



## Full Length Research Article

### INVESTIGATING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN READING TEXTS WITH AND WITHOUT TOPIC IN STUDENTS STUDYING IN IRAN'S SCHOOL IN TAJIKESTAN

**\*Ardeshir, Jahani and Hossein, Akbarzadeh Mohammadabadi**

Department of Foreign Languages, Academy, of Sciences, Republic of Tajikistan

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016  
Received in revised form  
18<sup>th</sup> February, 2016  
Accepted 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016  
Published online 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2016

##### Key Words:

Reading comprehension,  
Prior knowledge,  
Text topic.

#### ABSTRACT

According to Fisher and Frey (2009) a student's prior knowledge about a subject is probably the best predictor of reading comprehension. The present study aimed at investigating the difference between reading texts with and without topic in high school students studying in Iran's school in Tajikistan. Forty eleventh grade students (20 males and 20 females) participated in this study. The data was collected through two pre-intermediate English passages with the same content but only one of them was printed with topic. The result of t-value computation revealed that there was a significant difference between reading a passage with and without text topic. The result showed that there was statistically significant difference in reading comprehension scores of the two groups. That is the students with text topic performed better in reading comprehension. The result of this study is in line with the principles of schema-theory suggesting that people understand texts and experiences by comparing them with stereotypical mental representation of similar cases. The researcher recommends that teachers activate students' prior knowledge to be able to make connections to the new information they will be learning. Text book writers are also recommended to include texts with interesting topics in foreign language text books to help the activation of students' prior knowledge concerning the contents of the texts.

*Copyright © 2016, Ardeshir et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that underlies academic success and is essential for people to succeed in their day-to-day life. It is defined as the most important academic language skill (Carrell, 1988). Despite the importance of this skill, a recent National Assessment Education Progress Report, reported that 33% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students and 24% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are reading below levels (National Centers for Educational Statistics, 2011). With that in mind, it's very important to find variables remediating these deficits and facilitating success. When we talk about prior or previous knowledge or schema, we refer to all of the experiences readers have had throughout their lives, including information they have learned elsewhere. Using prior knowledge is an important part of reading comprehension. Students relate written words to their previous experiences to make reading more personal, helping them to both understand and remember what they have read. Some experts believe that activating prior knowledge is the most important aspect of the reading experience. Robert Manzano states that "what students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new

information relative to the content" (2004, p.1). John Guthrie thinks the same when he writes about comprehension as impossible without prior knowledge (2008, p.11). Furthermore the National Research Council states definitively, "All learning involves transfer from previous experiences. Even initial learning involves transfer that is based on previous experiences and prior knowledge" (2000, p.236). Traditionally a number of different approaches have been taken toward the study of texts and text's comprehension. In the study of second language comprehension, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on the language to be comprehended not on the comprehender (listener or reader). In this view, every word, sentence or text has a meaning. Meaning is said to have separate independent existence from both the speaker or writer and the listener or reader (Carrel and Eisterhold, 1988). Such approaches to text comprehension are called textual analysis techniques or text grammar, story grammar, propositional analysis, cohesion theory, etc. The most influential of textual analysis techniques has been the approach by Halliday and Hassan (1976) known as cohesion theory. According to Halliday and Hassan, text derives cohesion (texture) from cohesive ties such as reference, substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. For example, in the sentence "John makes good meals. Last night he cooked spaghetti", the pronoun 'he' (the presupposing item) which

*\*Corresponding author: Ardeshir, Jahani*

Department of Foreign Languages, Academy of Sciences,  
Republic of Tajikistan.

refers or is anaphoric to John (the presupposed item) makes the text to be considered as a whole, or coherent. So according to Halliday and Hassan, coherence or as they call it, texture is created by the linguistic resources of the language (by cohesive ties). The schema theoretical view of text processing is completely different from those of traditional views. Schema theory maintains processing a text is an interactive process between the text and the prior background knowledge of the reader or listener. In this view of text processing what is important is not only the text, its structure and content, but what the reader or listener does with the text. Rather as Anderson *et al.*, (1977) point out "every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well". In the case of reading, some suggest that what one brings to the text is actually more important than what is in the text (Carrell, 1983; Carrell and Wallace, 1983; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). What the reader brings to the text (background knowledge) is said to have a large influence on students' performance, explaining up to 81% of the variance in post test scores (Dochy, Segers and Buehl, 1999). Widdowson (1979) has discussed reading in this light as the process of combining textual information with the information a reader brings to the text. So the reader plays a linchpin role in the construction of meaning provided that he/she be able to activate the pertinent schema. In an attempt to show how much of the schema is activated, Jahani (2015) showed that most subjects activated the relevant to the topic schema (the kitchen) when they read a text about the kitchen of the house. A research by Carrell and Wise (2000) indicated that there's a relationship between prior knowledge and interest in reading. Suzanzan and Zamanian (2014) also found that the location of topic sentence in the passage (at the beginning or at the end) has no impact on reading comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners. It can be deduced that advanced learners comprehend reading passages to the same extent regardless of their topic sentence location. Among the variables that can contribute to the success of reading is text topic as a contributor to prior knowledge activation which in turn improves students' reading comprehension performance. In the present study the researcher wants to see if text topic can help the activation of the reader's prior knowledge and in turn enhances the reader's reading comprehension.

## METHODS

### Participants

Subjects, 20 males and 20 females, aged 17 participated in the study. They were eleventh grade students studying in Iranian school in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. They were all Farsi speakers (Iranian, Tajik and Afgani) and were naïve with respect to the purpose of the study. They were distributed in two homogeneous groups in terms of their English proficiency.

### Instrumentation

Two pre-intermediate English passages were prepared to find out the students' reading comprehension ability. The passages were the same but only one of them had topic. Each group was expected to read its own passage and check the multiple-choice items at the end of each passage. The maximum score was 10 and the minimum was zero.

### Procedure

The subjects in the two groups were asked to read its own passage and check the ten multiple-choice items at the end of each passage. Fifteen minutes were allotted for the test. The allotted time was determined according to the pilot study.

### Results, Discussions and Recommendations

The answers were collected, studied and scored. The mean values of the two groups were also calculated. Table 1 shows the reading comprehension scores obtained by the subjects in the two groups. The mean values, std. deviations and std. error means of the two groups are also included in Table 1 below. In order to study the significance of the difference between the two means, the data was submitted to t-test, the results of which are shown in table 2 below. To check to see whether this obtained 't' (3.482) is statistically significant or not, the t-table was checked. In this study, there were 40 subjects in the two groups. This gives a total of 38 d.f (20 +20 -2). The experimenter chose 40 and checked the .05 and .01 levels of significance. The t-values needed for our selected significant levels of .05 and .01 are 2.021 and 2.704 respectively.

**Table 1. Reading comprehension scores, means, std. deviations and std. error means**

Scores (Group with Topic)	Frequency	Scores (Group without topic)	Frequency
10	5	9	2
9	4	8	2
8	3	7	3
6	3	5	2
5	2	3	9
4	2	2	2
3	1		
Mean:7.45	N: 20	Mean:4.80	N:20
Std.Deviation:2.35025		Std.Deviation:2.46235	
Std.Error Mean:.52553		Std.Error Mean:.55060	

**Table 2. The result of t-value calculation**

Group	N	mean	t-value	d.f	t-table level:05	t-table level: 01
With topic	20	7.45	3.482	38	2.021	2.704
Without topic	20	4.80				

Fortunately, our t-value (3.482) is enough above the t-values of the table which means that there's statistically significant difference in the reading comprehension scores. Now we can safely claim that text topic activated the subjects' background knowledge about the content of the passage and this led to their better comprehension of it. So, the difference between texts with and without topic is statistically significant and meaningful. Now we can confirm the following hypothesis:

### **There's a meaningful difference between reading texts with and without topic**

This means that text topic especially when it is of interest to the readers can activate the subjects' prior knowledge and this in turn enhances their reading comprehension performance. Now in addition to comprehension strategies, reading fluency, vocabulary size, motivation, Genres, Knowledge of text features, understanding text structures, etc, text topic can also be counted as a good predictor of the readers reading comprehension performance. This study as an evidenceto the role of text topic in reading comprehension has some implications for teacher: First, foreign language teachers should employ individual student interests as often as possible in selection of reading materials. This could easily be done by simple personal surveys in class or by permitting students to choose their own readings from time to time. Second, the level of background knowledge will be different among students and this will be the teachers' responsibility to fill in information gaps. Third, It implicitly indicates that teachers should provide the students with pre-reading activities to help them activate their background knowledge. Clearly, no research effort is comprehensive and further research is needed to confirm, validate and expand upon the results of the present study. The subjects here were eleventh grade learners studying in Iranian school in Tajikestan; replications should be made using subjects of diverse age groups .The same study could also be carried out using texts and learners of other languages. It has also implications for text book writers to design materials with topics that easily help the activation of students' background knowledge. Text book writers are also recommended to prepare text books including reading passages with topics of interest to the students and pre-reading activities all to activate the students back ground knowledge concerning the content of the passages.

### **REFERENCES**

- Anderson, R. C. Reynolds, R. E., Schallert, D.L. and Goets, E.T. 1977. Frame works for Comprehension Discourse. *American educational research Journal*, 14:367-81
- Carrell, P.L. and Eisterhold, J.C. 1988. Schema Theory and ESL reading Pedagogy. In P. Carrell, J. Devine and D. Eskey Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Carrell, P.L. 1988. "Introduction: Interactive approaches to second language reading." In P. Carrell, J. Devine and D. Eskey Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Carrell, P.L. and Wise, T.E. 2000. The Relationship Between Prior Knowledge and Topic Interest in Second Language Teaching. *Studies In Second Language Acquisition*. Volume 20, Issue 3, pp.285-309.
- Carrell, P.L., and B. Wallace 1983. Background Knowledge:Content and Familiarity in Reading Comprehension.In *On TESOL 82*,M. Clarke and J.Handscombe Eds.),295-308 ,Washington,D.C.:TESOL.
- Dochy, F., Segers, M. and Buehl, M. 1999. The Relationship Between Assessment Practices and Outcomes of Studies: The case of research on prior knowledge. *Review of Educational Research*, 69(2),145-186.
- Fisher, D. and N. Frey 2009. Background Knowledge:The Missing Piece of the Comprehension puzzle. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Guthrie, J.R. 2008. *Engaging Adolescents in Reading*. Thousand oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K., and R. Hassan 1976. *Cohession in English*. London: Longman
- Jahani, A. 2015. Schema Theory: How Is It Activated? *International Journal of Current research*. Vol 7, Issue 2, pp.12987-12990.
- Manzano, J.R. 2004. *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on what works in schools*.ISBN-13:978-0-87120-972-6
- National Center for Education Statistics 2011. *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2011 NCES 2012-457*. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.
- National Research Council. *How people learn:Brain,Mind,Experience, and school:Expanded Edition*. Washington, D C: The National Academies press, 2000.
- Souzanzan, R. and Zamanian, M. 2014. The Relationship between the location of the Topic Sentence and the Comprehension of a passage by Iranian Advanced EFL Learners. *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods*, vol.4 ,No.2.
- Widdowson, H. 1979. The Process and Purpose of Reading. In *Explorations in applied linguistics*,H.Widdowson (Ed.), 171-183.New York :Oxford University Press.

\*\*\*\*\*