

The Role of Culture in English Language Reading Comprehension

Veronica Hosana Gerneng¹, Arni Putri², Masagus Firdaus³

^{1,2,3}Universitas PGRI Palembang

*Corresponding author: vveronica273@gmail.com

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas peran penting budaya dalam pemahaman membaca bahasa Inggris, dengan menekankan bagaimana pengetahuan latar belakang budaya memengaruhi pemahaman teks dalam bahasa kedua atau asing (L2). Berdasarkan teori skema, artikel ini menyoroti bahwa pengetahuan budaya pembaca seperti adat istiadat, idiom, dan norma sosial membantu proses pembentukan makna dan interpretasi teks. Tulisan ini merangkum penelitian yang menunjukkan bahwa ketika pembaca familiar dengan budaya dalam sebuah teks, mereka memahaminya lebih mudah. Namun ketika budaya terasa jauh atau referensinya tidak familiar, pembaca mengalami kesulitan lebih besar, merasa lebih cemas, dan perlu menggunakan lebih banyak usaha mental untuk memahami teks tersebut. Selain itu, artikel ini menelaah bagaimana budaya sumber, budaya sasaran, dan budaya internasional muncul dalam bahan bacaan EFL/ESL, serta ketidakseimbangan yang dapat merugikan pembelajar. Implikasi praktis juga diberikan bagi guru dan perancang kurikulum, termasuk pemilihan teks yang relevan secara budaya, aktivasi pengetahuan latar belakang, dan pemberian bantuan (scaffolding) untuk menjembatani kesenjangan budaya. Hasil kajian menegaskan bahwa integrasi kesadaran budaya dalam pengajaran membaca bahasa Inggris dapat meningkatkan pemahaman, keterlibatan, dan keadilan dalam penilaian. Dengan demikian, budaya bukanlah faktor pelengkap, melainkan komponen utama dalam pedagogi membaca bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa kedua atau asing.

Kata kunci: budaya, pemahaman membaca, teori skema, EFL/ESL, kesadaran budaya, pengetahuan latar belakang

Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of culture in English language reading comprehension, emphasizing how cultural background knowledge influences the understanding of texts in a second or foreign language (L2). Drawing on schema theory, it highlights that readers' prior cultural knowledge such as customs, idioms, and social norms facilitates meaning-making and interpretation. The paper summarizes research showing that when readers are familiar with the culture in a text, they understand it more easily. But when the culture feels distant or the references are unfamiliar, readers struggle more, feel more anxious, and need to use more mental effort to understand the text. It further examines how source, target, and international cultures appear in EFL/ESL reading materials, noting imbalances that may disadvantage learners. Practical implications are provided for teachers and curriculum designers, including the selection of culturally relevant texts, activation of background knowledge, and scaffolding to bridge cultural gaps. The findings underscore that integrating cultural awareness into English reading instruction fosters deeper comprehension, engagement, and fairness in assessment. Ultimately, the study concludes that culture is not a peripheral factor but a central component of effective reading pedagogy in English as a second or foreign language.

Keywords: Culture, Reading Comprehension, Schema Theory, EFL/ESL, Cultural Awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension in a second or foreign language (L2) extends beyond the mere ability to decode words, phrases, or grammatical structures; it fundamentally involves interpreting the cultural meanings embedded within texts (Fadilah et al., 2023; Baleghizadeh & Maryam, 2019; Wei, 2023). Culture, broadly defined as the collective knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices shared by a community, profoundly shapes how readers perceive,

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interpret, and engage with written materials (Petropoulou et al., 2024). In the context of English language learning, familiarity with the cultural context of a text can significantly facilitate comprehension, whereas encountering unfamiliar cultural elements may impede understanding, create confusion, and reduce engagement (Mason & Smith, 2021; Ningsih et al., 2021; Hashemi, 2021).

Scholars in the field of reading and language acquisition emphasize the centrality of background knowledge in comprehension (Fauzi, 2021; Sherine et al., 2020; Gass et al., 2020). Kit et al. (2024) argue that readers utilize schemata cognitive structures of organized prior knowledge to interpret textual information effectively. When students possess schemata that are culturally relevant to the content, they are better able to anticipate meanings, make inferences, and establish connections between ideas. Similarly, Lindawati (2021) highlights that reading is an interactive cognitive process, in which prior knowledge including cultural experiences interacts dynamically with the information presented in the text. This interactive model suggests that comprehension is not a passive decoding of symbols but an active construction of meaning mediated by the reader's accumulated knowledge and experiences (Sakinah et al., 2025; Nurzama et al., 2019; Baleghizadeh & Maryam, 2019).

More recent scholarship reinforces the idea that culture is not merely supplementary to language instruction but is central to the construction of meaning. Blitvich and Sifianou (2019) contends that cultural knowledge enables learners to understand the pragmatic and sociocultural nuances of texts, thereby enriching interpretation and promoting deeper engagement. In this sense, culture shapes both the literal and inferential understanding of language, influencing how learners perceive character motivations, social norms, humor, idiomatic expressions, and value systems embedded in written discourse (Meisani & Purnawarman, 2019); Wu, 2018; Nuray & Ceylan, 2021).

The influence of cultural schemata on reading comprehension can be observed across multiple dimensions. First, cultural familiarity enables learners to relate textual content to their own experiences or to knowledge they have previously acquired, facilitating prediction, inference, and retention of information. Second, the representation of source culture (the culture of the language being learned), target culture (learners' own culture), and international or global cultural elements in reading materials can affect learners' engagement, empathy, and interpretive flexibility. Materials that strategically integrate these cultural dimensions allow learners to navigate cross-cultural meanings and develop a more nuanced understanding of texts (Gass et al., 2020; Ardiyani & Puspitaloka, 2025; Adhitya & Novita, 2021).

Furthermore, integrating cultural awareness into English reading instruction has been shown to enhance not only comprehension but also learner motivation (Puripunyanich, 2025; De Wilde et al., 2020). When students recognize the cultural relevance or significance of textual content, they are more likely to engage actively, ask questions, and participate in discussions that deepen their understanding. In contrast, neglecting cultural dimensions can result in superficial comprehension, misinterpretation of implicit meanings, and disengagement.

In conclusion, effective L2 reading instruction must consider cultural schemata as an essential component of comprehension. Teachers should incorporate texts that provide a balance of familiar and new cultural contexts, encourage learners to activate prior knowledge, and facilitate reflective activities that link textual content to students' cultural understanding. By embedding culture into reading pedagogy, educators can support learners in constructing meaning more effectively, enhancing cognitive engagement, and developing critical intercultural competence. Future research in this area could explore strategies for integrating multiple layers of cultural content local, global, and digital into reading curricula, as well as the impact of such interventions on diverse learner populations across proficiency levels.

2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive method through document and literature analysis (Neuman, 2019; Tisdell et al., 2025). The aim was to explore how culture influences English language reading comprehension based on previous theories and empirical findings (Amirah & Saidalvi, 2023). The data were collected from secondary sources such as journal articles, theses, and textbooks published between 2013 and 2024, focusing on cultural schemata, background knowledge, and representations of source, target, and international cultures in EFL/ESL contexts.

The collected studies were analyzed using thematic content analysis, identifying key themes such as cultural familiarity, schema activation, cultural content in reading materials, and pedagogical implications (Mauliddiyah, 2021; Herdayati & Syahrial, 2019; Susanto et al., 2023). The data were then synthesized and interpreted using Schema Theory to explain how cultural knowledge affects reading comprehension.

This method allowed the researchers to provide a clear overview of cultural factors that facilitate or hinder comprehension and to draw practical insights for English language teaching and learning.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study show that culture strongly influences English reading comprehension. Analysis of previous studies reveals that cultural familiarity, background knowledge, and cultural representation in reading materials strongly influence how learners understand and interpret texts.

1. Cultural Familiarity and Comprehension

Empirical studies such as those by Vargas García et al. (2024) and Radzi & Abd Aziz (2024) show that learners comprehend texts more effectively when the cultural context is familiar. Texts containing local or relatable cultural references activate learners' background knowledge, making it easier to infer meaning and connect ideas. Conversely, culturally distant or unfamiliar content increases cognitive load and confusion.

2. Cultural Schemata and Meaning-Making

According to schema theory, comprehension improves when readers can relate new information to their prior cultural knowledge. Studies by Radzi & Abd Aziz (2024) support this, demonstrating that the absence of cultural schemata hinders understanding. This highlights the importance of incorporating cultural context into reading materials to enhance schema activation.

3. Cultural Representation in Reading Materials

The review of Faris (2019) and Astuti et al. (2024) shows that English textbooks and tests in EFL contexts often emphasize target and international cultures more than source culture. For instance, Faris found that only 20% of reading passages reflected learners' own culture, while 40% represented foreign ones. This imbalance may reduce learners' engagement and limit comprehension since students are less able to connect texts with their lived experiences.

4. Cultural Distance and Cognitive Load

Texts containing culture-specific items such as idioms, traditions, or holidays (e.g., "Boxing Day," "Thanksgiving") can cause difficulties for EFL learners who lack background knowledge of those references. The unfamiliarity adds cognitive load, slowing comprehension and reducing focus on main ideas. This finding aligns with schema theory, which posits that missing background knowledge increases processing demands.

5. Pedagogical Implications

Integrating cultural awareness in English reading instruction enhances not only comprehension but also motivation and confidence. Agustiana et al. (2023) demonstrated that using local culture-based materials significantly improved students' reading scores. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to use culturally relevant texts, activate background knowledge before reading, and scaffold unfamiliar cultural content to bridge gaps.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that culture plays a crucial role in English reading comprehension, supporting the principles of schema theory, which emphasize that readers construct meaning by connecting new information with their prior knowledge, including cultural experiences (Smith et al., 2024; Destriana et al., 2024). Learners comprehend texts more effectively when they are familiar with the cultural context, as such familiarity activates relevant background knowledge, facilitates inference-making, and allows readers to connect ideas within the text (Vargas García et al., 2024; Radzi & Abd Aziz, 2024). Conversely, encountering culturally distant or unfamiliar content increases cognitive load and can hinder understanding (Jaya et al., 2025; Kaforina et al., 2023). The study also highlights the importance of cultural schemata, as learners who lack relevant cultural knowledge struggle to interpret texts accurately, reinforcing the need to integrate culturally meaningful content in reading materials (Radzi & Abd Aziz, 2024). Furthermore, analyses of EFL materials reveal an imbalance in cultural representation, with target and international cultures often prioritized over learners' own culture, which may reduce engagement and comprehension (Faris, 2019; Astuti et al., 2024). Culture-specific references such as idioms, holidays, or traditions can further increase cognitive demands for learners who are unfamiliar with them, underscoring the role of cultural knowledge in reducing processing difficulties (Sun et al., 2023; Ajani et al., 2024). Pedagogically, these findings suggest that integrating cultural awareness into reading instruction not only enhances comprehension but also boosts motivation and confidence. Teachers are therefore encouraged to select texts that are culturally relevant, activate learners' prior knowledge, and scaffold unfamiliar cultural content to bridge gaps, facilitating meaningful engagement and deeper understanding (Agustiana et al., 2023). Overall, the study confirms that culture is not merely an optional addition in language learning but an essential component that shapes learners' reading comprehension, engagement, and ability to construct meaning from texts.

4. CONCLUSION

The role of culture in English language reading comprehension is significant. Cultural knowledge, cultural familiarity, and the match between a learner's background and the cultural content of texts all influence how well a reader understands, interprets, and engages with reading materials in English. Empirical studies show that when cultural content is aligned with learners' background or when learners are supported to bridge cultural gaps, reading comprehension improves.

For effective English reading instruction, cultural considerations should not be an afterthought they must be integrated into material selection, lesson planning, and strategy teaching. By doing so, teachers and learners alike can reduce unnecessary barriers to comprehension and make reading in English both more accessible and meaningful.

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