

# English Language Cultural Schema and Its Relationship to Saudi Secondary School Students' Local Cultural Schema and to Their Attitudes towards Reading and Comprehension in English: A Case Study of Al-Ahsa Educational Zone, Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

Of all language skills (reading, writing listening and speaking), the reading skill needs to be put into consideration and given a special care. No doubt that the students' future academic success in majors that adopt English as medium of instruction, mainly depends on a good reading and comprehension. Although reading is described by many as a receptive skill which requires knowledge of the language system of the target language as well as knowledge of the cultural schema of that language. This study aimed at discussing the relationship between the target language cultural background and the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students. A total of thirty-two secondary school students studying at Imam Ja'afar Al-Sadiq Secondary School in Al-Ahas Educational Zone participated in that study. Participants were homogeneous in terms of age (16 - 19 years), gender (male), cultural background (the Saudi culture), and the native language (Arabic). Data were collected using a questionnaire. The results of the study show that the value of the (t) test is 2.909 with the value of freedom of (df) 31 and sig (2-tailed) of 0.007 less than 0.05. This indicates that there is statistically significant difference between the target language cultural background and the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students which affect their target language reading and comprehension. The study findings confirm the previous studies. It recommends some strategies and activities for the Saudi EFL teachers.

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## Keywords

Target Language, Cultural Background, Reading and Comprehension, Saudi Students, Native Language

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## 1. Introduction

It is worth mentioning that reading comprehension in English is an indispensable language skill. This claim is supported by [Li and Zang \(2016\)](#) who consider reading as a primary tool of developing language standard. The Saudi Ministry of Education adopts the learning of English as a foreign language form elementary to secondary levels. In all English textbooks, reading comprehension represents one of the contents of the English language courses. So, there is a need to enhance the level of reading and comprehension in English for the Saudi students because success in the English language in general and in exams in particular, primarily depends on good reading and comprehension. Unfortunately, reading in English and comprehension cause problems for native and non-native students. They face difficulty when they are asked to read or answer comprehension questions task. According to [Taylor and Hiebert \(1984\)](#) “substantial numbers of students in our elementary and secondary schools have difficulties with reading” (p. 3). [Alderson \(1984\)](#) also believes that reading is a source of worry for the students whose native language is not the English language. Of course, reading in a language requires linguistic knowledge as well as cultural background of that language. Cultural background or (schema) of a given language plays a significant role in reading and understanding that language ([Alptekin, 2006](#); [Johnson, 1981a](#); [Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979](#)).

As an EFL instructor, the researcher observed on different occasions that EFL students face difficulties when they are exposed to an English reading and comprehension. The situation becomes more complicated if that reading is about the culture of the English language. No doubt that factors such as the differences between L1 and L2 writing systems and phonology differences can cause reading difficulty. However, there are other factors interrelate to affect reading and hinder comprehension, for example, the difference between the culture of target language and the students’ native language culture. Students’ attitude towards reading in English is also a problem, needs investigation and requires solution.

### 1.1. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a process involves not only a reader’s linguistic knowledge of the target language but also knowledge of the world of that language. [Nuttall \(1996\)](#) as cited in [Pratami \(2011\)](#) believes that reading comprehension is a process of activating the knowledge of the word combined with the appropriate cognitive skill and reasoning ability to get ideas from the print. That is, the

transfer of a message from writer to reader .

Studying the sources of the reading and comprehension difficulties and finding instruments to solve reading comprehension problems, was an issue of concern to scholars. For example, [Haynes \(1989: p. 11\)](#) contributes that “to help second language readers comprehend English text quickly and accurately, language teachers need a good understanding of where reading difficulties are apt to occur and what can be done in the short and long run to help students overcome these difficulties”. “Second” language and “foreign” language are two terms used interchangeably in this study though a clear-cut distinction is made between them. [Yazigy \(1991: p. 11\)](#) says that “A second language is spoken by the community outside the classroom and has social functions within that community “while a “foreign language...is limited to classroom study and used for contact outside the community”.

## 1.2. The Theory of Schema (Background Knowledge)

The concept of schema (plural: schemata) was coined and used by scholars in various fields of knowledge such as linguistics, cognitive psychology, and psycholinguistics ([Cook 1994](#)). The history of schema goes back to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In the 1930s the term schema was used in the literary theory when Ingarden confirmed the existence of a level of “schematized aspects” in literature. In cognitive psychology, [Bartlett \(1932\)](#) describes “schema” as “an active organization of past reactions [or] of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response” (p. 201). In Artificial Intelligence, [Minsky \(1975\)](#) defines schema as “frames” to account for the “mental constructs of knowledge derived from an individual. [Rumelhart \(1980\)](#), [Carrell and Eisterhold \(1983\)](#) and [Hudson \(1982\)](#) used the term schema in reading to indicate the essential role played by the reader’s background knowledge in understanding reading comprehension. [Rumelhart \(1980: p. 34\)](#) describes schema as “a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory”. Rumelhart’s definition determines that there is no readymade knowledge, ideas or events stored in the reader’s memory recalls it at any time he wants, but rather general concepts or forms.

The literature proposes that the schematic factors have fundamental and essential impact not only on ESL/EFL students’ reading comprehension, but also on their rate of reading speed since most EFL students tend to slow down and reread what they do not comprehend.

Schema or prior knowledge is “considered in current reading research as a crucial and a significant factor in ESL reading comprehension” [Nelson \(1987: p. 404\)](#). [Scarcella and Oxford \(1992\)](#) stress that “...lack of schemata or familiar to activate an appropriate schema can significantly impair comprehension” (p. 69). According to schema theory, the text itself does not carry meaning rather it provides directions for readers as how they should construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge, or background knowledge.

### 1.3. Types of Schema (Background Knowledge)

No doubt that schema or background knowledge plays a major role in reading and understanding. In the L1 or L2 context, readers' failure to respond to a given text is for a high degree referred to their lack of an appropriate schema that can easily fit within the content of the text. Missing of an appropriate schema can be due to one or more types of schema. Schema which is connected to reading is classified by Li et al. (2007) into three main types: linguistic schemata, formal schemata, linguistic and content schemata.

The first types of schemata are the ones which are called linguistic schemata. According to (Nassaji, 2002; Oller, 1995 cited in Erten and Razi, 2009), linguistic schemata refer to reader's existing language proficiency in vocabulary, grammar and idioms. These types of schemata play an essential role in the comprehension of the text. They help the reader decode and comprehend the codes of the text. Therefore, the more linguistic schemata a reader has in his mind, the faster the reader acquires information and the better understanding the reader may get.

The second type schemata is described by (Alderson, 2000; Carrell, 1987; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) as knowledge of language and linguistic conventions, containing knowledge of how texts are structured and what the key characteristics of a particular genre of writing are. They include what a reader knows about written texts, such as what is covered in text grammars or text linguistics predict what is likely to follow. Carrell (1987: p. 464) cited in Erten and Razi (2009) mentions that "texts with familiar rhetorical organization should be easier to read and comprehend than texts with unfamiliar rhetorical organization".

Content cultural schemata is the third type. Brown (2001) cited in Erten and Razi (2009) refers to Content cultural schemata as the background knowledge of the content area of a text, or the subject. This knowledge can be about people, the world, culture, and the universe. Olaofe and Masembe (2006) believe that content schemata is the familiarity of the subject matter of the text. It contains understanding of the topic of the text and the cultural-specific constituents required to interpret it. This type of schemata (Content schemata) is divided into two different types: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge. Background knowledge refers to the knowledge that may or may not be relevant to the content of a particular text, whereas the subject matter knowledge directly related to the text content and topic (Alderson, 2000 cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). Similarly, content schema is an element of the individual's cultural orientation, and while culture influences all aspects of life, it undoubtedly has a major impact on all components of learning process (Al-Issa, 2006). Various studies show that readers' content schemata influence their reading comprehension more greatly than formal schemata. On the whole, the familiarity of the topic has a direct influence on readers' comprehension. The more the reader knows about the topic, the more easily and quickly he gets the information of the text. Therefore, if one wants to be an efficient reader, he needs to try to know the knowledge about more fields and topics. Learners with more prior knowledge can better comprehend and remember the text more (Yule, 1996: p. 87). Cultural

schema brings about cultural familiarity and helps a person to restructure the story line through referring to more personally and culturally appropriate scripts (Oller, 1995 cited in Erten and Razi, 2009). To interpret a text, suitable culture schemata is considered to be essential. As previously mentioned, schemata involve various knowledge structures which include culture, beliefs, expectations, values, and other past experiences which are used to comprehend the nature of things and events. Culturally specific schemata affect comprehension (Kaplan, 1966). According to Kaplan, cultural differences lead to different approaches to teaching reading to first language speakers and second language speakers. The significance of cultural knowledge lies behind the fact that, for any reader to comprehend any writing written in a language which is not his mother tongue such as humor, knowledge of the culture of the target language must be taken into consideration.

Research on types of schema has shown that background knowledge or cultural schema plays an important role in affecting ESL reading comprehension than formal schema (Carrell, 1987; Floyd & Carrell, 1987). Grabe (1991) reports that “content background knowledge has a major influence on reading comprehension” (p. 381). Steffensen, Joag-Dev and Anderson (1979) confirm that “implicit cultural knowledge presupposed by the text and the reader’s own cultural background interact to make texts based on one’s own culture easier to read and understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent text based on less familiar, more distant cultures” (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988: p. 80).

#### 1.4. Previous Studies

In Carrell (1981) advanced Japanese and Chinese ESL students were compared on recall of folktales from three different cultural sources: native culture (Japanese and Chinese), second culture (Western European/English), and completely unfamiliar culture (American Apache Indian). The findings of the study showed that the cultural origin of the text and the subject’s prior familiarity with it, affected the ESL subjects’ judgment of the level of difficulty of the texts as well as their recall of information from the text.

Johnson (1981a) conducted a study on Iranian intermediate to advanced level ESL students and American students. Participants were asked to read Iranian and American folktales in English. Subjects were tested on their reading comprehension through use of multiple-choice questions on explicit and implicit information in the texts. The findings indicated that Iranians performed better on the text from their native culture than on a text from American culture. He concluded that prior background knowledge of culture, specific information presupposed by a text affects reading comprehension of that text. More specifically, in Johnson’s (1981b) study the results indicated that the cultural origin of the text has a greater effect on ESL reading comprehension than does linguistic complexity.

Egyptian students were also subjected to a study by Nelson (1987). The study found that students recall significantly more when reading passages from their

own culture and that they usually prefer the articles and stories from their culture. She concluded that “culture as a component of knowledge and experience is a crucial factor in reading comprehension” (p. 424).

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of cultural schema on the Saudi secondary school students in reading comprehension .

### **1.5. Objectives of the Study**

The study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To explore the difference between the target language cultural background and the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students.
- 2) To explore the effect of the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students reading and comprehension.
- 3) To suggest some strategies and activities for the Saudi EFL teachers to help activate their schemata when they read something about the culture of the English language.

### **1.6. Research Hypotheses**

- 1) The native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students can affect their reading and comprehension.
- 2) There is statistical difference between the target language cultural background and the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students.
- 3) There are reading comprehension strategies and activities English language teachers can apply to enhance and improve the students’ level of reading and comprehension.

### **1.7. Limitations of the Study**

The population of the study is limited to the Saudi secondary school students studying at Imam Ja’far Al Sadiq secondary school in Al-Ahsa Educational Zone. This school is taken as representation to the other Saudi secondary schools. Secondary schools were thought to be convenient to conduct this study because the English language courses there contain different reading comprehension topics of which some were from the Saudi local culture and the others were from the foreign language culture. The study was conducted during the second semester of the academic year (2018/2019) and the sample of the study was chosen randomly from the first to the third-year students. Thirty-two participants were asked to respond to a 20-item-questionnaire. The data were gathered and analyzed for the purpose of the study.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

To achieve the goal of the study, thirty-two secondary school students at Imam

Ja'far AlSadiq Secondary School were randomly chosen to participate in the study. The sample was chosen from the first to the third-year secondary school students. Their academic levels range from high to middle to low level. They share multiple characteristics in common. For example, they are homogeneous in terms of nationality (Saudi students), age (16 - 19), gender (male), native language (Arabic), and cultural background (Saudi local culture).

## 2.2. Research Tools

The data for the study were collected by means of a 20-item closed ended questionnaire. Thirty-two participants were asked to respond to the questionnaires' items. The questionnaire in this study was used due to the fact that during Corona Virus Pandemic (the time the study was conducted) students were studying distantly which made it difficult to directly contact the students to use any other direct method of investigation for data collection.

## 2.3. Applied Study

This section aims at presenting, analyzing, and discussing the data obtained by the questionnaire. It also explains the efficiency and the purpose of the tool, achieving its goals in accepting or rejecting the hypotheses of the study through the following analysis. For the data analysis, the study used the statistical package for social studies (SPSS). It also used frequencies, percentages, descriptive statistics, standard deviation and mean. Cronbach's Alpha and one sample T test were used to calculate the questionnaire's validity and reliability.

## 2.4. Questionnaire Validity and Reliability

In Joppe (2000: p. 1) "Validity is determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. In other words, does the research instrument allow you to hit the "the bull's eye" of research object? Researchers generally determine validity by asking a series of questions, and will often look the answers in the research of the others".

Joppe (2000: p. 1) views reliability as "the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable" (see **Table 1** & **Table 2**) for the questionnaire's validity and reliability.

**Table 1** shows that the alpha value of all variables is less than the total value of Cronbach's Alpha, which is equal to 0.842, which confirms that the stability of the questionnaire questions is very high. Also, the value of the total validity coefficient, which is equal to approximately 92%, also indicates the high sincerity of the questions, which confirms the efficiency of the questionnaire and its ability to fulfill the required fixed and honest results.

The first column of **Table 2** shows that the values of Cronbach's Alpha for each statement of the questionnaire are less than 0.842, which indicates that the questionnaire's is reliable. The second column shows the values of the validity

**Table 1.** Validity and reliability of Cronbach's alpha.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
0.842	20

**Table 2.** Values of reliability and validity coefficients: (Cronbach's alpha).

Q	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	validity coefficients
x1	0.831	0.912
x2	0.839	0.916
x3	0.841	0.917
x4	0.838	0.915
x5	0.835	0.914
x6	0.830	0.911
x7	0.832	0.912
x8	0.827	0.909
x9	0.827	0.909
x10	0.839	0.916
x11	0.829	0.91
x12	0.839	0.916
x13	0.840	0.917
x14	0.836	0.914
x15	0.833	0.913
x16	0.837	0.915
x17	0.825	0.908
x18	0.841	0.917
x19	0.841	0.917
x20	0.827	0.909

coefficient, which is also strong because they are all greater than 0.50 This indicates the level of sincerity of the questionnaire's questions and confirms the efficiency and the ability of these questions to meet the required objectives and results of the study.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

After the collection of the questionnaire responses, the participants' responses were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science program (SPSS). The gathered data were analyzed. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages of the participants' responses were used to obtain the required results. Independent (t) test and means were also used to achieve the objectives of the study.

Item (6) of **Table 3** indicates that more than (80%) of the participants face in reading English as a foreign language. This difficulty may be attributed to the



**Table 3.** Percentages of the students responses to the questionnaire Items.

Item #	Item	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree
1	Reading in English is important.	75	21.90	2.0	1.10
2	I love reading passages written in English about the Saudi local culture.	43.80	53.10	2.0	1.10
3	Not knowing the English cultural concepts causes me difficulties in comprehending.	43.80	28.10	12.50	15.60
4	My teacher encourages me to read English.	56.30	28.10	9.40	6.20
5	Members of my family encourage me to read English.	21.90	34.40	34.30	9.40
6	I face difficulty in reading English as a foreign language	40.50	40.60	31.30	15.60
7	Not knowing the pronunciation of many English words makes me upset.	28.10	34.40	28.10	9.40
8	When reading in English, I feel it takes a lot of time and effort before I understand what I read.	15.6	46.90	28.10	9.40
9	I don't feel comfortable when I read in English something written about the culture of the English people.	50.60	38.10	37.50	18.80
10	The reading comprehension difficulties which I face when reading English do not negatively affect my reading attitudes.	31.30	50.00	9.40	9.40
11	The passages and stories in the textbook should relate to our local culture and experiences.	31.30	43.80	18.80	7.10
12	My teacher motivates me to do outside free reading	31.30	50.00	9.40	9.40
13	I find myself forced to read passages about the foreign language culture.	25.00	37.50	12.50	25.00
14	I read English just for passing the final English examination.	3.10	31.30	25.00	40.60
15	It is easier for me to read something relating to my local Saudi culture than to read something relating to the foreign culture.	48.10	40.60	21.90	9.40
16	I think my friends and I have a negative feeling towards English reading	6.20	43.80	21.90	28.10
17	I don't like to read something written about the culture of the English people.	15.60	28.10	25.00	31.30
18	I read English in the class but I don't read it at home.	12.50	37.50	31.30	18.18
19	My teacher does not follow the strategies of teaching reading comprehension.	15.60	25.00	21.90	37.50
20	It would be easier for me to understand reading comprehension if it were based on my local culture.	40.60	37.50	12.50	9.40

difficulty they face when they read something written about the culture of the target language. More than (88%) of the participants think that they do not feel comfortable when they read in English something written about the culture of the English people. More than (88.5%) believe it is easier for them to read something relating to their Saudi local culture than to read something relating to the target language culture. This result confirms the first hypothesis.

**Table 4** shows that the sample size N (32) has a mean of 54.8125 and a standard deviation of 9.35824. **Table 5** shows the arithmetic means and standard deviation of the study variables

In **Table 6** the value which is less than 0.05, is significant and the one which is greater than 0.05, is insignificant.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics of the study.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
z	32	54.8125	9.35824

**Table 5.** Arithmetic means and standard deviations of the study variables.

Item #	Std. Deviation	Mean	Phrase Direction
1	0.64446	3.6875	Strongly agree
2	0.65991	3.3750	Strongly agree
3	1.01947	2.8438	Agree
4	0.90195	3.3438	Strongly agree
5	0.93109	2.6875	Agree
6	0.91581	2.5000	Agree
7	0.96512	2.8125	Agree
8	0.85901	2.6875	Agree
9	0.97912	2.4063	Disagree
10	0.85901	2.6875	Strongly agree
11	0.87988	3.0000	Agree
12	0.89747	3.0313	Agree
13	1.12880	2.6250	Agree
14	0.93272	1.9688	Disagree
15	0.94186	2.8750	Agree
16	0.95830	2.2813	Disagree
17	1.08462	2.2813	Disagree
18	0.94826	2.4375	Disagree
19	1.11984	2.1875	Disagree
20	0.96250	3.0938	Agree

**Table 6.** Differences in the questionnaire items by one-sample T test.

Item #	t.	df.	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
1	10.424	31	1.18750	0.000	Significant
2	7.501	31	0.87500	0.000	Significant
3	1.907	31	0.34375	0.066	Insignificant
4	5.292	31	0.84375	0.000	Significant
5	1.139	31	0.18750	0.263	Insignificant
6	0.000	31	0.0000	1.000	Insignificant
7	1.832	31	0.31250	0.077	Insignificant
8	1.235	31	0.18750	0.226	Insignificant
9	-0.542	31	-0.09375	0.592	Insignificant

**Continued**

10	1.235	31	0.18750	0.226	Significant
11	3.215	31	0.50000	0.003	Significant
12	3.349	31	0.53125	0.022	Significant
13	0.626	31	0.12500	0.536	Insignificant
14	-3.222	31	-0.53125	0.003	Significant
15	2.252	31	0.7500	0.032	Significant
16	-1.291	31	-0.1875	0.206	Insignificant
17	-1.141	31	-0.21875	0.263	Insignificant
18	-0.373	31	-0.06250	0.712	Insignificant
19	-1.579	31	-0.31250	0.125	Insignificant
20	3.490	31	0.59375	0.001	Significant

**Table 7** shows that the value of (t) test is 2.909 with the value of freedom of (df) 31 and sig (2-tailed) of 0.007 is less than 0.05. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the English cultural background of the secondary school students. These differences are in favour of the opinions of the students because the differences between the means are positive.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The section is prepared to discuss the findings of the study in the light of the research hypotheses.

#### 3.1. Results of the First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis states that the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students can affect their reading and comprehension. Item (6) of **Table 3** indicates that more than (80%) of the participants face difficulty in reading English as a foreign language. This difficulty may be attributed to the difficulty they face when they read something written about the culture of the target language. More than (88%) say they do not feel comfortable when they read in English something written about the culture of the English people. More than (885%) think it is easier for them to read something relating to their local Saudi culture than to read something relating to the foreign culture.

#### 3.2. Results Related to the Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis states that there is statistical difference between the target language cultural background and the native language cultural background of the Saudi secondary school students.

**Table 7** shows that the value of (t) test is 2.909 with the value of freedom of (df) 31 and sig (2-tailed) of 0.007 less than 0.05. This indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the English cultural background of the secondary school students. These differences are in favour of the responses of the

**Table 7.** The value of (t) test, the value of freedom of (df) and sig. (2-tailed).

Test Value = 50				
	<b>T</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
z	2.909	31	4.81250	0.007

students to the questionnaire items because the differences between the means are positive.

#### 4. Findings

According to the analysis of the participants' responses to the questionnaire statements and the answers to the questionnaire hypotheses, the findings can be briefed as follows:

- 1) The results of the study indicate that there is a significant relationship between the target cultural background and the Saudi secondary school students' local culture.
- 2) The results of the study confirm the importance of the students' local cultural background and the positive impact of that local cultural background in their reading in English and comprehension.

#### Recommendation

Based on the results obtained, the researcher recommends the following:

- 1) Reading comprehension activities and reading strategies should be given consideration when teaching reading comprehension.
- 2) Discussion of the reading topic, pictures, titles subtitles, brainstorming, silent reading, scanning, skimming, pre-reading, while reading and post reading should be applied by the Saudi EFL teachers.
- 3) EFL teachers should give students reading topics connected to the students' local culture and related to their personal life experience.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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