

Research Article

Culture and Language Are Inextricably Linked: Surveying the Effectiveness of Culture-Based Instructional Materials on Enhancing Reading Comprehension (RC), Inclination to Reading, and Reading Attitude (RA) among EFL Learners

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Students who learn about different cultures during their education feel more comfortable and safer with these differences later in life. This allows them to interact in a wider range of social groups and feel more confident in themselves and in their interactions with others. Thus, language and culture are not separated. Considering this important point, the present research inspected the impacts of having English CBK on improving the EFL learners' RC and motivation. In addition, the EFL learners' attitudes towards incorporating English cultural-based materials (CBMs) into their English coursebook were examined. This was accomplished by randomly dividing 50 pre-intermediate students from a private English language institution into two groups: an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG). Next, the motivation questionnaire developed by Hayami and colleagues (1989) was delivered to the individuals in both groups of participants. Following that, all participants received a pretest of RC, and then, the intervention was performed. The EG was instructed through using the English CBMs, while the CG received the instruction using culture-free materials. The entire treatment took 11 sessions. In the last three sessions, the reading posttest, the motivation, and the attitude questionnaires were administered to assess the influences of the treatment on the RC and motivation of the EFL learners (EFLs). The results of the statistical analyses indicated that the EG had better performances than the CG on the posttests of RC and reading motivation (RM). Also, the results divulged that the EFL students manifested positive attitudes towards integrating English CBMs into their English coursebook. Considering the findings of this study, some implications are proposed at the end of this study.

1. Introduction

Understanding the target culture is necessary to learn the language more successfully. Culture is the situation in which we live, think, feel, and communicate with other people. It is the “glue” that unites groups of humans. It can be seen as a model, which directs the behaviors of the individuals in the community, and it is inserted into our family life. It directs our behaviors in groups, helps us be aware of the issues of the situations, and aids us to know what other people expect of us and what will occur if we do not meet their expectations. Therefore, culture assists us to understand how far we can go as people and what our responsibilities are towards the groups.

Comprehending English culture can help EFL learners develop their RC. Reading is seen as an argumentative activity in which the reader is making meanings according to the literacy cues [1–3]. Goodman [4] asserted that reading is the process of involving in conversations. The quantity of information in the passage cannot assess reading performance, as it depends on how much information the reading text can manifest and how much readers expect to extract from the texts. In fact, from this point of view, reading is not considered as a reaction to the passage, but is regarded as an interaction among the authors and the readers.

Teaching reading skill has a crucial impact on teaching and learning English as a foreign and second language. Learning English is necessary because the English language is a tool for communicating internationally. Language is imperative for carrying out many tasks and activities, including educational, political, and socioeconomical activities [5–8]. Its importance is well recognized in the EFL settings. In the information period, the curriculum designers ought to review instructional processes and activities to prepare the learners for practical application. Education needs to concentrate on the improvement of the four key skills in English learning. Carrell [9] considers reading skill as the most significant skill in acquiring and mastering a foreign or a second language. Reading ability is the mother of all other abilities, it is a vital tool that aids in the acquisition of other abilities, and it is one of the most significant abilities in our everyday life. Indeed, almost all kids who start school are hopeful to learn how to read. The ability to read is crucially needed for all children.

Alderson [10] regards reading skill as “an enjoyable task which causes the readers to enjoy” (p. 28). Via reading, students are subjected to the new vocabularies, grammatical structures, and even new cultural issues. Despite the importance and the effectiveness of RC, most Iranian students have RC challenges and difficulties. Despite all efforts to teach reading, EFL students seem to have lost interest in reading and have become passive in their comprehension of what they read.

RM and attitude are two main factors that influence EFL learners’ reading skill [11, 12]. Based on Grabe [13], RM improves RC. If the readers are highly motivated, they will read more books, and their RC level will develop. Guthrie et al. [14] state that the motivated readers will read more. RM is referred to the students’ motivations in reading English or

any other language. For instance, learners who read books for fun and use some techniques to help them understand better have a high RM. These types of students generally regard RC to be a significant part of their activities and can address challenges in the reading process and become successful readers. Also, the motivation of reading is the students’ behavior, goal, thought, and desires associated with the reading outcomes [5, 15–17].

Cooter and Alexander [18] assert that RAs refer to the feeling that results in interest or hatred of the students about reading. Similarly, Smith [19] confirms that RAs are regarded as the mind state, accompanied by feeling and emotion that cause reading more or less enjoyable. The reader who enjoys the reading process believes that reading is enjoyable and the attitudes of the reader towards reading will get more positive. On the other hand, the readers’ attitudes towards reading will get more negative when they feel frustrated in reading since they have negative attitudes and unpleasant experiences in the reading process. To develop RM, comprehension, and attitudes of Iranian students, the researchers applied English culture-based materials.

2. Review of the Literature

Recent research studies have focused on the mutual correlation between English teaching and teaching target culture, especially over the two last decades with the writings of researchers such as Byram [20] and Kramsch [21, 22]. Those people who are engaged in language learning and teaching have again started to comprehend the close correlation between language and culture [23–26]. It has been stressed that without studying the concept of culture, teaching a second language is not done accurately and completely. For ESL/EFL learners, language learning is meaningless if they do not know anything about the individuals who use the TL or the society where the TL is applied. Learning a novel language does not limit to learning grammar and words [27]. Based on Bada [28], the need for cultural literacy in ELT originates fundamentally from the fact that many language students, not subjected to cultural issues of the country in question, appear to face many difficulties in interacting and transferring meanings to the native speakers. Moreover, today, the target culture is manifested as a central interdisciplinary in some L2 curricula and coursebooks [29–32].

The cultural knowledge (CK) of the students is the basis of language learning. A language is just learned well when learners gain adequate knowledge about the culture of the target language (TL) [33]. It is believed that the CK can activate background knowledge and link novel information to the previous information that can result in enhancing comprehension. If pupils do not possess pertinent knowledge about diverse subjects in their minds, they cannot comprehend the new listening texts successfully [34–38]. Razi [39] stated that a good mastery of cultural background knowledge (CBK) can give the students the opportunity to enhance both their RC and motivation. The theoretical framework of the present study was generated based on the Beamer [40] schemata model for international encounters. According to Beamer’s model, individuals create a

projection of the new culture on the information they receive and their cultural background. This projected image is developed as individuals' primary schema of the target culture, which is not usually near to reality. Little by little, interaction with the target culture and acquiring deeper understanding of it modify individuals' primary schemas [41–43]. This study also considered symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, which suggests that individuals subjectively respond to the elements of their environments. That is, individuals create and modify meanings in response to the elements of the environment via symbolic communication with people in the society [44–49].

Cultural identity, according to Brown [48], is a deeply ingrained element of the very fabric of human existence, whereas language, as a means of communication between members of a culture, is the most obvious and easily available sign of that culture. The individual's perspective, identity, and ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and communication can be modified via changes from one culture to another. Likewise, Tang [49] held that language is culture and culture is language. Tang stated that if we want to speak a language successfully, we should think in that language and that thinking is very powerful. Language and culture are inseparably related, and in short, culture refers to our lifestyle.

Exposing EFL learners to the English CBMs can develop EFL learners' RC. Chastain [50] mentioned that reading skill is a pivotal and important ability in learning and teaching a language. Speakers of a second language ought to learn and read to communicate and read several real materials. He said that reading for meaning or rebuilding the writers' meanings is the center of the reading process. Indeed, comprehending the texts is the main objective of reading.

Tsou [51] performed a research in which a combination of anthropological processes and task-based techniques was used to conduct the cultural lessons, which was published in 2005. During one term, two elementary-level EFL groups were taught using cultural instructions to determine the effects of cultural instructions on the acquisition of a foreign language. When cultural artifacts were introduced into English as a foreign language training, pupils' language abilities were significantly improved. Furthermore, the pupils expressed greater enthusiasm for learning the language.

Karimi and Nafissi [55] investigated the influence of adopting different culturally oriented material on EFL students' reading anxiety, reading competence, and reading self-efficacy in reading comprehension (RC). The inquiry was carried out with the help of two intermediary groups, both of whom worked in the area of English language teaching. The pre- and posttests of the study included the RC self-efficacy scale, the foreign language reading anxiety scale, and the reading portion of the Michigan test [53], which were administered to the participants before and after the research. To evaluate the data, the ANCOVA test was used. The findings revealed that, although considerable improvements were detected in both courses in terms of the three factors indicated above, it was the EG class that exhibited much less anxiety as compared to the CG class.

Despite this, there was no significant difference between the two courses in terms of reading self-efficacy or reading competence.

Yang and Chen [51] aimed at examining language teachers' perceptions and beliefs about teaching culture and the problems and barricades of teaching culture to college-level students. The research was performed applying qualitative instruments: document miming, classroom observations, and interviews with language instructors. The obtained findings indicated two profound barriers, namely instructors' beliefs and attitudes in addition to the lack of specialized progress opportunity in learning technique on weaving culture teaching in foreign language classes at the college level.

After reviewing the related literature, rare studies have been done to check the impact of culture-based instructional materials on enhancing RC, inclination to reading, and RA among EFL learners. Thus, to reach this aim and bridge this gap, the researchers posed three questions in this study.

RQ1. Does RC of EFL enhance by providing English CBK?

RQ2. Does RM of EFL improve by providing English CBK?

RQ3. Do EFL present positive attitudes towards incorporating English CBMs into their English coursebook?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants. Fifty Iranian EFL participants were selected from a pool of 70 students using a nonrandom selection approach for the purpose of conducting this study. They were selected from among students at an English Language Institute in Iran. It was determined that they had a pre-intermediate level of English, which was determined by their band score on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The selected subjects were randomly divided into two EG and CGs based on the convenient sampling method. It must be stated that both females and males participated in this study.

3.2. Instruments. For having more homogeneous subjects, the OQPT was employed as the first tool in this study. This instrument was applied to gather information on the participants' general English level. This test has two parts: one part has 40 questions assessing knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. The second part has 20 questions in the form of the cloze test. Based on the OQPT guidelines, the learners whose scores are between 30 and 40 are at the pre-intermediate level [36].

The other instrument used in this investigation to collect the sufficient data was a researcher-created reading pretest that was made based on the content of the students' coursebook. It had 20 objective items including filling the blanks, true or false, and multiple-choice questions. The pretest's reliability was .83 ($r = .83$) that was computed by

TABLE 1: DS of the pretest of both groups.

		N	Means	Std. deviations	Std. error means
Pretest	EG	25	12.73	3.69	0.71
	CG	25	13.10	3.61	0.78

TABLE 2: Independent-samples *t*-test (reading pretest of the two groups).

	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -Test for equality of means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
Equal variances assumed	0.00	0.77	0.19	48	0.63	0.18	3.25
Equal variances not assumed			0.19	47.85	0.63	0.18	3.25

utilizing the KR-21 formula. Additionally, the pretest's validity was confirmed by three English specialists.

The third tool that was used in the current investigation was a researcher-made reading posttest. Some small differences were made in the pretest, and it was used as the posttest. All features of the reading posttest such as the content of the questions and the number of the items were identical to the pretest of RC. The researchers just modified the order of the questions and the options to eliminate the subjects' pretest reminding. The posttest was administered to determine the influences of cultural awareness on the participants' RC enhancement.

The fourth instrument was the questionnaire of achievement motivation, which was designed by Hayami et al. [55]. It included 27-point Likert-type items. The validity and reliability of this instrument were measured through previous researchers. This questionnaire was employed as the pre- and posttests of this research.

The last tool was an attitude questionnaire prepared by the researchers to check the participants' RAs. It included 15-point Likert-type items. The validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by some English experts. Its reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha ($r = .85$).

3.3. Procedures. To carry out this research, first, the researcher went to one of the Iranian English Language Institutions and administered the OQPT to 70 EFL students. Then, based on their scores on the OQPT, 50 EFL students (pre-intermediate level) were chosen for the target respondents of the study. After selecting the needed participants, the researchers randomly divided them into two groups—an EG and a CG. The whole instruction lasted 11 sessions, in which 50 minutes were allotted for each. At the beginning, the achievement motivation questionnaire [55] and the attitude questionnaire were distributed among the learners in both experimental and control groups. In the following session and before the intervention, a RC pretest was given to all participants (both EG and CG). Following this step, the EG was trained by applying the English cultural materials. That is, some English texts containing issues related to the English culture were taught to the EG participants. In contrast, the

participants in the CG were taught by the culture-free materials. In other words, the English texts that were taught to the CG participants did not contain issues relevant to the English or any particular cultures. Finally, the motivation and the attitude questionnaires were distributed among the participants to measure their motivation and the attitude after the treatment. At the end of the experiment, a RC posttest was conducted to inspect the learners' achievements in both the control and experimental groups and investigate the effectiveness of the program. Finally, the achievement motivation questionnaire [55] and the attitude questionnaire were administered to all of the EG and CG attendees.

4. Results

For analyzing the collected data, the researchers used the SPSS software and reported the results in tables as follows.

The reading pretest statistics of all the respondents in the two groups are reported in the table above. The mean score of the EG is 12.73, and the mean score of the CG is 13.10 (Table 1). The mean scores of the two groups seem almost the same prior to the instruction.

The mean scores on the reading pretests for the two groups are shown in Table 2, which demonstrates that they are different. Because Snice Sig (0.63) is larger than $p = 0.01$, it may be concluded that there are no significant differences between the reading pretests of the two groups in terms of comprehension. The truth is that the two groups had almost the same level of reading ability prior to getting the intervention.

The mean scores on the reading posttests for the two groups are reported in Table 3. The mean score for the EG participants is 16.69, whereas the mean score for the CG participants is 14.75. The reading posttests revealed that they had done differently. The EG seems to have outperformed the CG on the reading posttest, according to the results.

Table 4 proves that Sig (0.00) is less than $p = 0.01$, and this means that there is a significant difference between the reading posttests of the participants. Now, one can claim that the EG participants got higher scores on their reading posttest, and this betterment can be due to the treatment.

TABLE 3: Reading posttest DS of both groups.

		N	Means	Std. deviations	Std. error means
Posttest	EG	25	16.69	1.32	0.61
	CG	25	14.75	1.09	0.67

TABLE 4: Inferential statistics of the two groups on the reading posttest.

	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for equality of means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
Equal variances assumed	5.03	0.09	2.82	48	0.00	4.81	0.91
Equal variances not assumed			2.82	47.21	0.00	4.81	0.91

TABLE 5: Paired-samples test (pre- and posttests of each group).

	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
EG	2.34	4.59	0.73	4.08	24	0.00
CG	2.77	4.11	0.64	4.01	24	0.11

TABLE 6: DS of motivation pretest.

	N	Means	Std. deviations	Std. error means
EG	25	13.98	1.55	0.56
CG	25	13.64	1.71	0.52

TABLE 7: Inferential statistics of the two groups on the motivation pretest.

	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -Test for equality of means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
Equal variances assumed	0.72	0.51	0.71	48	0.43	0.78	0.43
Equal variances not assumed			0.71	47.42	0.43	0.78	0.43

In the above table, for comparing the differences between the pretest and the posttest of each, two paired-samples *t*-tests were used. The first paired-samples *t*-test shows that Sig (0.00) of the EG is less than 0.05, and therefore, we can claim that the treatment (English cultural materials) assisted EFL learners to enhance their RC on the posttest. The outcomes of the second paired-samples *t*-test reveal that Sig (0.11) of the CG is higher than 0.05, so there were no meaningful differences between the performances of the CG in the pretest and the posttest (Table 5).

Table 6 displays that the mean scores of the EG and the CGs on the motivation pretest are 13.98 and 13.64, respectively. Their performances seem equal.

As presented in Table 7, Sig. is higher than $p = 0.01$, so the two groups had the same level of RM before the instruction had been carried out.

TABLE 8: DS of motivation posttest.

	N	Means	Std. deviations	Std. error means
EG	25	18.13	3.43	0.48
CG	25	14.39	2.59	0.45

Based on the outcomes reported in Table 8, the mean score of the EG participant is greater than the mean score of the CG participant on the posttest of motivation.

According to the inferential statistics in Table 9, the EG participants outperformed the CG participants on the motivation posttest since Sig. is less than $p = 0.01$.

In Table 10, the quantity of statistical *T* value is 46.23, *df* is 14, and the significance level is 0.00, which is less than $p = 0.05$. The EFL learners had favorable opinions regarding

TABLE 9: Inferential statistics of the two groups on the motivation posttest.

	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -Test for equality of means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
Equal variances assumed	3.05	.07	5.12	48	0.00	5.19	0.38
Equal variances not assumed			5.12	47.13	0.00	5.19	0.38

TABLE 10: One-sample test of the students' questionnaire.

One-sample test Test value = 0						
<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference		
				Lower	Upper	
46.23	14	0.00	3.28	3.11	3.41	

including English CBMs in their English coursebook, as a result of which we may draw the following conclusion.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Following the completion of the data analysis and the receipt of the final results, it was discovered that the EG who had received culturally based teaching outperformed the control group. The researchers discovered the impacts of the English CK on the reading and motivation development of EFLs in their study. The students in the EG could comprehend the texts better and increased their motivation thanks to having English CK. In addition, the results indicate that the EFL held positive attitudes towards integrating English CBMs into their English coursebook.

Integrating culturally based materials into the EG's class helped them enhance their reading skill and increase their RM. Incorporating cultural-based content within the FEL teaching syllabus is very important for the students to boost high proficiency in English. The results obtained in the present research are in line with the results of Karimi and Nafissi [55] who indicated that applying diverse cultural-oriented content had positive effects on EFL university students' foreign language reading anxiety, reading proficiency, self-efficacy, and RC.

A possible explanation for the EG class's superior performance on the reading and motivation posttests is the activation of schemata in the students. The participants in this article were given the opportunity to develop their RC via the activation of cultural schemata. Bilokcuoglu [35] said that efficient activation of previous information may aid us in the successful acquisition of a new language skill. In order for students' schemata to be activated, they must depend on past information about the passages and make connections between current or new knowledge and that background knowledge. This link aids them in their efforts to learn the English language more effectively. Developing RC and motivation can be attributed to having adequate schematic knowledge.

Our research lends support to Oanh and Minh [55] who showed that the respondents of their study discovered that the cross-cultural materials were useful in aiding them to comprehend the lessons better and make a good cross-cultural awareness. Furthermore, this research is advocated by Hayati [33] who studied the influences of having CK on enhancing the listening skills of Iranian EFL students. His findings proved that the students of both groups had different performances on the listening posttest showing that cultural familiarity developed the EG's listening comprehension.

The integration of cultural contents or materials in a second language learning process makes instructors to be more effective communicators of the TL. When communicating with someone from a different cultural background, it is important to consider the strategies of negotiating meanings that are found on values, conventions, and norms. Language teachers in second language situations, on the other hand, are not interested in teaching cultural components in the target language [56].

The practice that follows focuses on learning grammatical structure, rather than improving the efficiency of language communication through context. The elements followed by them concentrate on the learning grammatical structures, rather than improving the efficiency of language communication through contexts. Thus, many conventional teaching methods fail to enhance the ability to use foreign languages in a specific setting.

The development of cross-cultural competencies highly relies on the useful application of communication techniques in the second language learning process. The instructors must be cognizant of such educational processes aiming to develop the communicative competencies of foreign language students in nonnative cultural contexts. An important challenge in these programs is the use of the coursebooks dealing with linguistic aspects of acquiring a new language. Nevertheless, the application of real passages and educational contents can boost communicative competencies using classroom practices and tasks that concentrate on the language functions in the environment [56, 57]. Hence, the prepared coursebooks for EFL learners in universities and Iranian schools may fail to enhance the ability in cross-cultural communication in Iranian situations.

Certainly, cultural awareness can significantly contribute EFL learners to learn a foreign language successfully. The students can just boost their communicative abilities after getting familiar with the cultural issues of the TL. For achieving awareness of culture, it is needed to subject the students to a cultural contents and elements through making interactive/communicative tasks by methods in language teaching. Teaching passages including CK can be presented to the

students to achieve competencies and skills in applying patterns of the language.

A proper and suitable teaching method incorporates cultural elements with the linguistic knowledge on how language is used in enhancing skills in cross-cultural communication needs language instructors to go through a type of intercultural training prior to attending a second language teaching course. These chances can enhance comprehension of differences between cultures, and they can provide the instructors with capabilities to CG the difficulties encountered by the students in making communications in a second language [58, 59]. The instructors teaching in Iranian do not have such supports since the instructors' improvement programs rarely supply intercultural teaching on how to instruct English as a foreign or a second language in an academic situation.

Although we tried hard to do a perfect study, the limitations and the drawbacks are inseparable in any research. The first limitation is referred to the small sample of the study that the future studies are offered to involve more participants. The other limitation is that only quantitative data were collected in this study, and the future research studies are suggested to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to increase their results' validity. This study worked on the pre-intermediate level; the next papers are offered to examine the impacts of the English CBMs on other levels' language learning.

The results of this study may have some pedagogical implications for language teachers to apply supplementary activities to compensate for the lack of culturally based materials for language learning. In other words, it is needed to devise additional supplementary parts and assignments to balance the lack of culturally based materials in the textbooks. Additionally, the implications drawn from this study may assist policy-makers and curriculum developers to consider the findings of the current research in teacher education programs. Moreover, material developers are suggested to upgrade the contents of the textbooks and devise more authentic tasks targeting both language and culture.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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