



## Cultural Familiarity in Vocabulary Learning through Literary Texts: Short Story Reading

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore whether cultural familiarity influences vocabulary learning through reading short stories and nativizing the story can compensate for the lack of such familiarity. The study was conducted with 48 pre-intermediate university students divided into two groups. The experimental group studied on familiar (nativized) story while the control group did so with an unfamiliar (original) story. The participants were selected according to their scores of two tests including a pre-intermediate reading comprehension test and a vocabulary test on the tested vocabulary. For providing equality in opportunity, nativization was applied to an original story instead of using two different stories. After introducing the targeted words, the stories including the target words were studied with the students whose test scores pointed to a significant difference between the memorization levels of the two groups. The analysis of variance indicated a better vocabulary memorization with the nativized story.

Key Words: Cultural familiarity, vocabulary learning, nativization, reading

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### 1. Introduction

One of the strategies EFL learners employ for vocabulary development includes extensive exposure to reading activities. However, ‘reading’ is a general term including many text types. For this reason, the term ‘reading’ embraces literary texts particularly short stories. The present study explores whether cultural familiarity influences vocabulary learning through reading short stories and nativizing the story can compensate for the lack of such familiarity.

The reason for selecting short stories within the scope of the present study is that literary texts make relatively more sense when regarded within the context of cultural infrastructure. That is, regarding cultural background, it is the short stories which can have various reflections on people from different cultures. Also, literature presents authentic examples of language and life as such is a reflection of the feelings, emotions and thoughts. Through literature, these three abstract notions become concrete being transcribed into the texts, called literary texts.

However, it is still an ongoing argument whether it is beneficial to use literature in EFL teaching or not. While Hall (2005) points out that supposing that it is widely understood literature is something that gives any individual a chance to find something motivating and interesting in, McKay (1982) argues that it could be hard to introduce vocabulary and grammar structures to language learners because of the fact that literary texts are structurally complex and unique. Also, considering some countries, like Turkey, where language teaching at government schools is based on inflexible syllabus because of strictly centralized syllabuses and many entrance exams, it looks hard to carry out this crucial task. Regarding her study, Gilroy (1995) states that none of the teachers she interviewed seemed to use literature on a regular basis, as an integral part of the syllabus. Although many said they would like to, syllabus restrictions made this difficult. It arises from the fact that even teachers may ignore the communicative aim of a language teaching-learning process by focusing on multiple choice testing strategies rather than communication development. Accordingly, a crucial question arises here in many teachers' minds: Why should a language teacher use literary texts with classes, especially if there is no specific examination requirement to do so and little extra time available? (Collie & Slatter, 1987). Considering their motivation for training students for specific entrance exams, EFL teachers themselves may not be sure about the necessity of literature integration into language teaching.

The present study focuses on the cultural familiarity of literary short stories. Yet, the issue of cultural familiarity factor may influence reading literary texts in both senses:

a) Curiosity to the unfamiliar could be a factor provoking for a higher reading motivation for some learners. Even while pointing familiar texts, Gambrell (1996) argues that curiosity is accepted as a provoking factor for reading motivation which may lead a more enthusiastic point of view through the newly learned vocabularies.

b) On the other hand, even though learners could arouse curiosity towards the unknown, the easiness of learning in the light of the already known makes familiarity one step ahead from unfamiliar ones.

## **2. Research Questions**

The aim of the present study is to have an insight into the major (1), and minor (2, 3) research questions below:

1. Is there any difference between learning vocabulary through reading culturally familiar and unfamiliar literary short stories for EFL learners?
  - 1.1. Which types of the texts, culturally familiar or unfamiliar literary short stories, make more contributions to EFL learners' vocabulary learning process?
  - 1.2. To what extent does culturally familiar/unfamiliar literary short story differ from the other in terms of contributing to EFL learners' vocabulary learning?

## **3. Literature Review**

There has been a long time since background knowledge was argued to be an important aspect influencing reading. That is because reading is a process in which readers use their previous background knowledge when interacting with new texts (Pujol & Corrius, 2013). From this point of view, as Ausubell (1968) points out, acquiring new knowledge could be more profitable with the aid of the previous. Considering two materials all other aspects of which is equal except from familiarity, more familiar one is more accessible by the reader (Chihara et al., 1989). This refers to the content schema theory which puts forward the idea that a reader's familiarity with the subject matter of a text has a direct influence on the reader's attitude towards

and comprehension of a reading text (Carrel, 1983). Being regarded within the concept of the term ‘background knowledge’ for familiarity, cultural familiarity seems to play an important role in reading attitudes. There are many studies arguing the influence of cultural backgrounds and topic knowledge on the way a text is approached and comprehended (Spyridakis & Wenger, 1991). In this direction, Johnson (1981) and Floyd and Carrel (1987) argue that cultural familiarity has much more influence on reading comprehension even more than the structure of sentences. Submitting more evidence for these studies, a study carried out by Steffensen et al. (1978) showed that those who are asked to read two passages of equal difficulty in terms of textual schemata but different in terms of contextual schemata performed the tasks in different times. In that study, subjects from the United States and India were asked to read letters about American and Indian weddings. Reading culturally familiar letters, which is Indian wedding for Indians and American wedding for American, took relatively less time. Besides the time they required for finishing the reading tasks, the participants performed much better at reading culturally familiar texts. In another study focusing on this issue from a religious point of view, Lipson (1983) analyzed the influence of religious contexts on reading. The research found that subjects who are asked to read materials including religious contents relevant to their religious showed better performance in terms of reading comprehension in comparison with those who are asked to read materials including religious materials which are not relevant to their religious backgrounds. Also, Gatbonton and Tucker (1971), Droop and Verhoeven (1998), Pei-Shi (2012), Cristina and Martinez (2013), Ketchum (2006), Jousef (2014), Jalilehvand and Samuel (also drawing attention to gender differences) (2014), Jafari and Aghaei (2013), Brantmeier (2003), Erten and Razi (2009), Gürkan (2012), Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), Demir (2012) put emphasis on the significance of cultural familiarity and background knowledge for a better reading comprehension and learning process. Also, Yuet and Chan (2003), and Alptekin (2006) supports this view adding that the proficiency levels of the readers should also be taken into consideration as the influence of familiarity could be more significant for relatively less proficient readers. The issue of proficiency level is also taken into consideration in the present study participants of which are pre-intermediate students.

In addition to reading comprehension, even expectations and attitudes of the readers towards a text in a foreign language are highly influenced by the cultural background of the readers and play an important role in their motivation for reading the text they are expected to read. Among the earliest studies referring to this issue, Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) point out that the more an EFL learner is close or feels close to the culture of the target language, the easier the success comes in learning that language because of the motivation factor. Within this scope, a study carried out by McClure et al. (1983) showed that the socio-cultural differences of the stories the subjects were asked to read played an important role in the expectations of the subject about the texts. Similarly, a study carried out by Sasaki (2000) showed that even changing some culturally unfamiliar items with familiar ones had an influence on the subjects’ perceptions on the texts they read. Being highly close to the present study with regard to having a vocabulary learning scope, Sasaki used the close text technique by partly replicating Chihara et al.’s (1989) experiment. In her study, she asked the students to complete culturally familiar or unfamiliar cloze tests. She states that “those who read the culturally familiar cloze text tried to solve more items and generally understood the text better”. In her statement, the word “try” refers to the fact that they attempted to get closer to the text. This shows the influence of cultural familiarity in the attitudes of the readers towards the texts and the words comprising it. Supporting this view, Rashidi and Soureshjani (2011) point out that their study on Persian learners of English as a foreign language showed that apart from its contribution to improving the motivation level of language learners, cultural familiarity plays a great role in also comprehension and recalling performance. Similarly, Gürkan (2012) points out that it is significant to take cultural familiarity into account as it could have a positive impact on the

readers' motivation to read which makes significant contribution to better reading performances. Upon her study she carried out on high-intermediate students with two reading passages in two different topics, Pulido (2004) found that the participant learners who studied on familiar scenarios performed much better in terms of vocabulary gain when compared to those with unfamiliar ones.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1. Participants**

The participants of the study are 48 (28 female, 20 male) Pre-Intermediate Turkish prep class students and an instructor. All the students study at the School of Foreign Languages, Black Sea Technical University where the instructor has been working for 11 years, as well. The participant instructor of the study was a one of the most experienced instructors at the school. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 21. Before the application week, the researcher visited the students in their classes with the participant instructor twice for preparing a friendly infrastructure for the application.

The proficiency levels of all the participants were nearly same. They all failed at the prep class exemption exam in the beginning of the first semester and they were taking the same courses. Yet, in order to decrease the risk to be caused by individual differences, students were exposed to two different tests to be determined as participants. The participant selection tests included one reading comprehension test and one vocabulary test.

#### **a) Reading comprehension test:**

The reading comprehension test to determine the general reading comprehension levels of the students to be selected as participants included one pre-intermediate reading passage and ten questions related to it. It is beneficial to state the fact that the passage used for this purpose included a story about an athlete's daily routine without any cultural items. This type of a passage was preferred by the researcher to prevent any kind of familiarity interference to the comprehension test scores. Including a passage with 413 words and ten questions with three options, the reading comprehension test is delivered to the students to be completed in 25 minutes with no extra time.

#### **b) Vocabulary pre-test:**

Upon finishing the reading comprehension test, following just one minute of break to rest, the students are exposed to one more test including the 8 experimental words to be used in the short stories during application and post-tested in the end. Each word was offered to the students with four choices. They were asked to select the most appropriate Turkish meanings of the 8 words in four minutes. Instead of synonym matching, Turkish meaning selecting type is preferred to avoid the synonym knowledge being variable.

Upon finishing the pre-testing process, only the students who got between 60 and 80 from the comprehension test, and answered maximum 2 of the 8 vocabulary questions correctly were selected as participants. Ultimately, there were 48 students within these ranges. Finally, both control and experimental groups included 24 (14 female, 10 male) students.

### **4.2. Data Collection Process**

As soon as the participants were selected and divided into two equal groups, data collection process started for the purpose of avoiding external factors. Also, the students were not

informed about the fact that they were going to be tested on the same words again for avoiding unnatural attitudes such as discussing with friends, looking up in dictionaries etc.

The story reading process included 2 main steps:

- 1- The researcher started doing the reading activity in their natural classroom environment (The instructor told the students Turkish meaning of the words including the experimental words during reading).
- 2- When reading time finished, the instructor delivered the vocabulary post-test including the words which were pre-tested during participant selection and experienced in the reading activity. The students were asked to select the Turkish meanings of the 8 experiment words again in four minutes. In order to decrease visual memorization interference, the order of the questions and options were changed in the post-test.

With the aim of decreasing the anxiety levels of them, the students were not expected to write their names on the papers. Instead, each reading comprehension, vocabulary pre-test and vocabulary post-test paper was instead labeled with a number by the researcher in advance. Each student was given the paper with the same number during the three measurement tests in order to observe individual developments.

When data collection process was completed, the scores of each group were calculated and analyzed to see whether there was a difference between the control and experimental group in terms of the level they recall the words they had learned within the culturally familiar and unfamiliar literary short stories.

#### 4.3. Reading Text

For the study, an original and a nativized (by the researcher) versions of the same simplified literary short story, ‘John’s Christmas’ by Louise Delahay from Pearson Education were applied to the groups. Without making any change in the main clauses, the researcher did some changes in the vocabularies of the stories in parallel with the purpose of the study. While the control group studied the original version, the experimental group studied the nativized version of the same story. Instead of selecting different stories of the same levels with different cultural context, nativizing the same story is preferred to be more suitable for the purpose of the study as it was more equal for both groups to study on the same text with one adapted in parallel with the purpose of the study. In this way, the risk of inequality of the stories in terms of structural patterns, lexical variety and even number of the words of comprising each story was decreased.

##### 4.3.1. Nativization

Nativization is a process including the adaptation of the ‘sociological, semantic, and pragmatic’ aspects of the original story to the learner’s own culture without making any significant change in the ‘linguistic and rhetorical’ content of it (Alptekin, 2006). For this purpose, cultural adaptation is applied to the story ‘John’s Christmas Story’ in two ways: (a) substituting unfamiliar words with familiar ones, and (b) adaptation of unfamiliar situations into home culture without significant linguistic alternation.

##### John’s<sup>(1)</sup> Christmas<sup>(2)</sup> Story

John **launches out** Christmas Preparations for Christmas early. We **purchase** the Christmas tree<sup>(3)</sup> a week or two before and then put the decorations on it<sup>(3)</sup> one evening after school. Near to Christmas, we are **fond of** lighting candles in the evenings<sup>(5)</sup> too, because it

looks more festive. The children put their stocking(6) at the end of their beds, on Christmas Eve and we put some small toys or food into them(7). On Christmas Day, we usually get woken up quite early by the kids, who are always **avid** to open Christmas presents(8). We **assemble** around the Christmas tree and open them in the morning(9). We like to go to church(10) too. We can **hark** the bells(12) from our house and it's only a short walk. The children like **chanting** carol. Then, it's back home for a glass of sherry(13) before Christmas dinner(14). We eat that and then watch Queen's Speech on TV(15), like most people in the UK(16). If it has snowed, we'll be outside later playing snowballs or making a snowman(17) and then it's just a relaxing(18) family day watching TV(19) and **perhaps** playing a few games. On Christmas Days, we usually eat too much and have to go to bed quite early

#### Ahmet's(1) Ramadan Bairam(2) Story

Ahmet **launches out** Ramadan Bairam Preparations for the Bairam early. We **purchase** him new Bairam clothes(3) a week or two before and then he tries them on(4) one evening after school. Near to Bairam, we are **fond of** cleaning our houses for days(5) too, because it looks more festive. The children put penny banks(6) next to their beds, on Bairam Eve and we prepare some pocket money for giving to children(7). On Bairam Day, we usually get woken up quite early by the kids, who are always **avid** to wear their Bairam clothes(8). Children **assemble** around their parents and show them their clothes on them in the morning(9). We like to go to mosque(10) too. We can **hark** the azan(11) from our house and it's only a short walk. The children like **chanting** carol. Then, it's back home for Bairam greetings(13) before the Bairam breakfast(14). We eat that and then visit our relatives(15), like most people in Turkey(16). If children have received enough pocket money, they'll go to grocery stores later getting chocolates or toys(17) and then it's again just a busy(18) large family day meeting relatives(19) and **perhaps** playing a few games. On Bairam Days, we usually eat too much and have to go to bed quite early.

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

For analyzing the data obtained by the participants, independent samples *t*-test was used to evaluate whether there was any difference between the vocabulary learning levels between the control and experimental groups to see whether or how the familiarity of the linguistically equal literary short stories influenced the students' vocabulary learning process.

Upon checking the students' answers, their post-test scores were compared with those of the pre-tests. When the score change in each student was recorded, the results were computed into SPSS and differences between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups were analyzed.

### 5. Results and Discussion

In addition to the view that cultural familiarity facilitates reading comprehension as well as promoting language learners' attitudes positively towards a text, the results of the present study show that cultural familiarity also helps vocabulary learning.

As also shown in the Table 1, having studied with the familiar text, the mean score of the experimental group ( $M=7,5833$ ,  $SD = ,97431$ ) was significantly higher than the score of the control group having studied with the unfamiliar text ( $M=5,4167$ ,  $SD = 2,06243$ ),  $t(23) = 5.108$ ,  $p = .000$ .

Table 1 – The *t*-test mean differences on the vocabulary learning scores

Group	n	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
Experimental	24	7,5833	,97431	5.108	23	.000
Control	24	5,4167	2,06243			

Analyzing the results in the light of the research questions, the major question “Is there any difference between learning vocabulary through reading culturally familiar and unfamiliar literary short stories for EFL learners?” seems to be answered with “yes” as there is a significant difference between them. When it comes to the minor questions, the answer to the question “Which types of the texts, culturally familiar or unfamiliar literary short stories, make more contributions to EFL learners’ vocabulary learning process?” is answered with the higher scores of the experimental group showing the fact that the literary short story of the present study made ‘more contributions to the s’ vocabulary learning process’. Also, the answer to the third question “To what extent does culturally familiar/unfamiliar literary short story differ from the other in terms of contributing to EFL learners’ vocabulary learning?” could be understood from the difference between the mean scores 6.0833(experimental) and 4.0833(control).

Considering all the findings shown on Table 1 and defined above, it can be said that cultural familiarity to the text studied on makes significant contribution to learning new words. This claim arises from the fact that the tested words in both texts are surrounded with cultural items. To give some examples, the word ‘purchase’ comes just before ‘Christmas tree’ in unfamiliar texts while it is again just before ‘Bairam clothes’ in the familiar one. Moreover, in the subject mornings, while children in the home culture ‘assemble around their parents to show them Bairam clothes’, those in unfamiliar text ‘assemble around the Christmas tree and...’. Lastly, while people in home culture are ‘fond of cleaning their houses for days’ before Bairams, those of unfamiliar text are ‘fond of lighting candles in the evenings’. The experiment words are arranged to be close to the cultural items by the researcher to get clearer results. That is because the students tend to find something from themselves in the new words as the structures before or after them are close to their cultural or traditional possessions.

## **7. Conclusions and Implications**

The results of the present study support the view that cultural familiarity is commonly accepted to have some degree of influence in developing positive attitudes towards reading texts, which complies with the initial premise of this study. Taking the studies, Carrel (1983), Floyd and Carrel (1987), Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), Sasaki (2000) and many more carried out in the light of schema theory into account, this study has provided significant support for the positive influence of cultural familiarity in short stories for vocabulary development in EFL settings. In fact, the language learners, especially those relatively at low proficiency levels, trying to learn new words in familiar cultural contexts obtain more successful results when compared with those doing the same exercise within unfamiliar contexts. It is revealed that both groups participated in the present study were at similar levels and were selected with reading comprehension and lexical tests from already almost homogeneous group. Even though their pre-test lexical scores were similar, the post-test scores yielded a significant difference between the two groups.

As regards the limitations of the study, the limited number of the participants could be a handicap for the generalizability of the study. Yet, this limitation does not recede significant suggestions for further research. Moreover, one limitation that would be worth emphasizing is

the limited time span of the treatment. Further studies in which the texts of different domains are investigated over a long period of time might be enriching. Another limitation arises from the selection of the culturally familiar texts because of cultural variations of Turkey. Turkey presents a considerable regional diversity, and it might be difficult to figure out the reference culture. Considering the participants from various cities and cultural backgrounds, it could be hard to determine the common cultural fabric of the contexts. Furthermore, possible unobserved interactions of the participants may cause a change in their vocabulary knowledge during the testing process. For all these limitations and expected handicaps, the present study should be replicated and developed with other studies within this concern.

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