

The Relevance of Schemata in the Comprehension of Literary Texts in the EFL Context

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to shed light on how schemata (background knowledge) can be of significant relevance in the comprehension of literary texts. It stresses the requirement of the learners' cultural, linguistic and literary competence in reading literary texts. Furthermore, it tries to highlight the importance of familiar schemata. Furthermore, schema theory is an important concept in EFL teaching, and some tasks are often designed to activate the learner's schemata. This paper summarises some of the research into schema theory and its applications to EFL reading. This process explains the readers' combination of their own background knowledge with the information in a text to comprehend that text. Readers carry different schemata and these are also often culture-specific. Finally, it is important to state some of the recommendations, set by scholars, of the use of the schema-theoretic.

Key Words

Schemata, Schema theory, culture, literary competence, linguistic competence.

1. Introduction

It is acknowledged that reading comprehension is very significant in the EFL context. Traditionally, it was regarded as a bottom-up process in which the reader is asked to read the text in order to derive its meaning and the writer's message. In this respect, the learners' comprehension lies on their linguistic, literary and cultural background knowledge in EFL context, in which learners are supposed to face comprehension issues because of their poor grammar and vocabulary knowledge. This claim has been the concern of many scholars in the field such as Bernhardt (1991). As a result, the learner's cultural schemata began to be more and more important in the choice of literary texts to be read. Moreover, Carter and Long (1991) claimed that in order to better understand literary texts, there has to be a cultural knowledge background parameter to be taken into account. As a response to traditional thinking, many scholars have contributed in reading comprehension effectiveness by exploring schema theory. Anderson (1977) defines it as any act of comprehension which calls for

medida y forma rectangular de 85 por 125 metros, clausulada y cerrada. Pues las plazas españolas resultan sin duda más pequeñas y modestas comparadas con las americanas y en sus laterales se situaban los edificios administrativos u oficiales tal como la catedral o iglesia de la ciudad.

Sin embargo la Plaza de Armas de Orán es relativamente proporcional con la superficie global de la ciudad en aquel siglo, tenía la forma de un espacio cerrado irregular, situada cerca del convento de San Francisco y donde se encontraba el Ayuntamiento junto a otras construcciones que tenían soportales en mayoría, cuyas estructuras estuvieran en madera. Junto a la Plaza de Armas que era la principal en la ciudad (figura 1), existían otras plazas grandes y pequeñas que eran encrucijadas de las calles principales que no carecían de vida urbana, según lo que opinan Epalza y Vilar (1988).

Se ha deducido de nuestras lecturas sobre la historia urbanística de Orán, que la Plaza de Armas, llevada por los españoles como plaza central de la ciudad, no es la misma plaza central inicial de la antigua ciudad "islámica"; antes de la llegada de los españoles, puesto que no se ha proyectado allí la Iglesia Principal Nuestra Señora de las Victorias. Cabe mencionar que esta última estuvo en el lugar mismo de la Mezquita Mayor, y sabiendo que en cada medina suele estar la Mezquita Mayor en la plaza central de la ciudad. Mientras la nueva plaza emprendida por los españoles fue transformada en el siglo XVIII, en centro administrativo y social de la ciudad, porque en sus laterales se situaban los edificios administrativos y oficiales, la plaza tuvo una forma pentagonal cuyas cotas tenían medidas diferentes, y con soportales que sostenían fachadas homogéneas con pisos dotados de balcones.

Con nuevos aires renovadores procedentes de Europa y sobre todo de Italia, los Borbones, emprendieron cambios profundos en las ciudades peninsulares proyectando muchas obras que fueron patrocinadas en mayoría por arquitectos italianos¹. En el caso de Orán y tras la reconquista de 1732, se hicieron también muchos cambios en la estructura urbana de la ciudad, entre ellos las reformas de la Plaza de Armas donde se han proyectado nobles edificios con soportales o pórticos como el Ayuntamiento, la Junta de Gobierno, las casas

1-Véase: "Arte de los Borbones" en: arteespana.com/borbones.htm.

3. Types of schema

In general, EFL teaching acknowledges the existence of three main types of schema: content schemata, formal/ textual schemata and cultural schemata. They are closely related to learners' reading comprehension of literary texts. In addition, such types of schemata are based on different background knowledge that learners use in the reading comprehension process.

3.1 Content Schemata

Content schemata refer to the background knowledge of particular text content, or a particular subject of a text such as knowledge about people, the world and culture (Brown, 2001). They include understanding the topic of a text and the cultural- specific elements needed in its interpretation. Such schemata can be divided into two distinct types: background knowledge and subject matter knowledge. The former refers to the knowledge that may be relevant for the content of a particular text, and the second is directly related to the text (Alderson, 2000). Furthermore, content schema is cultural-oriented, and since culture influences many aspects of life, it has certainly a significant influence on all the elements of the learning process (Al- Issa, 2006). Language does not only refer to a simple combination of vocabulary items, syntax, and grammar, but it rather encompasses different levels of the language culture. So, to some extent, content schemata can bridge the gap between language knowledge, and thus help learners comprehend texts by predicting, selecting information and eliminating vagueness.

3.2 Textual/ Formal Schemata

Textual schemata link the organizational forms and rhetorical structures of written texts. They consist of different knowledge types of textual organization, language formation, vocabulary, sentence structure and level of formality. Formal schemata are defined as knowledge of language and linguistic conventions. They shed light on how texts are structured and the identification of key characteristics of a particular genre of writing are (Carell & Eisterhold, 1983). Furthermore, formal schematic representations of a text can be used to understand information in novel texts. In this fact, Carrell (1987: 464) argues: "*texts with familiar rhetorical organization should be easier to read and comprehend than texts with unfamiliar rhetorical organization*". Thus, familiarity with the topic of a particular text facilitates its comprehension.

3.3 Cultural Schemata

The third type of schemata is linguistic one. It is also called *abstract schema* (Oller, 1995) and *story schema* (Mandler, 1984). In this respect, Yule (1996) posits that cultural schemata are developed

within our own life experiences. They refer to the previously acquired knowledge about the culture of a particular acquired language. It is argued that cultural schema is culture- specific extension of content schema since both of them refer to the significant role of the cultural relationship that is required to comprehend the integrated meaning of the author's actual conception. In this respect, cultural schema helps the learner to reformulate the story line by referring to more personally and culturally appropriate scripts (Offer, 1995). Consequently, we can say that in order to interpret a language appropriately, cultural schemata are prerequisite. For example, in order to interpret a text that deals with *Bar mitzvah* appropriately, the reader is supposed to have a prior knowledge about the Jewish culture and traditions in order to understand it.

As a result, different kinds of schemata are recognized as being independent since they produce distinct output under certain experimental conditions, and that they are classified in a logical hierarchical way. Abstract or cultural schemata are more general and powerful than formal ones which are in turn more general and powerful than content ones. According to Peirce's logic, each type of schemata requires a particular inference: *deduction*, *induction*, and *abduction*. Despite the fact of acknowledging that formal schemata are derived from abduction, Offer (1995) argues that the unknown abstract schemata are logically important for the schema theory to be complete.

4. Schemata Role in Teaching Literary Texts

Among the most important features of literature classrooms is the teaching which uses cultural schemata and deductive reasoning in the pedagogical procedures and decisions. More importantly, the various investigations conducted under the inductive thinking, regardless of the deductive reasoning, may produce only superficialities about teaching. Thus, the strength and the function of schemata type indicate the way teachers proceed in class that come from abstraction and deductive reasoning with the authentic used material and the readers' own experiences.

Generally speaking, schemata vary from one learner to another according to his/her mental abstraction. Schemata refer to the various kinds of information such as objects of academic topics, rules, events, routines, ideas and social situations. They represent knowledge rather than definitions and they are not based language, but they rather represent the knowledge which may be used for reading comprehension. In addition, background knowledge is not static but rather fluid; it varies in accordance to the provided input. It can also be modified if it is developed by accommodating or modifying prior schema in relation to the content of the text to be read. It is used in the reading materials and it provides much effective instructions for the

teaching of foreign language reading. According to Urquhart and Weir (1998), schematic knowledge is based on the topic of a particular text, relevant socio-cultural knowledge and formal schemata which are related to the rhetorical structure of the text. Therefore, they refer to the knowledge of how discourse is organized with respect to different genres, different topics or different purposes and linguistic schemata under different types of language.

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that culture may influence the way readers consider content and formal schemata they call for in their comprehension of ideas of a particular literary text. Some of these may not be present in the schemata of foreign readers, such as the term 'Lottery', it may denote different interpretations. For instance, in the Algerian context, the concept of 'cow' activates schemata for obesity or for insulting others especially girls. Whereas, in Europe, it is linked to schema that refers to an animal which produces meat and milk.

Among the different scholars in EFL, Carrell (1983) stresses that the learners' cultural schemata of texts have to be taken into account to prevent difficulties learners may face with EFL reading. In other words, these difficulties which are the result of a lack of familiarity with the culture-specific content the text presumes lead to the selection of authentic literary texts to be read as well as the learners' ability to well understand them. For example, in the case of short story of 'The Lottery' written by Shirley Jackson, it may be not well interpreted by the Algerian students because it talks about a celebration which is not practiced by the Algerians. In addition, it is a social practice which is forbidden by the Islamic principles. Therefore, EFL teachers should be aware of the extent to which readers are familiar with the textual information since familiarity plays an important role in the reading comprehension of literary texts. In this light, the teachers are supposed to minimise the learners' reading difficulties by choosing culturally familiar texts for learners to facilitate their comprehension. According to Carrell (1983), there should be an activation of the relevant schemata in order to reach the learners' better comprehension of the read material.

In EFL context, many studies acknowledge the relevance of the linguistic competence to prior knowledge and reading. Among the different researchers who investigated this issue is Hudson (1982). He highlighted the significance of the pre-reading activities' in the language skills deficiency in reading comprehension. In his exploratory study, some vocabulary items were explained before reading the literary text. According to the result of this investigation, the provided prior knowledge seems to pave the way for comprehension effectiveness. Therefore, the linguistic competence

can be considered only as one aspect of reading comprehension. Furthermore, Doyé (1999) holds that it is insufficient for the learners to be capable of yielding grammatically correct sentences if they are not enough skilful in using these sentences in real communicative contexts.

Moreover, it is acknowledged that there exist different cognitive literary studies and their development. Reading literary texts require the identification of narrative devices such as metaphors, story and parable (Tuner, 1996). In her accounts for socio-cognitive complexity in literature, readers are challenged and tested in their ability to read the minds of others. To begin, texts of literature can be more advantageous than other informational materials in encouraging the acquisition process since they are based on authentic contexts in learning new language. In addition, literary texts allow learners to identify literary themes and new language acquisition. In other words, according to Brumfit and Carter (1986), a literary text refers to an authentic text and authentic language use, to which we can reply directly. Therefore, such an advantage seems to render literature appropriate to language teaching in different circumstances and cultures. Moreover, since literary texts deal with language for native speakers, literature is considered as a teaching model whereby learners become familiar with different structures and agreements (Collie and Slater, 1991).

5. Implications for Activating Learners' Schemata

According to Carrell (1987), EFL teachers are required to reduce their learners' reading difficulties by providing them with familiar relevant cultural contents. In addition, reading materials must activate the learners' relevant schemata which will then lead to an effective comprehension of texts reading. Different scholars proved that EFL reading comprehension may be influenced because readers fail to activate it. Therefore, schemata relevance necessitates three main implications. First of all, the teacher has to take into account the schemata of texts to be read. Second, if a reader does not use his/her background knowledge, a significant part of the reading process does not taking place. Third, teachers must draw their main objective in solving problems, being creative in interpreting strategies in which the learners may exploit whatever knowledge or resources they may have. Therefore, teachers have to orient students how to activate their background knowledge and how to push them to become better readers.

Furthermore, it is important to activate the learners' schemata by instructing extensive reading which has been introduced by many scholars. Yet, despite its positive effects, some researchers and educators have raised the issue of the possibility to include it in the

curriculum. In this light, Grabe (2002) investigate the problems related to extensive reading for the need to encourage teachers about the importance of extensive pleasure reading, and providing classrooms with libraries with reading resources that can incite learners to read.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, many investigations have been driven to stress the importance of schemata in EFL reading comprehension. Such researches highlight the ability to comprehend literary text which does not merely focus on the reader's linguistic competence, but also on the knowledge of the world and the extent to which relevant schemata is activated during this interaction process between the text and the reader. It is also important to shed light on the relevance of schema theory in teaching which is supposed to provide relevant implications for literary reading texts. Moreover, the relevance of the schemata of a particular text to be read determines either the ease or difficulty of comprehending it. In other words, regardless the readers' level of mastery of the target language, they cannot understand literary texts appropriately if they do not know about its content schemata. Therefore, the learner's reading comprehension of literary texts depends on the teacher's activation of textual, content and cultural related schemata through classroom activities and some teaching techniques.

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