

The Impact of Gender-Specific Cultural Knowledge and English Proficiency on the Reading Comprehension of Saudi EFL Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the impact of gender-specific background knowledge and language proficiency on reading comprehension among Saudi EFL undergraduate students at Majmaah University. The primary method of data collection was quantitative, involving two culturally distinct texts – one familiar and one unfamiliar to the participants. The research design included 120 second-year undergraduate students (60 males and 60 females) majoring in English at Majmaah University. The study employed a quantitative approach, with statistical analyses conducted utilizing regression models to explore the relationships between gender, language proficiency, and reading comprehension scores. The findings revealed several gender-related factors influencing reading comprehension, including social and cultural

influences that may affect students' understanding of texts. These findings suggest that teachers can modify curricula and instructional methods to account for these factors, while teacher training programs should incorporate elements of language development and cultural competency. Furthermore, promoting inclusivity in education can be achieved by revising policies and implementing tailored student support programs. Future research is required to investigate additional relevant factors and conduct cross-cultural comparisons. In particular, further studies should investigate the effects of multicultural reading materials currently used in EFL instruction on undergraduate students' reading comprehension and language proficiency.

Keywords: EFL learners, gender-specific background knowledge, English language proficiency, reading comprehension, schema theory

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension plays a crucial role in education as it underpins both effective communication and academic success (Taşpınar & Cubukcu, 2020). According to Acbasli, Sahin, and Yaykiran (2016), it enhances logical reasoning, which in turn improves performance in subjects like mathematics and science. Gender, however, significantly influences comprehension, thereby affecting academic achievement and career choices (Koban Koç, 2016; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Kannianen et al., 2019). Students' diverse experiences, shaped by social and cultural factors, also contribute to variations in comprehension. Some studies (Oda & AbdulKhadim, 2018) suggest that male students outperform female students in reading comprehension, while others (Koban Koç, 2016) report that female students generally achieve higher scores.

Saudi Arabia is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and strong moral values. Its unique cultural context is shaped by traditional customs and practices, often defined by gender-specific roles and expectations. This cultural background can greatly influence how male and female EFL learners approach reading comprehension in English language instruction (Ghorbandordinejad, F., & Bayat, Z. 2014). Additionally, English

language proficiency is a pivotal factor in reading comprehension (Ismail, S. A. M. M., Karim, A., & Mohamed, A. R., 2018), as the ability to read and understand English texts is essential for academic success, career advancement, and effective communication.

Saudi students often struggle with reading English texts for several reasons. First, many Saudi EFL learners lack sufficient vocabulary knowledge or effective learning strategies (Nor & Rashid, 2018). These challenges in reading comprehension often stem from difficulties encountered early in their education, leading to repeated failures (Hart & Risley, 2003). Vocabulary knowledge and prior experience are essential for fully understanding reading materials (Koda, 2007). Additionally, Shiotsu and Weir (2007) assert that a learner's level of syntactic knowledge significantly influences their reading comprehension, and Koda (2005) highlights that both background knowledge and syntactic competence can facilitate learning.

Research consistently portrays Saudi EFL learners as having generally low academic achievement (Al-Khairiy, 2013a; Alrabai, 2014a; Alrahaili, 2013; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Further studies suggest that their English proficiency remains unsatisfactory and falls below expected standards (Alhawsawi, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009; Khan, 2011; Rajab, 2013). According to the third edition of *The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test* (2009), Saudi Arabia holds the lowest average TOEFL scores globally, with an average of 57 out of 120. Then, Saudi EFL learners are raised in a context where English is rarely spoken outside the classroom. As a result, they struggle to interpret and understand foreign English textbooks (Meier, 2003), primarily due to a lack of cultural background knowledge. Readers possessing the necessary cultural schemata are more likely to interpret meaning accurately (Yousef et al., 2014). Hamdan Alghamdi (2018) further argues that the comprehension and interpretation of English textbooks are significantly influenced by the cultural schema that learners bring into the classroom.

This study aims to address a gap in the literature by exploring the relationship between gender-specific cultural

knowledge, language proficiency, and reading comprehension (Kanniainen et al., 2019). It examines how gender norms and cultural expectations influence the interpretation of texts in different cultural contexts. While providing students with greater linguistic and background knowledge can enhance learning, the impact of language ability and prior knowledge varies depending on the text, the reader, and the context (Foltz, 2012). Schema theory supports EFL students by helping them connect texts to their cultural experiences, thereby improving comprehension (ALYousef, 2020).

Although there is an extensive body of literature on race and language, this area remains largely under-researched within the Saudi EFL context, particularly at Majmaah University, where to our knowledge, no studies have been conducted. There is a need to investigate how gender-based cultural schemata affect the reading comprehension of texts from different cultural backgrounds. This research aims to help learners understand how these gender-based schemata impact their reading performance. Over the last two decades, the study of gender-specific background knowledge has proven invaluable in expanding researchers' and practitioners' understanding of how cultural backgrounds shape the analysis and interpretation of culturally diverse texts. Moreover, these findings have been instrumental in developing student's critical thinking, enabling them to connect their sociocultural experiences and ideologies with texts to uncover hidden meanings (Koç, 2016).

In light of this significant gap, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' gender-specific cultural background knowledge of two unfamiliar cultural texts influence their reading comprehension?
2. To what extent does Saudi undergraduate EFL learners' English language proficiency in two unfamiliar cultural texts affect their reading comprehension?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Loseke's (2007), gender operates as an institutionalized social framework that shapes social and cultural narratives. In response to these narratives, individuals develop cognitive schemas, as suggested by Bem (1983). Learners with similar cultural background will interpret and respond to texts differently based on their unique schemas. These schemas are crucial for textual analysis and understanding power-knowledge relationships, as they reflect social and cultural roles, including aspects such as caregiving, social responsibilities, and values (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000; Williams et al., 2013).

According to Nishida et al. (2005), gender experiences are retained in long-term memory, facilitating the recall and development of structured schemas. However, a lack of awareness of cultural schemas can hinder understanding (Pidduck et al., 2020). Each gender embodies distinct social, religious, and educational characteristics when analyzing literary texts (Fairclough, 2003). Communication gaps often emerge in the Saudi EFL context, where female students may struggle to connect with their male peers due to traditional and religious constraints (Stichter & Parpart, 2019). Ånstrand (2006) and Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) note that these sociocultural limitations can also restrict career opportunities, contributing to the different interpretations of texts by genders (Brantmeier, 2001). Gender is a variable with heterogeneous characteristics that can influence textual analysis (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). Numerous studies have identified gender differences in reading comprehension of the target language (Brantmeier, 2003; Doughty & Long, 2008). However, poor reading performance can often be attributed to a lack of cultural knowledge and social disparities associated with gender, which can have long-term effects (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Previous studies have reported significant gender differences in reading comprehension among Saudi students, particularly regarding the influence of cultural background knowledge (Callender, 2008; Chang, 2007; Tabatabaei & Shaker, 2013). (Al-Shumaimeri, 2005). Wei (2009) also found correlations in China

between gender disparities, reading strategies, and reading comprehension these social and cultural dichotomies profoundly affect readers' levels of understanding due to their multifaceted experiences, linguistic cognitive repertoires, and backgrounds (Marková & Marková, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to investigate the impact of gender-specific background knowledge, as well as the familiarity and unfamiliarity of culturally diverse texts, on the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL undergraduates.

Cultural Schema Theory

According to schema theory, background knowledge is essential for language comprehension, as texts prompt readers to create or deduce meaning based on their existing knowledge. The interaction between the text and the reader's background knowledge facilitates understanding. Comprehension involves the reader's ability to connect the text to their personal experiences and worldview, extending beyond mere language proficiency (Reynolds et al., 1984).

Schema theory posits that a reader's understanding of a text is influenced more by their prior knowledge and experiences than by the text itself (Ghandehari, 2013). Readers' interpretations, shaped by their social, cultural, and personal contexts, imbue texts with meaning. Socio-cultural theory further suggests that individuals' perceptions, thoughts, and interactions are reflected in the social processes and practices that shape literacy (Bender-Slack, 2009). According to Stubbs (1996) and Stutz et al. (2016), readers from diverse cultural backgrounds may interpret texts differently due to their unique schemas. Thus, awareness of one's cultural background significantly influences reading comprehension, thereby validating schema theory.

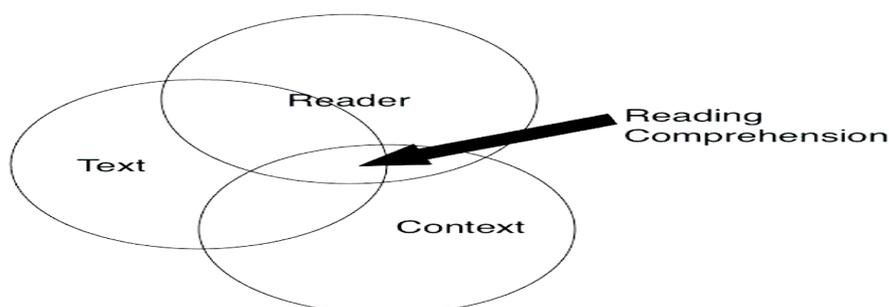


Figure 1. Interaction of Reader, Text, and Context in Reading Comprehension

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship among the text, reader, and context. These three elements can enhance students' understanding of the text by enabling them to connect their sociocultural experiences to it.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present quantitative study employed an experimental design to examine the impact of gender-specific cultural schemata on reading comprehension of EFL learners.

Participants

This study employed convenience sampling to select 120 respondents (60 males and 60 females) between the ages 19 to 21. Etikan et al. (2016) describe convenience sampling as a method that facilitate easy access to participants and offers balanced presentation between groups. The use of this sampling method is well-supported in the literature, with several researchers adopting is based on the cohort characteristics of the participants (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). The participants in this study were second-year English majors enrolled in a BA program, all of whom were Saudi EFL learners with Arabic as their first language. They shared a homogeneous social and cultural background, characterized by limited exposure to English, which underscored the importance of independent reading for their language acquisition. As a cohort, they offered meaningful insights into the

development of reading skills in relation to English textbooks. With one year of English language instruction, they had established a solid foundation in reading comprehension, a crucial skill for both academic achievement and professional growth.

Materials

The culturally descriptive texts "FIFA" and "HENNA," were selected for their relevance to gender-specific narratives familiar to Saudi EFL learners, as well as their appropriateness in terms of topic familiarity, length, and difficulty. These texts aligned with the participants' existing cultural knowledge: "Henna" reflects feminine cultural practices, while "FIFA" represents masculine sports culture, both of which hold significant importance in Saudi society. Within the Saudi context, these texts address culturally relevant themes, making them suitable for investigating the influence of gender-specific schemata on reading comprehension.

The English language proficiency test used in this study evaluated its impact on the reading comprehension of EFL undergraduates using the text "Dream." The test comprised 40 multiple-choice questions divided into three sections—vocabulary, writing, and grammar. Each correct answers were awarded one mark. To ensure validity, the test was reviewed by two experts from the College of Education for layout, subject relevance, and language appropriateness. The reliability of the reading comprehension tests was determined using the KR-21 method, yielding high-reliability scores of 0.93 for the "FIFA" text and 0.88 for the "Henna" text. These scores indicate strong internal consistency, confirming the tests' reliability and effectiveness in measuring reading comprehension. Furthermore, the Flesch Kincaid Reading Ease scores for "FIFA" and "HENNA" were 42.6 and 48.6, respectively, indicating a college-level reading difficulty. To further ensure validity, the "FIFA" text contained 730 words and 1,173 syllables, while the respondents by incorporating both familiar and novel vocabulary, thus effectively assessing their reading skills.

Procedure

This survey-based study involved 120 participants (60 women and 60 men). Prior to the commencement of the study, each

group received an overview of the research and was given sufficient time to complete the assigned reading passages. To maintain focus and comfort, juice and snacks were provided, followed by a 20-minute break after participants answered the comprehension questions. The tests were administered by the researcher and a female assistant to minimize scheduling conflicts. Participants first read culturally familiar texts before proceeding to unfamiliar ones, carefully reading each passage and marking the correct answers on the comprehension tests after completing each reading.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0. Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the effects of gender and language proficiency on reading comprehension. In this analysis, reading comprehension served as the dependent variable, while gender and language proficiency were the independent variables. The table below provides a summary of the key findings.

Table 1. The independent sample t-test results for gender-based mean differences in background knowledge the texts: “FIFA” and “HENNA”

Text	Groups	Variable	Mean	SD	T	df	P
HENNA	Male	Cultural	44.13	11.40	12.88	118	.000
	Female	Knowledge	73.05	13.12			
FIFA	Male	Cultural	81.12	10.86	16.34	118	.000
	Female	Knowledge	44.46	13.50			

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of the background knowledge of two distinct groups of respondents, consisting of both male and female participants. For male respondents, the mean score for the unfamiliar text 'HENNA' was $M = 44.13$, with a standard deviation (SD) of 11.40. In contrast, for the familiar text 'FIFA,' male respondents achieved a mean score of $M = 81.12$, with a standard deviation of 10.86.

For female respondents, the mean score for the unfamiliar text 'FIFA' was $M = 44.46$, with a standard deviation of 13.50. In contrast, for the familiar text 'HENNA,' female respondents

displayed a mean score of $M = 73.05$, with a standard deviation of 13.12.

Based on the data presented in the tables, we can summarize the conclusions of our hypotheses as outlined in the following table.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: Means and Standard Deviations of Gender-Specific Cultural Background Knowledge for "FIFA" and "HENNA"

Cultural Background Knowledge Instrument	Gender	N	Mean	SD
FIFA: 40m	Male	60	81.02	10.87
	Female	60	49.18	16.62
HENNA: 40m	Male	60	44.13	11.41
	Female	60	66.42	18.51

Table 2 reveals that, for the cultural background knowledge text, male participants exhibited significantly higher scores on the "FIFA" text ($M = 81.02$, $SD = 10.87$) compared to female participants ($M = 49.18$, $SD = 16.62$). In contrast, female participants scored higher on the "HENNA" text ($M = 66.42$, $SD = 18.51$) than their male counterparts ($M = 44.13$, $SD = 11.41$).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on reading comprehension of male and female EFL respondents

	Groups	N	Mean (%)	SD
Reading comprehension instrument (HENNA & FIFA)	All	120	63.13	11.61
	Male	60	68.39	10.60
	Female	60	57.85	10.14

Statistics on reading comprehension for both male and female EFL respondents are presented in Table 3. The overall mean score for all participants was 63.13% ($SD = 11.61$). The mean score for male participants was 68.39% ($SD = 10.60$), while the mean score for female respondents was 57.85% ($SD = 10.14$).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of reading comprehension and English language proficiency for “FIFA” and “HENNA”

Reading comprehension instrument	English Proficiency Level	N	Mean	SD
HENNA (100m)	High/Male	30	54.21	17.12
	High/Female	30	82.00	4.87
	Low/Male	30	52.51	16.22
	Low/Female	30	69.73	12.59
FIFA (100m)	High/Male	30	88.11	8.01
	High/Female	30	43.75	20.06
	Low/Male	30	81.71	12.50
	Low/Female	30	44.44	11.98

Table 4 illustrates the disparities in reading comprehension based on gender. In the case of "HENNA," male participants with high proficiency achieved a mean score of $M = 54.21$ ($SD = 17.12$), while female participants with high proficiency scored $M = 82.00$ ($SD = 4.87$). Males with low proficiency scored $M = 52.51$ ($SD = 16.22$), in contrast to females with low proficiency, who obtained a mean score of $M = 69.73$ ($SD = 12.59$). For the text "FIFA," males with high proficiency attained a mean score of $M = 88.11$ ($SD = 8.01$), whereas females with high proficiency scored significantly lower, at $M = 43.75$ ($SD = 20.06$). Males with low proficiency achieved a mean score of $M = 81.71$ ($SD = 12.50$), while females with low proficiency scored $M = 44.44$ ($SD = 11.98$). These findings indicate significant performance disparities based on gender.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This study employed both familiar texts ("FIFA") and unfamiliar texts ("HENNA") to examine the influence of gender, linguistic ability, and cultural background on reading comprehension. High-competence readers demonstrated greater success in comprehending the familiar material, underscoring the significance of prior cultural knowledge. In contrast, the performance of low-competence readers was similar across both texts, suggesting that cultural knowledge or limited proficiency had a diminished impact on their reading comprehension. The findings

indicate that the relationship between English proficiency and cultural background plays a crucial role in reading comprehension. Familiar literature that aligns with students' cultural backgrounds enhances cultural awareness, while fluency in English is beneficial, even when engaging with unfamiliar cultures. However, it is important to note that even fluent English speakers may struggle to grasp complex topics if they lack familiarity with the relevant cultural contexts.

In contrast to previous research, which often explored these factors separately, this study uniquely integrates English language proficiency and gender-specific cultural backgrounds knowledge to examine their combined influence on reading comprehension. By focusing on a previously understudied cohort - Saudi EFL undergraduates - and incorporating literature from other cultures, the study broadens the scope of comprehension assessment. This comprehensive approach provides a thorough analysis of how linguistic abilities and cultural familiarity with Western texts shape reading comprehension, offering valuable insights into the interplay between language proficiency and cultural awareness.

The study underscores the importance of employing foreign cultural texts to measure reading comprehension and reveal distinct differences in how male and female students apply their cultural background knowledge, leading to varied comprehension outcomes. The findings emphasize the need for culturally relevant and gender-sensitive educational strategies, showing that students with strong gender-specific cultural knowledge and higher language proficiency tend to perform better on reading comprehension tests.

This study aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of cultural schemata in text comprehension (Carrell, 1983; Serafini, 2010). Participants with cultural background knowledge relevant to the content of the texts demonstrated significantly better performance in reading comprehension. This result highlights the importance of culturally relevant knowledge in understanding foreign texts, especially those involving with gender-specific themes.

Gender-specific cultural norms, customs, and roles are prominent in Saudi Arabia, as in many other nations, and these elements could influence how individuals read and comprehend texts. For instance, Saudi male and female students may have differing cultural insights and attitudes that affect their interpretation of texts. Comprehension improves when these cultural insights align with the content of the text. However, challenges can arise when texts contain cultural references that are unfamiliar or incompatible with a student's cultural background. Effective comprehension of such texts requires not only linguistic competence—encompassing syntax, grammar, and vocabulary—but also cultural knowledge.

In this study, participants who encountered texts aligned with their own cultural experiences and background knowledge achieved significantly higher comprehension scores. This suggests that readers rely on their cultural schemas and prior experiences to make sense of foreign texts, consistent with schema theory, which asserts that readers actively construct meaning by connecting new information to existing schema (Rumelhart, 1980). When texts reflect students' gender roles and cultural experiences, comprehension becomes more natural and effective. Students are able to relate to the content, recognize references, and more easily infer the author's intent. Conversely, when texts contain unfamiliar or conflicting cultural references, students may struggle to fully understand the material. The study also highlighted the critical role of English language proficiency in reading comprehension. Participants with higher levels of proficiency consistently outperformed those with lower proficiency, supporting existing research on the link between language proficiency and comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

This study is grounded in schema theory, which emphasizes the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension, particularly when engaging with diverse cultural texts (Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998; Bernhardt, 1991; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Chou, 2011; Nassaji, 2007; Rumelhart, 1977). In the EFL context, cultural background knowledge is particularly important for learners (Lu &

Liu, 2015). Readers interpret texts through cultural, syntactic, and linguistic lenses, which can significantly influence their reading performance. This process also incorporates the reader's own reading culture, as suggested by Mohseni Takaloo and Ahmadi (2017).

The study uniquely examines the intersection of gender-specific cultural background knowledge and English language proficiency in relation to reading comprehension among Saudi EFL undergraduates. It offers valuable insights for developing tailored instructional practices while addressing the specific gender and cultural dynamics of Saudi Arabia. The findings contribute to the global EFL literature and have the potential to influence instructional practices in similar contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of gender-specific cultural background knowledge and English language proficiency on the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that comprehension is improved when learners are familiar with culturally relevant information, particularly when reading texts with gender-specific themes. These results align with schema theory, which emphasizes the role of prior knowledge in text comprehension. The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating culturally appropriate content and advancing language skills to improve comprehension. It suggests that EFL teachers and curriculum designers should prioritize the integration of culturally relevant content and the development of language skills to enhance reading comprehension for Saudi EFL students.

This study has limitations but provides valuable insights into the impact of gender-specific cultural background knowledge and English language competency on reading comprehension among Saudi EFL learners. The generalizability of the findings is constrained by the small and homogeneous sample of 120 from Majmaah University. Future research should explore additional cultural variables beyond gender and utilize larger, more diverse sample sizes. Furthermore, challenges encountered during the data

collection process, such as participant resistance, physical fatigue, and mental exhaustion, also limited the study's scope

The research findings offer relevant implications for EFL education in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the need for educators and curriculum designers to foster more inclusive classroom environments. Saudi EFL undergraduates' reading comprehension can be enhanced by developing resources and curricula that take into account both language proficiency and students' cultural experiences. Teachers can cultivate culturally responsive classrooms by designing lessons that align with students' cultural backgrounds while gradually introducing them to diverse cultural perspectives. This approach promotes inclusivity and enhances students' engagement and comprehension.

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