "reading comprehension affects cultural awareness". This indicates that both concepts 'reading comprehension' and 'cultural awareness' influence each other in way or another.

Item 13. How do you evaluate your awareness about the English culture?
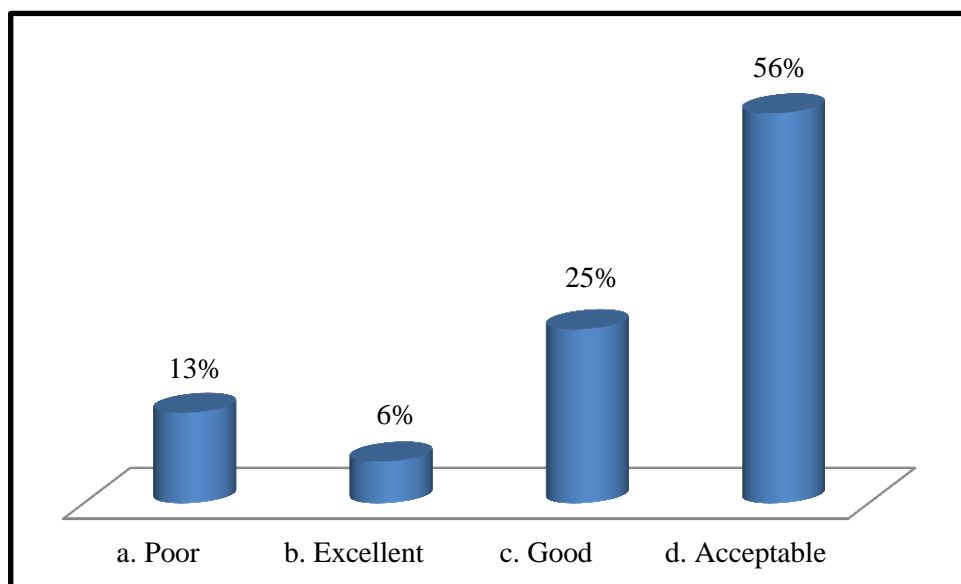
Figure 3.13: Students' Level of Awareness about English Culture

The results that are summarized in the above figure show that a great number of participants (56%) evaluated their level of awareness about English culture as acceptable, followed by percentage of (25%) of participants who assessed their selves as good. A minority of participants think that they are excellent, with an average of (6%); however, only (13%) of the participants see themselves unaware of the cultural differences of English.

Item 14. What kind of strategies do you use to develop your awareness about others' culture(s)?
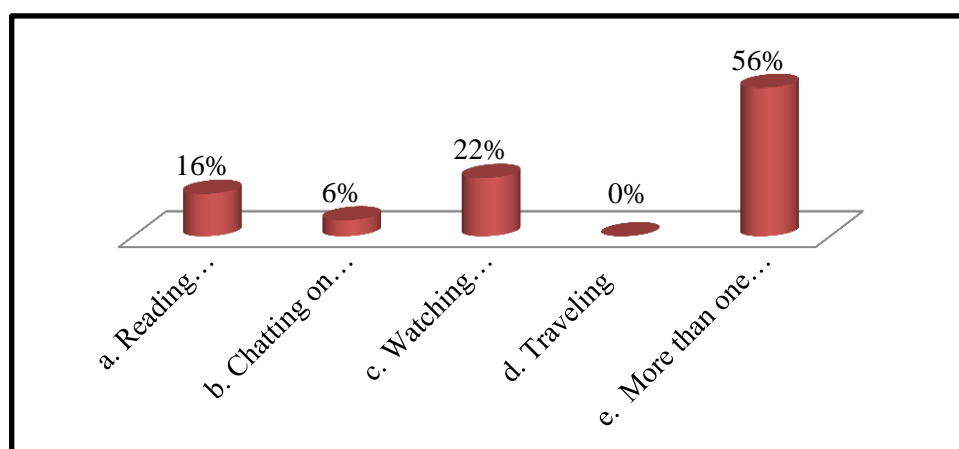
Figure 3.14: Types of Strategies Used to Develop Students' Awareness about Others' Culture(s)

The data obtained from this question display that the majority of the participants regard "more than one strategy" as the method that are more effective in enhancing their cultural awareness, in which they form the average of (56%); whereas, "watching movies and documentaries" comes in the second place, "reading books, stories and magazines" come in the third place; however, the rest who consider chatting on social media to be more effective strategy in developing their awareness about other cultures represents the percentage of (6%). Lastly, it is important to mention that none of the participants opted for "travelling" option.

Item 15. To what extent do you agree or disagree that having a good awareness about the English culture can help in comprehending English texts?
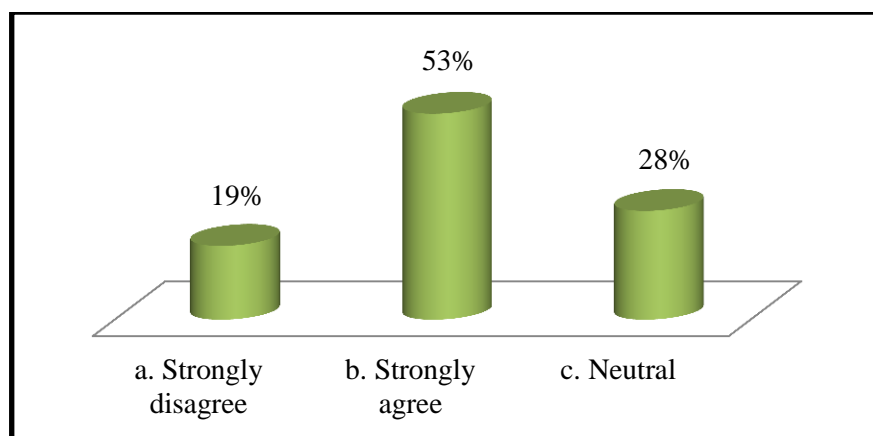
Figure 3.15: The Usefulness of Having a Good Awareness about English Culture in Comprehending English Texts

In response to this question, one can see that the majority of participants opted for "strongly agree" option with percentage of (53%); however, (19%) of participants declared that they strongly disagree with the question. On the other hand, a ratio of (28%) of students was neutral, neither agreed nor disagreed with the given idea.

Item 16. According to you, does the lack of a sufficient cultural knowledge contribute in the occurrence of EFL learner's reading comprehension difficulties?
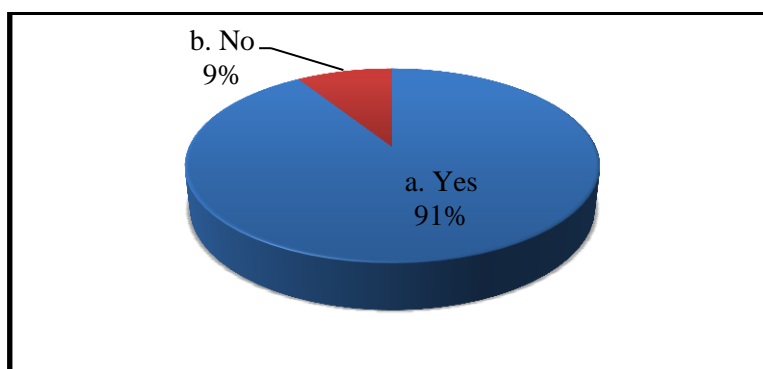
Figure 3.16: The Effect of the Insufficient Cultural Knowledge on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Out of 32, 29 of the participants (91%) reported that the deficiency of cultural knowledge influences their comprehension of text. According to them, cultural knowledge is an important factor in achieving reading comprehension ability, since culture and

65

reading are interrelated concepts. For example, if the readers have no idea about Martin Luther King and his speech, this will lead them to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the texts and discourse. Meanwhile, a single participant added and we quote "cultural knowledge works as guide to know more about language". On the contrary, the participants who showed their refusal represent the average of (9%), because EFL learners nowadays have cultural knowledge of English language.

Item 17. What can EFL teachers do to help students' overcome their lack of knowledge about the English language culture?

This question is sought to identify the appropriate strategies or techniques in order to overcome the lack of knowledge about the English language culture. Some of the participants declared that overcoming such issue requires integrating culture as part of teaching/learning process. Some others added that learners should be exposed to English texts extensively in order to be familiar with its culture. Additionally, using authentic materials and providing interesting activities can help in facilitating their reading comprehension; students, here, will be exposed to real contexts. On the other hand, some others suggested that it is important to provide learners with different homework and assignments about it in order to encourage them.

3.3. Discussion of the Main Findings

The focus of this research was on the role of cultural awareness in facilitating EFL learners' reading comprehension. The selected sample was students of third year LMD at Biskra University. During the analysis of the questionnaire, the researcher had deduced the following conclusions:

In this respect, the majority of participants were females with percentage of (84%). In addition, the researcher attempted to identify the reason(s) behind studying English language, the analysis showed that (88%) of respondents' choice was personal because they like this language and consider it as favourite language.

Another important detail, it was deduced that third year EFL learners are aware of the important of reading skill in English language learning; yet, their reading frequency is insufficient due to the different difficulties they face during the reading process; such as, inability to understand vocabulary and new terms. These difficulties lead them to utilize

different strategies to overcome these problems such as reading books, stories and magazines, as well as watching movies and documentaries.

Students' questionnaire confirmed that integrating background knowledge in English language teaching can help improve their reading comprehension, and overcome the difficulties that they may encounter in reading. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the majority of students find difficulties in reading comprehension due to lack of motivation, lack of interest in reading and poor background knowledge. The obtained results also showed that students stressed on the importance of cultural awareness in comprehending English texts. Accordingly, the students' answers confirmed that cultural background contributes to their accurate understanding of the texts as more known information can develop comprehension.

The results obtained from the questionnaire revealed that reading comprehension is rarely integrated within the teaching of culture; despite the fact of its important role. Additionally, the respondents stated that there is relationship between having a good awareness of culture and reading comprehension. That is to say, cultural familiarity affects the reading comprehension and vice versa, because the lack of sufficient schemata can contribute in the occurrence of EFL learners' reading comprehension difficulties.

Following the students' questionnaire, reading books, stories, and magazines as well as watching movies and documentaries can be adequate strategies to activate the learners' schemata and overcome the obstacles arise in reading. Their comprehension of the stories and books can enhance their understanding of English texts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the analysis of the students' questionnaire revealed that cultural awareness plays a significant role in EFL teaching and learning process. It also confirmed the effectiveness of cultural knowledge as an important skill that enhances their reading comprehension, as well as, its usefulness in language learning. This collecting tool clarified the students' positive attitude towards teaching English culture in EFL classrooms. Consequently, it has confirmed from the results obtained that cultural familiarity and reading comprehension are inseparable concepts, because the former affects the latter and vice versa.

General Conclusion and Recommendations

General Conclusion

This study has been conducted in order to investigate the role of cultural familiarity in facilitating learners' reading comprehension. It aims at demonstrating the importance of background knowledge in improving third year students of English reading skill at Biskra University. Moreover, this work hypothesized that when EFL students possess a strong cultural background about the target language that will facilitate their process of comprehending cultural and literary texts.

Basically, the content of this research is divided into three chapters. Meanwhile, the first two chapters cover the theoretical part; however, the third chapter is devoted to the field work of the study. Fundamentally, the first chapter provides a closer look at the significant elements of the reading skill and reading comprehension. Further, it highlighted an overview of reading skill and then, it focuses on reading comprehension. On the other hand, the second chapter focuses mainly on the second variable, which is cultural awareness. It provides definitions, different stages and the role of background knowledge. The third chapter covered the analysis and interpretation of the gathered data from the data collecting tool which is the students' questionnaire.

Methodologically, this research opted for qualitative descriptive method; under that, it used one data collecting instrument to confirm the research main hypothesis and objectives. The questionnaire was administered to 32 EFL learners LMD at Mohamed Khidher Biskra University to obtain insightful views and attitudes towards this investigation.

Based on the obtained findings from analyzing, interpreting and discussing the data gathered, the important research questions were answered. Overall, the present research confirmed that having good cultural background knowledge affects positively the EFL learners' reading comprehension.

Recommendations

Various recommendations were gathered from the students' questionnaire in order to investigate the role of cultural awareness in facilitating learners' reading comprehension at Biskra University. These recommendations are summarized in the following points:

- Teachers can teach students the English language culture using different learning strategies.
- They should make students practice more on their reading skill
- Teachers should provide students with feedback
- Teachers should add sessions and lectures about English language culture
- Teachers should advise their students to watch tv programs and series in English about English countries
- Teachers should try to find some effective strategies enhance their cultural awareness , doing a research related to cultures , integrate with foreigners, share and discuss different topics in different cultures
- Teacher also should teach provide slang idiotic expressions and bringing up interesting stories and customs of foreign cultures that carry some suspense, and this is what motivates students.
- There is also a method that is somewhat arbitrary, but motivating at the same time, which is to force the student to read. This is done by imposing homework and assessments in the educational stages because the majority of students strive to succeed and gain the highest grades in education. For example, if my teacher tells me that whoever reads the book 'The Culture of Peoples' will get a full mark. This will certainly motivate me to read. He will certainly test our culture in various ways within the department to see who read the book and who did not.

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Appendices

Appendix 01

Students' Questionnaire

<u>A Questionnaire for Third-Year EFL Students</u>

Dear student,

I am a second-year Master student. I am conducting a research about 'The Role of Cultural Awareness in Facilitating EFL Student's Reading Comprehension'. Therefore, I would be so grateful if you could answer the following questionnaire, which aims at gathering the information needed for the accomplishment of my study. Please tick the appropriate box(es) or make complete statements whenever necessary. Be sure that your responses will be anonymous and will be used for research purposes only.

Thank you for your time, effort and collaboration.

Prepared by:

Zoulikha HAMZAOUI

Supervised by:

Mr. Abdelhak CHENINI

2021-2022

Section One: General Information

Q1. Would you specify your sex please?

a) Male ☐   b) Female ☐

Q2. Learning English at university was:

a) Your own choice ☐

b) Your parents' choice ☐

c) Someone's advice ☐

Q3. Which of the following language skills is important for you to learn English?

a) Listening ☐
b) Reading ☐
c) Speaking ☐
d) Writing ☐

Justify your answer please

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Section Two: Reading Skill

Q4. How often do you read in English?

a) Always ☐   b) Someimes ☐   c) Rarely ☐   d) Never ☐

Q5. Do you read for:

a) For intertainment ☐
b) For increasing your background knowledge ☐
c) For Enlarging your vocabulary ☐
d) For developing your productive skills ☐
e) For succeeding in your academic courses ☐
f) All of them ☐

If others, please specify

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………

Q6. How do you evaluate your reading ability of English texts?

a) Poor

b) Acceptable

c) Good

d) Excellent

Q7. Do you have any reading comprehension difficulties?

a) Yes   b) No

Q8. What kind of reading comprehension difficulties do you face?

a) The inability to recognise the types of text and/or the unfamiliarity

with the topic of the text,

b) The inability to connect the ideas of the text with each other and/or the inability to

connect background knowledge with the new one

c) The inability to understand complex language forms (words, sentences)

d) The inability to understand new vocabulary

e) The inability to know the writer's intentions

f) Lack of attention

g) All of them

If others, please specify

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Q9. Would you specify the main reasons for students' reading difficulties? (you may choose more than one answer)

a) Lack of exposure to different text genres and to different text structures ☐

b) The lack of opportunities for practicing reading ☐

c) The disuse of some effective reading strategies ☐

d) Learning in overcrowded, disorganised, and noisy classrooms ☐

e) Having poor background knowledge ☐

f) All of the above ☐

Q10. How much do you agree that background knowledge has great importance in reading comprehension?

a) Strongly agree ☐
b) Neutral ☐
c) Strongly disagree ☐

Justify your answer, please

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Section Three: Reading Comprehension and Cultural Awareness

Q11. Do you think that teaching culture is important for English language teaching?

a) Yes ☐   b) No ☐

Justify your answer, please

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Q12. Do you think that there is a relationship between reading comprehension and having a good cultural awareness?

a) Yes ☐   b) No ☐

If yes, what kind of relationship?

a) Cultural awareness affects reading comprehension ☐

b) Reading comprehension affects cultural awareness ☐

c) They are interrelated ☐

Q13. How do you evaluate your awareness about the English culture?

a) Poor ☐

b) Acceptable ☐

c) Good ☐

d) Excellent ☐

Q14. What kind of strategies do you use to develop your awareness about others' culture(s)?

a) Reading books, stories and magazines ☐

b) Chatting on social media ☐

c) Watching movies and documentaries ☐

d) Traveling ☐

If others, please specify

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Q15. To what extent do you agree or disagree that having a good awareness about the English culture can help in comprehending English texts?

a) Strongly agree ☐
b) Neutral ☐
c) Strongly disagree ☐

Justify your answer, please

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Your collaboration is highly appreciated

الملخص

يعد الإلمام بالجوانب الثقافية للقراءة إحدى أهم الدراسات في أقسام اللغة الانجليزية. عدم امتلاك قدر كافي من الثقافة قد يؤدي إلى صعوبة في فهم محتوى النص المراد قراءته. لهذا السبب، يهدف هذا البحث الحالي إلى التحقيق في دور الوعي الثقافي في تسهيل عملية فهم القراءة لطلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم إتباع المنهج الوصفي حيث شارك فيه 32 طالبا من جامعة بسكرة.تم اقتراح الفرضية الاتية: عندما يمتلك طلاب اللغة الانجليزية خلفية ثقافية سيسهل ذلك عملية استيعابهم للنصوص الثقافية و الأدبية. تم استخدام الطريقة النوعية (الوصفية) كأداة لجمع البيانات لهاته الدراسة. استخدم الباحث استبيان وزع على طلبة السنة الثالثة، قسم الآداب و اللغات الأجنبية، شعبة لغة انجليزية بجامعة محمد خيضر ببسكرة. بعد تحليل البيانات تم الحصول على النتائج التالية: إذا كان المتعلم على دراية بالجانب الثقافي للغة الأجنبية، سيسهل ذلك فهم محتوى النص المراد قراءته، وجود علاقة ايجابية بين المتغيرين، و دمج الجانب الثقافي في التدريس سيعود بالإيجاب على المتعلم و المعلم. على أساس هذه النتائج، تم تقديم مجموعة من الحلول و التوصيات التي تهدف إلى دمج الثقافة في صفوف طلبة السنة الثالثة.