

Original Article

An Account of Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension in a Culture-Based Instructional Environment: Does Gender Play a Role?

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Abstract

One of the major issues in language learning classrooms is familiarity with the cultural perspective of reading materials. Learners' insufficient knowledge of the target culture of language brings about some difficulties to understand the target reading materials. Consequently, learners' motivation to learn the new language would be diminished. Thus, the current study aimed to investigate the impact of teaching cultural materials on improving Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension across two genders. To this end, 150 upper-intermediate male ($n = 75$) and female ($n = 75$) EFL learners out of 250, were selected through administering an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). 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). Then, a reading comprehension pretest was administered to assess the participants' reading comprehension at the beginning of the course. After the pretest, the researchers practiced the treatment on the three groups. Each group received reading comprehension materials that reflected a particular culture. During the treatment, some reading passages related to American and English culture (for group A), Persian culture (for group B), and culture-free materials (for group C), were taught. Finally, a posttest of reading comprehension was administered after the treatment. The results showed that teaching culturally oriented materials improved the Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension better. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that there was no significant difference between male and female learners' reading comprehension posttest. In light of the findings, a number of conclusions are drawn and several implications are put forward.

Keywords: Cultural Knowledge, Gender, L2 Readers, Reading Comprehension, Source Culture, Target Culture.

1. Introduction

In teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), the primary focus is on the pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax of the language. However, teaching a foreign language may also provide certain cultural elements that students need to recognize in order to make language learning simpler (Bakhtiarvand & Adinevand, 2011; Bedford, 1981). According to Sotoudehnama and Asadian (2011), language and culture are not separate entities and the aim of teaching a language along with their culture is to help students develop a greater understanding of both.

Learning about the culture of a new language is not sufficient for language learners. Language teachers must incorporate cultural topics in their classrooms consistently. According to Barron and Bell (2015), language could be considered as a social construct that is intermingled with culture as a whole, particularly the cultural niches in which it plays a pivotal role. Along these lines, if our supposition is that language is, or ought to be, comprehended as social practice, at that point inevitably we should likewise wrestle with the idea of culture according to language. Liu (2015) believes that “language is not an autonomous construct be that as it may, social practice both making and made by the structures and powers of [the] social establishments inside which we live and function” (p. 63). Language unquestionably cannot exist in a vacuum; one might be bold enough to establish that there is a sort of transfusion work between language and culture at work (Rangriz & Harati, 2017).

According to Johnson (1982) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (2014), EFL learners’ reading skills can be influenced by background knowledge and awareness of the new culture as well as linguistic competence. For instance, EFL learners’ understanding of texts can suffer if they have difficulties with the complexity of the foreign language. Moreover, if this linguistic ambiguity is coupled with the lack of background knowledge and/or incorrect schemas, the learners’ understanding suffers even more. For comprehending a foreign text, the cultural background is surely needed. Johnson (1982) explains this point clearly when stating that:

“In choosing reading contents for EFL learners and in the assessment of learners’ reading comprehension, the impacts of language intricacy and the culturally specified background of a text on reading comprehension have always been diagnosed as the main concerns” (p. 74).

Studies conducted on the reading of texts with a foreign cultural background have revealed that discourse has its own meaning which specifies the relative meaningfulness of groups of sentences which encompass it (Barron & Bell, 2015; Johnson, 1982; Rezaei et al., 2012). More importantly, readers of English as a foreign language may encounter difficulties when counting merely on the content of a text without having, activating, and utilizing previous knowledge. Thus, to understand a text successfully, as Rezaei et al. (2012) believed, it is crucially needed that EFL readers know how to interpret texts; further, the EFL readers need to know something about the subject prior they can read and understand a text in the target language. In other words, the EFL learners at elementary or intermediate levels may get entangled with inconsistent concepts when relying on only a text-based approach. Consequently, they may grasp a weak meaning of what they read owing to the lack of prior, at least general knowledge of the text. This is also true that relying on the mere focus of the prior background knowledge would not consequent a permanent comprehension of the text material in question (An, 2015; Sotoudehnama & Asadian, 2011; Yang, 2017).

While considering EFL learners, the linguistic aspect may tend to be negligible as contrasted with the background knowledge. As Anderson et al. (1977, p. 369) contended, "comprehension of words, sentences, and discourse could not be simply a matter of implementing linguistic knowledge." They believe that any process of interpretation and understanding necessarily requires an individual's understanding of the world as well. Every act of comprehension, they believe, requires one's knowledge of the world. Moreover, Johnson (1982) believed that due to their weak language basis, it seems like EFL students tend to cling best to their previous knowledge of the topic they are reading to rebuild its concepts than seeking to discover the linguistic purposes propounded in it.

The culture of Iran (as a country located in the Middle East) may not conform entirely to the culture of English-speaking countries such as the U.S., England, or Australia, and this cultural discrepancy could give rise to failure in comprehension when Iranian EFL readers deal with texts written in English, particularly in the event that those texts are culturally overloaded. Given this problem, there are two reasons why this research is significant. First, the research can expand the literature of schema theory to include EFL students' reading comprehension. Second, the results of this study could shed light on the

putative usefulness of teaching the elements of culture to EFL students, thus heightening the awareness of L2 teachers, materials developers, and policy-makers as well.

This study focused on schema theory which asserts that background knowledge and proper schemata are indispensable for reading comprehension of a text. The comprehension and retrieval of texts rely on the correct schema. Results from schema theory studies have divulged that background knowledge affects reading comprehension (Al-Issa, 2006; Berkeley et al., 2011; Birsch, 2011; Cain & Oakhill, 2011; Johnson, 1982). In this regard, Alptekin (2006) claimed that, if readers of a text make use of schema to help them in understanding the text or in reconstructing its meaning, it follows that those texts are simpler to process and comprehend than ones built according to an unfamiliar schema. The key point that has crucial repercussions here is that many schemata are culture-specific.

For Iranian EFL learners, the need for instruction in foreign language culture may be of vital importance. These learners learn English in their homeland and lack exposure to a foreign culture. The concern here is to include materials bearing cultural aspects in the EFL materials currently being utilized in teaching English in other countries. Using culture-specific materials may bridge the cultural gap and make learning and comprehension of the foreign language much easier for language learners. In addition, the incorporation of cultural resources in the EFL curriculum may be beneficial for learners learning the English language, particularly those seeking higher education in the foreign languages, history, theology, law, or culture in the foreign countries.

As mentioned before, adding culture-specific material to the ESL/EFL courses curriculum together with linguistic units seems primarily to be a necessity than a mere advice. This study aimed at clarifying the requirement of incorporating cultural resources into the EFL teaching process and equipping the learners' minds with the background knowledge for a better understanding of English texts. Eventually, this study can provide text writers an incentive to integrate cultural aspects into their creation of EFL contents. Furthermore, publishers may find EFL content more advantageous in teaching English, including cultural aspects of the English language, and more accessible by EFL centers. In general, given the current political tensions between Iran and the U.S. as well as several other European countries, the chances for Iranians to be in touch with foreigners, host them, or travel to their countries are at the lowest minimum possible. Thus, the important

point is that Iranian EFL learners are deprived of the required cultural environment necessary for learning a new language. This is while the EFL material contents very often lack the cultural features appropriate to the subject they are aimed to teach. The reason might lie in that the EFL material authors are avoiding the perceived risk of simultaneous instructing two different subjects, and prefer to concentrate on teaching English than the double task of teaching English language and English culture.

2. Literature Review

According to schema theory, comprehension relies on readers' activation of their prior knowledge to create meaning. Many studies on L2 reading verified the crucial role of prior knowledge in comprehension. While classifying schemas as either content schemas (i.e., the reader's background knowledge of the conceptual content of the text) or formal schemas (i.e., the reader's background knowledge of the rhetorical structure of the text) (Alptekin, 2006; Coles & Hall, 2002), these studies indicated that L2 readers' abilities to utilize proper schemas and involve in processing the texts interactively lead to successful reading performance (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2014; Ebrahimi & Weisi, 2019). Schema-theoretic studies in L2 reading have generally revealed that there is a direct relationship between the extent to which the content and/or formal data of a text interact with the reader's culture-specific background knowledge and the extent to which they comprehend the text (Alptekin, 2006; Liu, 2015; Yang, 2017).

It is worth noting that developing suitable schemata about the language as well as its culture is essential for the learners when they are reading an English text. The absence of proper schemata may make interpreting the reading difficult, particularly when the material composes of cultural elements. If the correct cultural schemata of the target language are provided for learners, probably they have fewer difficulties in understanding the text. According to Anderson et al. (1977), the people's background knowledge has bearings on their interpretation of the messages; the interpretations people give passages are under the influence of their own history, knowledge, and beliefs. In processing and interpreting a text, background knowledge plays a crucial role; and it is more fundamental when that text is not in the reader's L1. Deficiency of knowledge about the new culture could lead to misapprehension and misinterpretation of foreign texts (Alijanian et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 1977; Oda & Abdul-Kadhim, 2017; Sasaki et al., 1991).

Cultural differences may cause more difficulties for EFL learners in reading comprehension. The challenges these learners may be encountered with are not limited to vocabulary, linguistics, grammar, and other factors, but include the challenges of adaptation to a foreign culture as well. Particularly, if the culture of the foreign language and the culture of the student are of tremendous differences, learning a foreign language may become the most challenging aspect of its learning (Sotoudehnama & Asadian, 2011; Zhan, 2016). In case the student is exposed to the language culture, he/she will become familiar with the special association of the same culture to the related language.

Elbro and Buch-Iversen (2013) argue that the words *world knowledge* and *knowledge* do not represent the knowledge acquired through instruction, but they may indicate the knowledge acquired through experience as well. Also, such knowledge can represent the other cultures' knowledge, and it may speed up reading and learning. "One can attribute the higher difficulties found in reading comprehension to knowledge shortages rather than the deficits pertaining to linguistic skills" (Barati et al., 2012, p. 8). Given the schema theory idea, the main factor determining a person's knowledge acquired through reading is the knowledge already possessed by him/her. In the same vein, Rezazadeh et al. (2013) suggested that the L2 reading comprehension enhancements may be the outcome of the nativization of the culture. They debated that in case the learners are acquainted with the cultural contents of the text, the reading comprehension may be facilitated. In this regard, Shirzadi (2015) argued that in case of a disagreement between the schemata behind the text and the ones activated in the minds of the learners, comprehension may never take place.

One can argue that the reading materials in English, especially the ones aimed to be used by EFL learners, ought to include topics with the typical elements of English culture. Comprehension might be simplified and encouraged if the EFL teacher clarifies and presents the same materials containing the foreign culture aspects to the students. Among the numerous reasons lying behind the introduction of such cultural elements, one can refer to the provision of background knowledge, reading comprehension improvement, students' familiarization with the foreign culture, reduction of culture shocks, boosting the native culture awareness through contrasting and comparison of cultures, strengthening the communications with the individuals from the foreign cultures, and having better comprehension relating to and of individuals with other cultures (Namaziandost et al., 2020; Tseng, 2002). As Bedford argues, the attempts made for the integration of culture in

language classes, especially the cultural aspects which are integral parts of the course, have not been followed all the time. He also points to the fact that the integration of culture is sometimes hidden from readers. He expresses his dissatisfaction with the fact that cultural dimensions are sometimes inexplicitly clarified when integrating culture in the curriculum, either by the teacher or via the materials (Bedford, 1981; Namaziandost et al., 2020).

Males and females are different in learning English as a forging language. Gender is the factor that can affect language learning. The variations in intellectual activities including reading can be affected by the variations in the learner's gender properties. According to Oda and Abdul-Kadhim (2017), the learner's reading skill or motivation to read is related to the attributes of being male or female which consequently affect text comprehension. Moreover, Zeynali (2012) and Hassan Salumy and Kadhim Bairmani (2016) stated that gender influences students' academic interest, need, and achievement. Gender differences exist in the relationship between intrinsic motivation and reading comprehension. For instance, Logan et al. (2011) discovered that boys' intrinsic reading motivation was remarkably associated with their level of reading ability, while this association was non-significant for girls. The variable gender was the focus of numerous research studies and many researchers investigated the variation between males and females in the language learning context (Farnia & Gerami, 2019; Mohammad Hosseinpur & Mousavi, 2021; Oda & Abdul-Kadhim, 2017). Coles and Hall (2002) discovered that the mothers of learners read more than their fathers so that they played a more prominent role in educating the reading them. This finding can explain why learners consider reading as a more feminine task. Likewise, Ghonchepour et al. (2020) suggested that the reading motivation of learners is subject to significant and considerable differences among the genders. This characteristic is stronger among the females when compared to the male learners. However, Al-Shumaimeri (2006) showed that the male readers had more control over their reading strategies, paraphrasing, and reading speed than the female ones.

In summary, although the language teaching literature is rich regarding research studies and findings on different aspects of the concepts somehow related to the present study, no specific studies in the Iranian context have been done so far on investigating the influence of teaching two types of cultural materials (i.e., English & American culture and Persian culture) across both male and female Iranian upper-intermediate EFL; thus, a sense of gap is felt. The other concern is that EFL English textbooks which are designed by the

Iranian Educational ministry are empty of English/American cultural issues; instead, they mostly include Islamic and religious texts. This may hinder Iranian EFL learners to improve their reading comprehension through benefiting from target cultural knowledge; therefore, this study was done to emphasize the probable effect and importance of teaching target culture to Iranian EFL learners.

Given the issues mentioned above, we dealt with the research questions presented below:

1. Does familiarity with the target (English and American) cultural materials affect Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?
2. Does familiarity with Persian cultural materials (i.e., source culture) affect Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?
3. Do culture-free materials have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension?
4. Is there any significant difference between Iranian male and female EFL learners' reading comprehension through teaching cultural materials?

3. Method

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

The quasi-experimental design included an equal control group pretest-posttest design was used in this study. Accordingly, the study employed a pre-test and post-test design to extract needed data of three male groups and three female groups. This study focused on the variable of teaching cultural materials as an independent variable and reading comprehension and gender as dependent variables which were hypothesized to be affected by the independent variable. The study was done in the Fall semester at five English language institutes in Ahvaz, Iran. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively through using parametric statistics.

3.2. Participants

For the present study, among 250 students learning English in five private language institutes in Ahvaz, Iran, 150 EFL students at the upper-intermediate level were selected. Using non-random convenience sampling, 150 female (N=75) and male (N=75) students learning English at the upper-intermediate level in five private English language institutes in Ahvaz, Iran were selected. The entire participants were 17-19-year old Iranian EFL

learners with Persian backgrounds. Their level of proficiency was determined by the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), which was first administered to the whole subjects. The subjects of each gender were divided into three groups with an equal number of subjects (n=25): Group A (Target Culture=TC), Group B (Source Culture = SC), and Group C (Culture-Free = CF) or Control Group.

3.3. Instrumentation

A reading comprehension test was the most important instrument used in this research. The authors selected 8 out of 20 reading passages with cultural topics instructed during this research. Following each passage, 5 multiple-choice questions were asked to check the reading comprehension quality. Given the practicality issues including ease of scoring, ease of administration, and removing the entire potential biases, the questions were presented in a multiple-choice format. The questions required answering via bottom-up (e.g. finding stated details) and top-down (e.g. finding out or inferring the primary idea) strategies and skills. The reason for selecting different topics was to make sure that the participants were likely to have different kinds of background knowledge and therefore potential biases regarding their background knowledge could be removed this way. These texts were shown to be equal by the Fog index of readability (Farhadi et al. 1994). Using the Fog index, the readability levels of the eight passages were computed to be 18, 20, 11, 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 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 the right response to each item received .5 points. False responses were not penalized.

To discover the possible effects of the treatment on the reading comprehension capability of the students, the pretest was conducted at the end of the research once again. This study used the same test for reading comprehension twice, once as a posttest and once as a pre-test instrument. Concerning the quantity and time, the whole attributes of the post-test were the same as those of the pre-test. The major difference of the test from the pre-test was the fact that to eliminate the chance of presumptive reminiscence of pre-test answers, the questions and alternatives were arranged in a different order. It is noteworthy to refer to the fact that for controlling the test type role, the post-test and pre-test questions were the

same. Moreover, since the questions were about culture and the same materials were taught, reading comprehension questions could not be different in the two tests. The last reason is that as the pretest was based on the cultural materials aimed to teach during the treatment, the posttest could not be different from the pretest.

Checking the validity and reliability of the above-mentioned test was crucial. To control the content and face validity of the test, five university experts with more than 10 years of work experience in English teaching read the whole tests and made the necessary changes to improve the representativeness, clarity, and simplicity of the items. The test was finally modified followed by piloting in another institute on a similar group with the same level and coursebook. By applying the Cronbach's alpha equation, the reliability was determined for the posttest and pretest, which were .846 and .898, respectively.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Before starting the research, to make sure about the proficiency level of the participants, the OQPT was administered to 250 EFL learners, and 150 upper-intermediate (75 male and 75 female) participants were chosen for participating in the study. The next step was dividing the selected participants of each gender into three equal groups, Group A (Target Culture=TC), Group B (Source Culture = SC), and Group C (Culture-Free = CF) or Control Group. All groups received a pretest of reading comprehension. After that, the treatment was carried out to each group. The participants in each group practiced reading comprehension materials that reflected a particular culture.

During the treatment period which consisted of 24 sessions, the first researcher in this study provided reading passages related to American and English culture for group A, Persian culture for group B, and finally, culture-free passages for group C. 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. *Students were asked to read carefully, and then the teacher asked them many questions including synonyms and antonyms, fill-in-the-blank, tell-what-you-understand, etc.*

For each group, the researcher who was also a teacher in this study offered the chosen reading passages along with pre-reading knowledge cultural preliminary activities. He also

presented some later questions associated with culture. For instance, in case Christmas was chosen as the cultural subject of reading passages, the learners received background knowledge of the western beliefs and customs about Christmas. Also, the students had the opportunity to discuss different parts of the passages and present their beliefs about the main theme of the passages, and even present their comments on the reading passages. Some activities such as Q & A (question and answer) were utilized as well. Question and answer included the presentation of some questions to the participants about the text and encouraging them for sharing their answers and creating ideas related to the responses of each other.

Moreover, the reliable sites on the Internet (e.g. *cnn.com* & *bbc.com*) and other authentic references including *Select Reading Series* (Lee & Gundersen, 2014), *ACTIVE Skills for Reading* series (Anderson, 2008), and *Top Notch Series* (Saslow & Ascher, 2007) that presented English texts for learners of various levels as well as some later questions for checking their comprehension, were used to retrieve the reading passages. It is noteworthy that after receiving those texts from the books/sites, their difficulty was evaluated through the Gunning Fog Tests scale. Ultimately, after finishing the study, the groups received a posttest for reading comprehension. The duration of the treatment was 24 sessions held within eight weeks (the first session, i.e. the introductory week and the OQPT were not considered). Three 65-minute class sessions were held every week.

3.5. Data Analysis

After data collection using the above instruments, the interpretation, and analysis of them was started in accordance with the research objectives. To examine the data normality before conducting statistical tests, the scores of the students on posttest and pretest were initially projected on normal distribution curves, and to check the normality of the distribution, the K-S (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) test was conducted. Thereafter, one-way ANCOVA and paired samples t-tests were administered to answer the research questions 1-3. A two-way ANCOVA was also conducted for question 4. Ultimately, the results were depicted in various charts and tables with great details.

4. Results

The normality distribution was vital to be verified before conducting any analyses on the posttest and the pretest. The K-S (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) test was used to check the

distributions normality. The indexes with the values of $>.05$ were represented by the *Sig.* values indicating the normality distribution for the posttest and pretest acquired from the three groups. Therefore, proceeding with the parametric tests (namely, one-way ANCOVA, two-way ANCOVA, & paired-samples *t*-test in the present case) and making additional comparisons among the involved groups is safe.

To answer questions 1, 2, and 3 of this study, the pretest and posttest scores of the learners in the three groups were compared using a paired-samples *t*-test:

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for Comparing Pretest and Posttest Scores of the TCG, SCG, and CFG

		Mean	<i>N</i>	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	TCG Posttest	14.67	50	1.07	.15
	TCG Pretest	10.91	50	.69	.09
Pair 2	SCG Posttest	15.14	50	1.12	.15
	SCG Pretest	10.98	50	1.04	.14
Pair 3	CFG Posttest	10.85	50	1.36	.19
	CFG Pretest	10.66	50	1.25	.17

Note. **TCG:** Target Culture Group; **SCG:** Source Culture Group; **CFG:** Culture-Free Group

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the CFG, SCG, and TCG learners on the pretest and posttest of reading comprehension. To determine whether the difference between these mean scores was statistically significant or not, the researcher needed to consult the paired-samples *t*-test (Table 2):

Table 2.

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

	Paired Differences						<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
TCG POST – TCG PRE	3.76	1.32	.18	3.38	4.13	20.05	49	.00	
SCG POST – SCG PRE	4.16	1.61	.22	3.70	4.61	18.22	49	.00	
CFG POST – CFG PRE	.19	.48	.06	.05	.32	2.78	49	.07	

Table 2 indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest 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 2 was smaller than the significance level ($.00 < .05$), it could be figured out that the difference between the reading comprehension pretest and posttest of the SCG learners was statistically significant. These demonstrate that the treatment (teaching target cultural materials (English and American) and Persian cultural materials (Source Culture) was beneficial so far as the reading comprehension of the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners were concerned. Lastly, based on the information presented in Table 2, there was not a statistically significant difference in the pretest and posttest 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 reading comprehension of upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

The main goal of the study was to see if there was a difference between familiarity with the target cultural materials (English and American), familiarity with Persian cultural materials (source culture), and culture-free materials concerning reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, the researcher had to compare the reading comprehension post-test scores of the three groups. To control for any possible pre-existing differences between these three groups, and compare their post-test scores accordingly, one-way ANCOVA was conducted:

Table 3.

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

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
TCG	14.67	1.07	50
SCG	15.14	1.12	50
CFG	10.85	1.36	50
Total	13.55	2.26	150

Table 3 depicts the SCG, TCG, and CFG learners' mean scores on the post-test. In order to check the statistical significance of the differences between the mean scores, the

researcher had to refer to Table 4 and check the *Sig.* column and in front of the Groups row:

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	<i>Df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	584.34	3	194.781	159.611	.000	.766
Intercept	98.27	1	98.27	80.52	.00	.35
Pretest	30.77	1	30.77	25.21	.00	.14
Groups	509.75	2	254.87	208.85	.00	.74
Error	178.17	14	1.22			
Total	28316.71	15				
Corrected Total	762.51	14				

The *p*-value can be found in Table 4 at the intersection of the *Sig.* column and the Groups row which would be compared with the alpha significance level. Here, the alpha significance level was higher than the *p*-value, reflecting a statistically significant difference between the reading comprehension post-tests of the three groups. This fact reveals that after the treatment, a significant difference was found between the three groups with regard to reading comprehension. Table 5 presents pair-wise comparisons made between the groups, showing the two groups with a significant difference with regard to the posttests held for reading comprehension.

The effect size value is also one of the other invaluable pieces of information found in Table 4, presented in front of Groups under the column Partial Eta Squared, and its value (.74) reflects the fact that the treatment (namely, teaching cultural materials) were responsible for 74% of the differences found between the same 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	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
TCG	SCG	-.43	.22	.14	-.97	.09
	CFG	3.70*	.22	.00	3.17	4.24
SCG	TCG	.43	.22	.14	-.09	.97
	CFG	4.14*	.22	.00	3.60	4.68
CFG	TCG	-3.70*	.22	.00	-4.24	-3.17
	SCG	-4.14*	.22	.00	-4.68	-3.60

As Table 5 shows, the comparison of TCG and SCG revealed that both familiarity with the target cultural materials (English and American) and familiarity with Persian cultural materials (source culture) employed for teaching reading comprehension to upper-intermediate EFL learners did not differ significantly due to the fact that the p -value corresponding to the comparison of these two TCG and SCG (i.e. .14) exceeded the significance level.

Moreover, one can find out that the difference found among CFG, SCG, and TCG ($M = 14.67$) is of statistical significance, because the *Sig.* value corresponding to the same comparison ($p = .00$) was $< .05$. As a result, it could be inferred that that teaching both target cultural materials and Persian cultural materials significantly affected upper-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension.

The fourth research question of the study intended to find out whether the effects of teaching reading comprehension through cultural materials differed for learners of different genders. To find an answer to this research question, owing to the fact that there were two independent variables (i.e., modes of instruction and gender) and a dependent variable (i.e., posttest reading comprehension scores of the learners), a two-way ANCOVA was carried out:

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	14.74	.87	25
	Female	14.60	1.25	25
	Total	14.67	1.07	50
SCG	Male	15.26	.90	25
	Female	15.02	1.31	25
	Total	15.14	1.12	50
CFG	Male	10.52	1.64	25
	Female	11.18	.92	25
	Total	10.85	1.36	50
Total	Male	13.50	2.44	75
	Female	13.60	2.08	75
	Total	13.55	2.26	150

According to Table 6, there was no significant difference between the female and male (*M*) learners. Nevertheless, in order to ascertain the finding that there were no statistically significant differences between the gender groups, the author had to analyze the *p*-value in the two-way ANCOVA table found under the *Sig.* column in front of Gender.

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	587.97	6	97.99	80.28	.00	.77
Intercept	98.13	1	98.13	80.40	.00	.36
Pretest	28.00	1	28.00	22.94	.00	.13
Groups	510.42	2	255.21	209.10	.00	.74
Gender	1.09	1	1.09	.89	.34	.00
Groups * Gender	2.49	2	1.246	1.02	.36	.01
Error	174.53	14	1.22			
Total	28316.71	15				
Corrected Total	762.51	14				

Table 7 indicates that the *p*-value in front of Gender was found to be greater than the significance level (.34 > .05), which means that there was not a statistically significant difference between the male and female EFL learners participating in this study. Moreover,

there was no statistically significant interaction effect for groups/treatment and gender on the posttest, whilst controlling for pretest, $F(2, 14) = 1.02$, $p = .36$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

5. Discussion

This study revealed that cultural familiarity plays a fundamental role in developing reading comprehension. According to Sasaki et al. (1991), two general notions exist about culture and material design when teaching the English language. The proponents of the first perspective defend culturally sterile English teaching or teaching without culture. Since they assume no role for culture when teaching English as a foreign or second language, they refuse to incorporate culture into the educational curriculum directly. By refusing the inclusion of cultural materials in the school curriculums directly, they assign no role to cultural materials when teaching English as a foreign or second language. This viewpoint has led to exclude cultural materials from the curriculum of Iranian state schools on the basis that (a) The combination of Islamic and national cultures creates the Persian culture. The Islamic culture is founded based on the religious laws and values observed by the people in their daily livings, and the foundation of national culture is based on ancient rituals and practices perceived by the people during the historic times; (b) Local culture of Iran can be disrupted by the dominant Western culture; (c) the Western cultural teachings may contribute to and the result in cultural oppositions; and, (d) In case English cultural matters are emphasized and taught in EFL classes, the instructor may be unfairly labeled as a politically influenced or Western-oriented teacher.

Alternatively, the second viewpoint proponents (Alptekin, 2006; Rangriz, & Harati, 2017; Yang, 2017) defend the incorporation of cultural materials within the curriculum, because they insist on the inseparability of culture and language and that the whole language is understandable through its relationship with culture, so that teaching language without the inclusion of culture is impossible. They suppose that culture and language are so intertwined that concentration on one of them without regarding the other is a very hard task (if not inconceivable). This research has confirmed the same viewpoint through its findings that familiarizing the text culturally affects reading comprehension significantly. When mixing the present knowledge with what the readers are reading, they are assumed to receive the sense of the writer (Yang, 2017). The familiarization of the short-term memory with the terms associated with the rituals and customs resulted in the activation of

the reader's schema (Alptekin, 2006; Hassan Salumy et al., 2016). Even, the texts with a cultural base had affected the readers such that they were not required to have a hard time with the unfamiliar words found within them. This resulted in better understanding because they were capable of processing new data within their short-term memories.

As Coles and Hall (2002) argued, successful reading comprehension takes place when the reader achieves structural awareness, schematic awareness, and context awareness. They suggested that the provision of structural and background knowledge to the learner presents him/her with the information needed for the promotion of comprehension of a topic with unfamiliar nature. This can be attributed to the fact that during this research, the groups A and B participants may increase their reading comprehension significantly by familiarity with the theme of the cultural meaning of the texts they read and creation of background awareness.

The findings are consistent with Ghonchepour et al. (2020) who argued that the closer the constancy between the text and the schema of the reader, the greater comprehension happens. Therefore, it should be clarified that reading comprehension relies on basic information that can relate what we do not know to what we already know. Furthermore, the results are also compatible with the outcomes of the research studies of Rezaei et al. (2012), Yang (2017), Tavakoli et al. (2013) who concluded that the absence of a proper schema that could fit within the content of the text would lead to failure in getting the meaning in a text. Therefore, it could be argued that reading tests of unfamiliar material could not help students grasp the passages effectively due to the absence of schema.

Consistent with previous studies devoted to the impact of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension, this research showed that the subjects had a significantly better performance on questions with culturally-familiar contents. The findings of the research are in line with the findings of Shirzadi (2015), Liu (2015), and Yang (2017), who suggested that students' reading comprehension efficiency is boosted through cultural awareness.

Another issue studied in this research was to find the differences found between the reading comprehension of Iranian female and male EFL learners via teaching cultural materials. Comparison of the results between the female and male learners showed no significant differences between them with regard to their reading comprehension.

Consequently, this lack of difference between the genders could be linked to background knowledge and prior experiences. Both male and female learners could have used identical reading methods and approaches, resulting in comparable reading success. The finding can also be due to the equal cultural understanding of reading passages which was not adequately being challenging for the discrepancies between genders to emerge. Presenting the classes with more difficult passages undoubtedly helps demonstrate the differences between the male and female learners. Participants in this research seemed having comparable cultural awareness which may have equally helped them interpret the reading passages.

In general, females are more inspired to read texts on diverse subjects, both intrinsically and extrinsically (Logan & Johnson, 2009). At the upper-intermediate level of the EFL context, the same motivation would bring about similar results for both female and male learners, such that it caused no significant gender-related discrepancies in their reading comprehension.

The present results are in line with the findings of Logan and Johnston (2009), and Sotoudehnama and Asadian (2011), who found no significant differences in female and male learners' reading comprehension. However, the study results are in disagreement with the findings of Coles and Hall (2002) who reported significantly better reading comprehension in females when compared to the males. Al-Shumaimeri (2006) also discovered that when reading familiar texts, the male students outperformed the female ones.

All in all, the research results showed that when compared with the CFG (control group), the SCG, and TCG had a better reading comprehension performance, which is resulted from the participants' knowledge of the cultural background. The results showed that students were not ready to become adapted to the international community using the Iranian EFL course books. Furthermore, it seems that teaching foreign languages is not aimed to enhance the skills required for better communication with others, the use, and interpretation of modern daily English, as should be, towards the target language culture.

The last important point is that the mere fluency in the speech production of a foreign language, with no perception of the associated contextual complications or the associated appropriate situational use or texts readings without any knowledge of the theories and concepts behind them these so-called capabilities, present no advantage even at practical

levels and by all odds rises serious doubts about the language research assertions for a reliable position in a liberating education plan.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the findings showed that higher exposure to special reading materials with a cultural basis is of a significant impact on the promotion of the reading comprehension of the EFL learners. This means that the SCG and TCG participants' reading capability with greater exposure to reading materials of cultural nature outperformed that of those in FCG (control group). In summary, the researchers concluded that a crucial feature of reading materials with cultural nature is the acquisition of background knowledge, and the language learners who tend to enhance their reading comprehension capabilities should receive two types of reading materials: source culture materials and target cultural texts. Through better access to various cultural texts (for instance, English culture texts), language learners can improve their reading skills. Moreover, linguistic complexity, background knowledge, and cultural familiarity are the major meta-linguistic and linguistic features for reading comprehension improvement. Therefore, better accessibility to language materials featuring the same three features will enhance reading comprehension.

Lastly, as previously stated, language and culture are intertwined, and it is a hard task (if not unimaginable) to discern them as such. Many scholars debated that teaching English is impossible without teaching culture (Alptekin, 2006; Yang, 2017). By emphasizing the need for teaching culture for EFL learners, Alptekin argues that for the entire languages of the world other than English, teaching culture with the language would be feasible; however, the same is not true for English as a worldwide spoken language. The Dutch language belongs to the Netherlands; the language of Bulgaria belongs to Bulgarian people; however, the English language can no longer be attributed to Britain. In the case of culture unconsciously or consciously remains an element of the instructors' pedagogical purposes, cultural diffusion seems to be unavoidable. The nature of our teachings will systematically be interconnected to the culture somehow, as Tseng (2002) notifies that all exercises are tied with something and that something would be culture.

This study could be beneficial for EFL learners as might help them enhance their understanding of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, ideals, behaviors, and

opinions, and how these express themselves or break into linguistic components and types. More precisely, this research could allow learners to be informed of speech actions, connotations, manners, that is, acceptable or improper behavior, and offers them the ability to behave as a part of the target culture. In addition, the findings of this study emphasize the fundamental and valuable role of EFL learners' exposure to culturally-oriented materials regarding to their reading comprehension, reading motivation, and reading attitude. The results of this study help EFL teachers bear in mind that if the unfamiliar content of a text has an impact on reading comprehension, then it must be regarded as a criterion in choosing reading materials and in evaluating reading comprehension. Consequently, teachers can devise various kinds of reading materials and resources to augment the cultural information of their students. On the other hand, in order to make teaching and learning atmospheres more attractive for learners, culturally familiar reading passages should be provided by the syllabus designers. Finally, as culturally familiar reading passages are easier than the other types of reading passages, it is highly advised that EFL learners make use of these passages in order to improve their reading skills.

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