The Impact of Cultural Familiarity on Vocabulary Learning through Reading among Iranian Upper-intermediate Male and Female EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the effects of cultural background knowledge on vocabulary learning through reading culturally oriented texts. The study was conducted with 150 upper-intermediate male ($n = 75$) and female ($n = 75$) EFL students. The participants of each gender were randomly assigned into three equal groups: group A (Target Culture = TC), group B (Source Culture = SC) and group C (Culture-Free = CF). After homogenizing the participants through a researcher-made vocabulary pretest, three groups received the treatment which was reading comprehension materials reflecting a particular culture. During the treatment, some reading passages related to American and English cultures, Persian culture, and culture free materials were taught to group A, group B, and group C, respectively. At the end of the study, a researcher-made vocabulary posttest was administered. Results of one-way ANCOVA and paired samples t test revealed the significant effects of cultural familiarity whereby vocabulary gains were greater after participants read within the culturally oriented text. Moreover, the results showed that there was no significant difference in vocabulary knowledge posttest between male and female learners.

Keywords: Cultural materials, reading comprehension, source culture, target culture, vocabulary learning

Introduction#

Defining culture is not an easy task since anthropologists have not agreed upon its definition. They have numerous responses to the question, "what is culture?" Each school of thought has a different viewpoint about the culture. Based on some anthropologists' points of view such as Coleman (2013), culture is defined as the models of behavior and thought that people living in social groups learn, construct, and share. Moreover, culture has been defined by Jackson (2018) as "…the communal programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from those of another" (p. 8). According to the experts of foreign language instruction in the United States, there

was a general and complete collection of standards for foreign language instruction, encompassing culture standards. They actually defined culture in terms of three interconnected elements: products, practices, perspectives (Firat, Kutucuoğlu, Saltik, & Tunçel, 2013). Furthermore, two paramount elements have been added by Moran (2011) to the elements of culture: persons and communities. He defined culture based on these five dimensions and believes that culture is the evolving way of life of a group of persons, comprising of a shared collection of rehearsals correlated with a shared collection of products, based upon a shared collection of viewpoints on the world, and set within particular social contexts.

Culture and language instruction cannot be segregated; therefore, while instructing a target language culture must be taught. In this regard, Chastain (1988) believed that culture instruction in EFL classrooms has got a pivotal role in the course. It

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is a famous and popular reality that language instruction and culture are constrained and learners need social and cultural awareness during international communications. More importantly, language, as a medium for communication, is a crucial inseparable component of culture. As language is culture-bound, a thorough understanding of the true nature of language would necessitate an appreciation of the context-specific culture of the members of a speech community. One of the issues directly related to learning a foreign language is that learners are confronted with culture-related values and norms reflected via the target language. From 1930s, the anthropological dimension of language studies emphasized by a group of linguists including Róg (2017), Wortham (2011), and Whorf (2009) lead to an increasing interest in the studies which mainly deal with language as a system of cultural values and norms rather than a system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. According to this view, language is a means for expressing an individual's like, dislikes, values and ethics. For L2 learners, it is useful to become familiar with the L2 culture therefore, an efficient EFL syllabus should provide enough opportunities for exposure to authentic language that help learners compare and contrast their L1 culture and foreign language culture. According to Bada and Genc (2000, p. 101), "the need for cultural literacy in the ELT stems primarily from the fact that most language learners, who are not exposed to the cultural elements of the society in question, appear to have significant difficulties in sharing and expressing meaning with native speakers."

The relation between language and culture as a concern of L2 teachers and educators has been highlighted in the works of different scholars (e.g., Byram & Feng, 2012; Gabora, 2010; Hall, 2013; Hismanoglu, 2011; Valencia & Ximena, 2015). As Xue and Ying (2006) put it, cultural values are encoded via language. In other words, the cultural beliefs and ideas of the native speakers of a foreign language community are reflected in their language.

Most learners learn a language in an EFL setting therefore, they do not have enough opportunities for real life oral communication with native speakers. On the contrary, they can expand their reading skills by using a variety of authentic reading material with varying degrees of difficulty. According to Bernhardt (2009), reading skill is considered as the most stable and durable of the foreign language modalities. Reading is a process in which different components including the knowledge of language, the cultural background knowledge, and other specialized knowledge are altogether influential in comprehension

of a given text (Ruthemsley, 2011; Xue & Ying, 2006).

Mental schemata are believed to have a vital role in developing and enhancing the processes of language production and comprehension. The activation of background knowledge or world knowledge for processing language facilitates comprehension (Alfaki & Siddiek, 2013; Bilgileri, 2016; Ghaniabadi & Alavi, 2012). In the receptive skill of reading, meaning construction is not a direct product of decoding the language input. It is an active process in which both language and schemata are involved.

More specifically, language reflects the substantial and particular ways of thinking of language communities. In other words, the language users' cultural knowledge is incorporated in the language they produce (Demir, 2012; Hao, 2009; Hill & Lin, 2012). Thus, cultural difference between L1 and L2 speech communities cannot be ignored in foreign language teaching contexts. More specifically, cultural patterns employed for meaning negotiation among native speakers can be investigated in order to help teachers and material developers in preparing exercises for enhancing their awareness of cultural variations.

According to Akbari (2015), there are two extreme evaluations of ELT situation in this context. On the one hand, English culture as a school subject is considered as representing and introducing Western culture to the Iranian students. On the other hand, there are voices claiming that English culture as it is currently presented in Iranian EFL context is nothing but a representation of the native Iranian or Islamic ideology incorporated into the language materials which have been developed by Iranian scholars. This controversy has led many researchers to examine the cultural content of EFL materials in Iran (Amirian & Bazrafshan, 2016; Mahboudi, & Javdani, 2012; Shahramnia, & Tadayon, 2012).

Last but not least, cultural teaching for foreign language learners is exceedingly pivotal particularly in teaching reading and vocabulary. Thus, the present study intended to investigate the impact of teaching cultural materials on developings the' learners'e vocabulary knowledge through reading among upper-intermediate EFL Learners.

Review of Literature

Reading as a reciprocal process involves different mental activities to be done simultaneously or quite similar in time. As students read, they are likely going forward from analyzing the text in smaller vocabulary units to broader conceptual units (Darling-Hammond

et al. 2020). Indeed, both micro-level text-driven characteristics, such as pattern diagnosis, letter reconnaissance, and lexical disposal, and macro-level reader-driven characteristics, such as activation of previous knowledge and guiding comprehension are considered by the readers (Demir, 2012). All these procedures need precious memory space and may sometimes overburden the working memory, which is confined in capacity (Engle, 2010; Namaziandost, Hafezian & Shafiee, 2018; Pulido, 2009).

This restricted resource may be further overburdened by the additional endeavor that students create while reading. Readers' attempts to deal with micro-level linguistic characteristics may put excessive pressure on readers that inadequate resources can be devoted to a macro-level textual investigation. (Alptekin, 2006). It has been discussed, however, that the cognitive burden can be diminished by activating the prior background knowledge that readers carry to the text (Engle, 2010; Nassaji, 2002; Pulido, 2009). Learners can assign enough attentional space for textual analysis and interpretation when they add pertinent background knowledge to the reading process. Thus, current background knowledge may assist to the functionality of what Wang and Adesope (2016) defined as automatic processes, sparing precious attentional space for more unknown and fresh constituents in the text.

According to Shuying (2013), the place of background knowledge in the reading process can be seen in schema theory. Nassaji (2002) believed that schema theory involves "preexisting knowledge structures cumulated in the mind" (p. 444) and how readers synthesize their prior information with the text (Ajideh, 2011; Alptekin, 2006; Ketchum, 2009). Both schema and background knowledge terms will be utilized synonymously and interchangeably in this paper. There are different kinds of background knowledge that readers utilize during their involvement with the text (Shuying, 2013; Oller, 2008; Nassaji, 2002). Of the various kinds, formal and content schemata are the most frequently alluded to and argued.

Formal schema, often referred to as textual schema (Singhal, 2009), is characterized as knowledge of language and linguistic norms, containing knowledge of the structure of texts and the key properties of a specific style of writing (Carrell, 1988; Shuying, 2013). Studies into formal schema propose that "texts with known rhetorical structure will be simpler to read and understand than texts with unknown rhetorical structure" (Carrell, 1988, p. 464).

Content schema, which is characterized as knowledge of the content (Kafipour & Jahansooz,

2017), can further be divided into two various kinds: background knowledge, the knowledge that may or may not be pertinent to the content of a specific text, and knowledge of subject matter which is straightly pertinent to the text content and subject.

Cultural schema is the third kind of schema which is more pertinent to this study (Ajideh, 2011). It is additionally named as abstract schema (Nassaji, 2002), story schema (Róg, 2017), or linguistic schema (Ketchum, 2009; Yousef, Karimi, & Janfeshan, 2014). Ketchum suggested the cultural schema as a culture-specific extension of the content schema as it relates to the function of cultural belonging that is required to better understand the writer's intended meaning.

The positive impact of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning has been reported by numerous researches (Alptekin, 2006; Ebrahimi, 2012; Gürkan, 2012; Pulido, 2009; Rashidi & Soureshjani, 2011; Riazi & Babaei, 2011; Ryan, 2012). For instance, Gürkan indicated that when cultural norms are familiar with students, they make a clearer exegesis of the text than when they are not. Subsequently, in cases of unknown cultural norms, students prefer to appeal to their own cultural resources, which lead to poor understanding of the text.

In 2006, Alptekin demonstrated that when cultural elements of a short story are nativized to make the text culturally more familiar, students can make better inferences than when they read the original but culturally-remote story. Alptekin's (2006) research varies from that of other schema-related studies (e.g., Alfaki & Siddiek, 2013; Carrell, 1988) in that he did not use two texts of comparable complexity but allowed use of the same text only by modifying some cultural features, such as the names of persons and locations, and by adjusting them to the learners' own cultural context. According to Alptekin, this decreases the feasible prejudice presented by differing degrees of conceptual density and intricacy in various texts.

Alptekin (2006) method is logical because he seeks to eliminate potential interference factors in the experimental phase. Ingeminating and extending his research are noteworthy in order to reach a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon. Furthermore, mitigating potential interference variables in such a system may also contribute to the evaluation of certain factors participating in the reading process. One such feature is the activities used in a reading class. Working with native texts proved to be useful in calculating how successful the use of practices is in compensating for the lack of a pertinent cultural schema. Thus, this research aimed to shed lights on Alptekin's study to investigate if cultural familiarity

has any significant effect on vocabulary learning through reading. To attain this purpose, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ 1. Does teaching cultural materials bring about any improvement in EFL learners' understanding of English vocabulary?

RQ 2. Is there any significant difference between and within all groups' foreign language vocabulary knowledge after three-month exposure to various cultural materials?

RQ 3. Is there any significant difference between Iranian male and female EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge through teaching cultural materials?

Method

Participants

To do this study, 150 male (n = 75) and female (n = 75) upper-intermediate students out of 250 were selected via non-random convenience sampling from five English Language Institute in the 2019 Winter semester in Iran. The participants' age range was between 16 to 19. They had been studying English as a foreign language for at least 6 years to be able to communicate in English as the foreign language and to improve their general English knowledge. They had two hours of English twice per week. They were upper-intermediate students and their level of English language proficiency was determined on the basis of their scores on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) before the treatment. Each gender group in the study was divided into three equal subgroups: Group A (Target Culture=TC), Group B (Source Culture = SC), and Group C (Culture-Free = CF) or Control Group, each comprising 25 participants.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in this study:

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)

An Oxford Placement Test (devised by Allen, 2004) was used in this study to determine the English language proficiency of the participants and to select homogeneous learners. It consisted of 60 multiple-choice items measuring grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Students were required to complete the test in 60 minutes by selecting the best answer from among the four options. The students' scores are ranked from high to low and homogenizing the participants is based on the OQPT categorizing chart including 0-10 scores for beginners, 11-17 for breakthrough, 18-29 for elementary, 30-40 for intermediate, 40-47 for upper-intermediate and 48-60 for advanced level. The reliability of the test estimated in a pilot study, using 100 similar students, turned out to be .91 using KR-21 formula, which is a high reliability index.

Vocabulary Knowledge Test Used as Pretest and Posttest

The next instrument used in this study was a vocabulary knowledge test. From among 20 reading passages were taught in this study, the researchers chose 8 passages which were based on cultural topics. Each passage was followed by 5 vocabulary multiple-choice questions in which the students must select the correct choice. So, the total number of items were 40 and each item received 0.5 point. The aim of the test was to check students' recognition and comprehension. The reason for selecting different topics was to make sure that the participants needed different kinds of background knowledge and therefore, to remove potential biases. According to Fulcher (2005), the level of difficulty of a text should be pertinent for the readers. Appropriate reading texts are determined through various ways. The essence of these formulas is the assumption that the more polysyllabic words in a sentence, the more difficult it is and the less sentence in a paragraph, the more difficult the paragraph will be. One of these formulas is the Gunning Fog Index (Gunning, 1952). Using the Fog index, the readability levels of the eight passages were computed to be 18, 20, 14, 17, 16, 15, 14, and 20. The average readability was 16.37 and the standard deviation was 3.06. The Fog index of readability of the texts selected for the purpose of this study was calculated to be 18 that gives it an appropriate level of difficulty because it was within the range of 16.37 ± 3.06. The allotted time was 50 minutes and there was no penalty for false responses.

At the end of the experiment, to find out the possible effects of the treatment on the students' vocabulary knowledge, the modified version of the pretest was used again as posttest. All characteristics of the posttest was the same as those of the pretest in terms of time and the number of items. The only difference of this test from the pretest is that the order of questions and alternatives were changed to wipe out the probable recall of pretest answers.

The reliability and validity of the mentioned test was checked. After construction, it was examined by five experts for its face and content validity. That is, to get sure about the content validity index (CVI) of the test items, five university professors who also taught

English for more than 10 years read through the tests and made some changes regarding the clarity, simplicity and the representativeness of items. Subsequently, the test was modified and then piloted on a similar group in another institute whose course book and level were the same. The reliability of the pretest and posttest were computed through the application of Cronbach's alpha formula and it was .985 and .891, respectively.

Data Collection Procedure

After selecting the target participants (75 males and 75 females), each gender was divided into three equal groups, namely Group A (Target Culture=TC), Group B (Source Culture = SC), and Group C (Culture-Free = CF) or Control Group. Then, all the participants were pretest ed through a vocabulary and then the treatment was practiced. The participants in each group practiced reading comprehension materials that reflected a particular culture. During the treatment period which was about 25 sessions, the researchers provided reading passages related to American and English cultures (for group A), Persian culture (for group B) and finally group C (Control Group) received culture-free passages. The passages were mostly about specific cultural issues, for example, *Mosque, Cathedral, Christmas festival, Nowruz Festival, Thanksgiving day, Boxing Day, Guy Fawkes Night, Chaharshanbe Suri, ,Sofreye Haft Sin Valentine's Day, Poppy Day or Remembrance Day, Ostrich Racing Sizdah Be-dar* and so on. In fact, the treatment was practiced in three different ways since there were three different groups of participants. The first group (TCG) was provided with some American/British culture-based texts. In each session one text was taught; each text included some new vocabulary items that the researchers aimed to teach them to the participants. In fact, new vocabulary items were taught during reading the related text; while facing a new vocabulary the researchers used explanations, definitions, exemplifications, synonyms, and antonyms for teaching them. The texts of another group (SCG) were Persian culture-based. The included vocabulary items in the mentioned texts were mostly related to the Persian culture and custom. The new words were instructed to the students through those techniques used for the previous group. The third group known as the control group (CFG) were given some texts that were neither American/British culture-based nor Persian culture-based. There were also some new words in these texts that were unknown or unfamiliar for the control participants. The techniques of explanations, definitions, exemplifications, synonyms, and antonyms were used to teach new words to the control group. The focus of the researchers was on 10 to 15 important cultural-based words in each text. In other words, 10 to 15 words were instructed to each group in one session. After finishing each session, some assignments were given to the students for example, writing one sentence for each word and writing a related paragraph by using the 10 or 15 words that had been taught. The aim of giving the assignment to write a sentence and a paragraph was to learn the words effectively through sentences. In the next session, the researchers checked the assignments and gave his comments and also took a quiz. Finally, after about 25 sessions and at the end of the study, a vocabulary knowledge test was administered to all groups as the posttest of the study.

It is worth noting that the reading passages were retrieved from Internet reliable sites (such as *bbc.com and cnn.com*) offering different levels of English texts for learners along with a number of questions following each of them to check the users' comprehension and other authentic sources such as ACTIVE Skills for Reading series (Anderson 2008*),* published by Heinle ELT, *Top Notch, level 1 A* by Saslow and Ascher (2007), and *Select Reading Series* (Lee & Gundersen, 2014). It should be mentioned that after retrieving the texts from the site, the difficulty of each text was measured using the scale of Gunning Fog Tests.

Findings

Before conducting any analyses on the pretest and posttest, it was necessary to check the normality of the distributions. Thus, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was run on the data obtained from the above-mentioned tests. Since the *p* values were larger than .05, it could be concluded that the distributions of scores for the pretest and posttest obtained from TCG, SCG, and CFG learners had been normal.

As the first research question of the study was intended to figure out whether teaching cultural materials bring about any improvement in EFL learners' understanding of English vocabulary, the pretest and posttest scores of the learners in the three groups were compared using a paired-samples *t* test:

Table 1.
Results of Paired-Samples t Test Comparing the Pretest and Posttest Scores of the TCG, SCG, CFG Learners

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	TCG Posttest	16.06	50	1.01	.14
	TCG Pretest	11.75	50	1.57	.22
Pair 2	SCG Posttest	15.64	50	1.36	.19
	SCG Pretest	11.86	50	1.67	.23
Pair 3	CFG Posttest	12.31	50	1.54	.21
	CFG Pretest	12.22	50	1.63	.23

As Table 1 shows, the TCG, SCG, and CFG learners obtained the mean scores of 11.75, 11.86, and 12.22 on the vocabulary pretest and 16.06, 15.64, and 12.31 on the vocabulary posttest, respectively. To find out whether the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the three groups was statistically significant or not, the researchers had to examine the paired-samples *t* test table (Table 2):

Table 2
Results of the Paired-Samples t Test Comparing Pretest and Posttest Scores of the TCG, SCG, and CFG

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
TCG POST – TCG PRE	4.31	2.03	.28	3.73	4.88	14.95	49	.00
SCG POST – SCG PRE	3.78	2.13	.30	3.17	4.38	12.49	49	.00
CFG POST – CFG PRE	.09	.33	.04	-.00	.18	1.92	49	.06

Table 2 revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest (*M* = 11.75, *SD* = 1.57) and posttest (*M* = 16.06, *SD* = 1.01) scores of the TCG learners since the *p* value under the *Sig,* (2-tailed) column was smaller than the significance level (i.e. .00 < .05). Moreover, since the *p* value under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column for the SCG group in Table 4 was smaller than the significance level (.00 < .05), it could be understood that the difference between the vocabulary pretest (*M* = 11.86) and posttest (*M* = 15.64) of the SCG learners was statistically significant. These indicate that the treatment (teaching target cultural materials (English and American) and Persian cultural materials (Source Culture) was effective so far as the vocabulary learning of the Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners were concerned. Lastly, based on the information presented in Table 3., there was not a statistically significant difference in the pretest (*M* = 12.22) and posttest (*M* = 12.31) of CFG since the *p* value was larger than the significance level (*p* > .05). Hence, it could be inferred that culture-free materials did not affect the vocabulary learning of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

To answer the second research question of this study, one-way ANCOVA was chosen to be conducted:

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Post-test Scores of the TCG, SCG, and CFG Learners

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
TCG	16.06	1.01	50
SCG	15.64	1.36	50
CFG	12.31	1.54	50
Total	14.67	2.13	150

The mean scores of the TCG (*M* = 16.06), SCG (*M* = 15.64), and CFG (*M* = 12.31) were found to be different from one another on the vocabulary posttest. To find out whether the differences among these mean scores were of statistical significance or not, one needs to examine the *p* value under the *Sig.* column in the one-way ANCOVA table below (Table 4).

Table 4
Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Post-test Scores of TCG, SCG, and CFG Learners

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	452.059[a]	3	150.68	96.13	.00	.664
Intercept	346.85	1	346.85	221.28	.00	.60
Pretest	29.92	1	29.92	19.09	.00	.11
Groups	443.56	2	221.79	141.49	.00	.66
Error	228.85	146	1.56			
Total	32962.25	150				
Corrected Total	680.91	149				

In Table 4, if you find the row labeled Groups in the leftmost column, and read across this row, under the *Sig.* column, you can find the *p* value, which should be compared with the alpha level of significance (i.e., .05). The *p* value here was lower than the alpha level of significance (.00< .05), which indicates that the difference between the three groups of TCG (*M* = 16.06), SCG (*M* = 15.64), and CFG (*M* = 12.31) on the vocabulary posttest was statistically significant. This means that cultural materials could significantly improve the vocabulary learning of the learners. Pair-wise comparisons of the groups (in Table 6) revealed which two groups were significantly different on the vocabulary posttest.

It is also worth noting that the effect size value, shown under the Partial Eta Squared column in front of Groups, equaled .66, which means that the treatment (i.e., cultural materials) accounted for 66% of the difference between the vocabulary posttest of the three groups.

Table 5
Pair-wise Comparisons for TCG, SCG, and CFG Learners' Mean Scores on the Posttest

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
CFG	TCG	-3.88	.25	.00	-4.49	-3.26
	SCG	-3.43	.25	.00	-4.03	-2.82
SCG	TCG	-.45	.25	.22	-1.05	.15
	CFG	3.43	.25	.00	2.82	4.03
TCG	SCG	.45	.25	.22	-.15	1.05
	CFG	3.88	.25	.00	3.26	4.49

Table 5 shows that the difference between CFG (*M* = 12.31) and TCG (*M* = 16.06) was statistically significant since the *Sig.* value corresponding to this comparison (*p* = .00) was less than .05. This means that teaching target cultural materials (English and American) could lead to a significant effect on vocabulary learning. Moreover, CFG learners' mean score (*M* = 12.31) was significantly lower than that of SCG learners (*M* = 15.64) because of the fact that the *p* value related to this comparison was .00, which is lower than the significance level. Thus, it could be concluded that teaching Persian cultural materials (source culture) also led to a significant effect on the vocabulary learning. Lastly, the comparison of TCG and SCG shows no significant difference since the *p* value corresponding to the comparison of these two groups (i.e. .22) was higher than the significance level (.05). Therefore, it can be inferred that both target

cultural materials (English and American) and Persian cultural materials (source culture) were effective as the vocabulary learning of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners was concerned.

To reach a logical answer to the last research question of this study, a two-way ANCOVA was run:

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the Male and Female Learners in the TCG, SCG, and CFG

Groups	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
TCG	Male	15.86	.93	25
	Female	16.26	1.08	25
	Total	16.06	1.01	50
SCG	Male	15.96	1.27	25

Groups	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
	Female	15.32	1.39	25
	Total	15.64	1.36	50
CFG	Male	12.68	1.34	25
	Female	11.94	1.66	25
	Total	12.31	1.54	50
Total	Male	14.83	1.93	75
	Female	14.50	2.32422	75
	Total	14.67	2.13	150

As Table 6 indicates, the total difference between the male ($M = 14.83$) and female ($M = 14.50$) learners seems to indicate a small difference. However, to get sure whether the difference between the gender groups in the study was statistically significant or not, the researchers needed to examine the *p* value in front of Gender under the *Sig.* column in the two-way ANCOVA table:

Table 7

Results of Two-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Posttest Scores of the Male and Female Learners in the TCG, SCG, and CFG

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	461.78	6	76.96	50.22	.00	.67
Intercept	348.79	1	348.79	227.61	.00	.61
Pretest	25.69	1	25.69	16.76	.00	.10
Groups	441.70	2	220.85	144.12	.00	.66
Gender	1.74	1	1.74	1.13	.28	.00
Groups * Gender	8.03	2	4.01	2.62	.07	.03
Error	219.13	143	1.53			
Total	32962.25	150				
Corrected Total	680.91	149				

Table 7 indicates that the *p* value in front of Gender was found to be higher than the significance level (.28 < .05), which means that there was not any statistically significant difference between the male and female EFL learners participating in this study. Moreover, there was not a statistically significant two-way interaction effect for groups/treatment and gender on the posttest, whilst controlling for pretest, $F (2, 143) = 2.62$, $p = .07$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of teaching cultural material on vocabulary learning through reading. It also aimed to discover whether there is any significant difference between male and female EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge through teaching cultural materials. The results revealed that there was not any significant difference between vocabulary learning of the three participating groups on the pretest. But both TCG and SCG had different performance on their posttest. In fact, the TCG and SCG outperformed the control group (CFG) on the posttest. This difference can be attributed to the use of various cultural-based texts in teaching vocabulary. The outcomes of study proposed that the better performance of the learners in the TCG and SCG revealed the efficacy of culture instruction. These results also corroborated that teaching cultural materials has significant impact on EFL learners' vocabulary learning through reading as opposed to the first null hypothesis of the study. If teachers use and teach cultural materials in the EFL classrooms excessively, the EFL learners definitely understand vocabulary and reading texts more successfully. Therefore, culture instruction should be an essential and structured aspect of the ideal foreign language classroom.

This result provides supplementary patronage for schema-theoretic and knowledge-based perspectives of learning and memory, under which the presence of suitable background knowledge is accepted to promote attentional allotment, the development of mental portrayals, and in the current study, the manufacturing of form-meaning associations, to differing degrees, between the new words and the contexts within which they were experienced. At least in short term, it is believed that stronger experience and acquaintance with the essence of the texts offered a neural framework for building and incorporating certain knowledge on new terms, even if that knowledge was mostly episodic in essence (i.e. recollection for having experienced a linguistic object in a specific context). Such results give further support to claim that background knowledge has an effect on L2 vocabulary improvements through reading comprehension. They

give credence to and expand the results found by Pulido (2009), which demonstrated the strong effect of topic familiarity, rather than cultural familiarity, on short-term vocabulary achievement. Furthermore, they expand the findings got from studies carried out on L2 lexical inferencing (e.g., Kafipour & Jahansooz, 2017; Riazi & Babaei, 2011), which have considered as a springboard for formulating hypotheses about the impacts of background knowledge on vocabulary learning. The current research gives yet another viewpoint and extra information regarding the vital role of cultural background knowledge in the vocabulary learning process. This was done through an experimental design that assessed participants' learning of new form-meaning relations that may have been formed when reading about texts that varied in their degree of cultural familiarity.

The plausible reason behind obtaining these results might be due to the roles of schemata and background knowledge in boosting EFL learners' vocabulary learning through reading comprehension. Based on the prior studies, most results agree that background knowledge does affect EFL learners' reading comprehension in the classroom (Demir, 2012; Gürkan, 2012; Yousef, Karimi, & Janfeshan, 2014). Furthermore, it is also mentioned that background knowledge is fundamental in terms of reading comprehension among learners as it offers a forum for bridging acquired knowledge to the new one. In brief, it demonstrates that this condition is compatible with the schema theory studies by (Bernhardt, 2009; Cristina & Martinez, 2014; Demir, 2012; Gürkan, 2012; Jafari & Aghaei, 2013; Pulido, 2009; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006) proposing that receptive abilities such as reading need a scheme to improve the comprehension of a given text by the learners. Furthermore, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) also believed that the constancy between the scheme of the learners and the texts makes for a better comprehension of reading materials in language classroom.

In addition, the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension has also been expanded by Shuying (2013); Davoudi and Ramezani (2014); Jalilehvan and Samuel (2014); and Nunan (2015). The results of their studies demonstrated that in the process of reading particular texts, readers will activate their previous knowledge or schemata in order to comprehend precise picture of the authors' intentions. In addition, the beneficial role of background information in second-language reading is also emphasized by (Ashrafzadeh, Don & Meshkat, 2015; Erten & Razi, 2009), which indicates that the lack of proper schemata that are inconsistent with the meaning

of learners would lead students to inability in understanding the reading materials.

Teachers' cultural knowledge, natural setting for teaching or classroom setting, the learners' attitudes towards foreign language, and also executing a totally culture-based curriculum are vital for expanding a teaching culture-based approach. The success and failure of culture instruction in language classrooms can be influenced by these factors. Damen (1997), for example, believes that "teachers as cultural guides and their right cultural knowledge play the most fundamental role in language classes." (p. 5). Textbooks may also function as one of the key influences in understanding the culture. Wandel (2011) proposed that textbooks must include materials that would require and encourage divergent views and discussions on cultural issues.

The fact that the learners who read the target culture and source culture performed better might also be attributed to motivational issues. Dörnyei (2003) concludes that motivation is tied to success, emphasizes that those who are inspired are likely to succeed. On the other hand, by asking a question, Lightbown and Spada (2006) contribute to the claim. Is a student successful because (s)he is motivated or motivated because he / she is successful? In fact, in this study both TCG and SCG were highly motivated to learn more and familiar with various cultures and customs.

Moreover, learning through culture helps us to understand that there are numerous ways of viewing the world. Knowing the interaction between linguistics and culture can aid us in progressing educational techniques and pedagogies for second language teaching. Kramsch (2008) believed that "culture in language learning is not an expendable skill." (p. 83). Culture and language should be learnt together to attain accurate linguistic understanding. After all, the more cultural concepts we learn, the more language abilities we acquire; the more language we acquire, the more competitiveness we have.

In addition, this study was motivated by the assumption that the learner's gender might make significant differences in their performance and might be affected by different culturally-based texts. The comparison between the male and female groups indicated that there was no statistically significant difference observed between the two genders in learning vocabulary through cultural materials. Both male and female groups were in the same cultural context and it appears that this common cultural background might have led them to perform similarly. In fact, their prior cultural familiarity of such text types may have enhanced in parallel ways so that both

groups had comparable repertoires of cultural background knowledge. The way both genders comprehended the two macro-genre texts (American/English cultural-based texts and Source cultural-based texts) might have also been influenced by the students' previous knowledge of such text types. Prior cultural background knowledge may have influenced both genders' vocabulary learning through reading in similar ways, as well. From psychological points of view, lack of significant difference between male and female students may be attributed to the point that the students were at a level (in terms of psychological maturation and development) that the differences between them regarding using cultural knowledge leveled off.

From a psychological point of view, the absence of substantial variation between male and female learners can be due to the fact that the learners were at a stage (in terms of psychological maturation and development) that the discrepancies between the learners with respect to utilizing cultural knowledge leveled off.

In summary, the findings of this research reinforce the view that cultural familiarity affects the comprehension of reading passages, which is in line with this study's initial goal. Taking the studies, Carrel (1988), Kafipour, and Jahansooz, (2017), Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), Alptekin (2006), Shuying (2013) and many more carried out in the light of schema theory into account, this study has given important support for the positive impact of cultural familiarity in culturally-oriented texts for vocabulary enhancement in EFL contexts. In fact, the language learners trying to learn new words in culturally-based texts reach more successful results when compared with those doing the same exercise within culture free texts. It is disclosed that both TCG and SCG participated in the current study were at equal levels and were chosen with vocabulary tests from already almost homogeneous group. Even though their pretest vocabulary scores were similar, the posttest scores yielded a significant difference in comparison with the control group.

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