

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE OF TEXT
CONTENT AND AFFECTIVE REACTION TOWARDS THE TEXT

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Abstract

Research studies carried out to study the comprehension processes of second language readers have found that background knowledge is an important factor. Research findings have also indicated that attitude, interests, and motivation are important determinants in the comprehension process. Although background knowledge and affective factors have been established as important elements in the comprehension process and are believed to facilitate second language learning, not much attention has been directed at the relationship between these two elements. This study examined the relationship between background knowledge and reader's affective reaction towards text read. In addition, it also evaluated readers' preference for text for use in teaching English. The findings indicated that background knowledge and affective reaction towards text read were positively related. However, there was no positive relationship between background knowledge and enjoyment and between background knowledge and preference for type of text for teaching English.

Keywords: background knowledge, affective reaction, comprehension

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies conducted to examine reading comprehension have found that prior background knowledge is an important contributor in determining comprehension. Research studies have also found linkage between affective factors such as interest and attitude and comprehension. Although background knowledge and affective factors such as motivation, interest, attitudes are believed to be important elements in the comprehension process and facilitate second language learning, not much research has been done to examine the relationship between these factors.

A. Background Knowledge and Comprehension

A number of studies carried out to study the comprehension processes of second language readers (e.g. Aslanain, 1985; Nunan, 1985; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2002; Samuelstuen & Braten, 2005; Steffensen, 198, Thang Siew Meng, 1997) have also found that background knowledge is an important factor. Comprehension improves when students have appropriate background knowledge that they can connect to the text they are reading (Anderson, 1985; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Block & Pressley, 2002; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Webster, 2001). Steffensen (1981) asserts that sometimes, what seems to be an apparent linguistics problem may turn out to be a problem of background knowledge. Nunan (1991) concludes that background knowledge is a more significant factor than grammatical complexity in determining the subjects' comprehension of the textual relationships in question. In a study examining the relative contribution of decoding, topic knowledge, and strategic processing to the comprehension of social science texts, Samuelstuen and Braten (2005) found that students' prior knowledge about the topic contributed most to their comprehension.

Theoretical models such as the schema theory (Anderson, 1994; Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980; Shank & Abelson, 1977) and the construction-integration model (Kintsch, 1988) postulated to account for the reading comprehension process place heavy emphasis on the importance of background knowledge. The schema approach contends that the reader brings to the comprehension process his/her previous knowledge of the subject at hand and knowledge of and expectations about how language works. Comprehension is the process of selecting the schema illustrating input information and variable constraints. Reading comprehension is first of all inputting some amount of information and then searching for the schemata illustrating the information. Comprehension is generated when such schemata are found or some schemata are specified or slots are filled (Rumelhart, 1980). Kintsch (1988) and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) assert readers can move beyond the bottom-up constructed, text internal meaning of the text and construct a situation model that integrates the text meaning with prior knowledge relevant to the text.

B. Affective Factors and Reading

Nunan (1991) says "that reading involves more than utilising linguistic and decoding skills; that interest, motivation and background knowledge will determine, at least in part,

the success that a reader will have with a given text” (p.70). He also believes that reading is a dynamic process which actively involves factors outside the text. Motivation has been shown to be a crucial factor in students’ comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). The more motivated students are to read a particular text, the more they will read (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and the more likely they are to attempt to understand the text’s meaning (Guthrie, 2003). Guthrie, Wigfield, Humenick, Perencevich, Taboda, and Babosa (2006), in a study examining the influence of stimulating tasks on motivation and reading comprehension, found that the main mediator was motivation, which accounted for a high amount of variance in reading comprehension. Ainley, Hillman, & Hidi, (2002) found in their study that the affective response generated by the text title was related to level of persistence with reading the text. topic interest with its associated affect contributed to continued interaction of students with the texts (persistence), and that the level of persistence with a text was significantly correlated with recall.

It is hypothesised that the reader’s background knowledge of a text read is positively related to the reader’s affective reaction towards the text. This study also looks at the relationship between prior knowledge of text content and perception of the suitability of a text as material for teaching English. If a relationship between background knowledge and reader’s affective reaction is found to be in existence, it may have implications for material design.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

Two hundred and eleven respondents were randomly selected from the students who enrolled in the English courses offered by two Malaysian universities. The sample comprised students majoring in engineering and social sciences.

B. Instrument

A self-developed instrument was used (see appendix 1). To avoid the interference of low English language proficiency on the participants’ understanding of the questionnaire, the questions were worded in Bahasa Melayu, the language that the respondents are comfortable with. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts. Part 1 of the questionnaire contained five questions for gauging respondents’ perception of prior knowledge and the text read in general. It had an α of 0.5. The reliability was not high, however, it was acceptable in view of the small number of question used. Part 2 of the questionnaire contained two short passages adapted from the New Straits Times, a Malaysian daily and a questionnaire measuring respondents’ affective reaction towards the two passages. Affective reaction is believed to be manifested through affect, confidence and anxiety, among others (Messick, 1979)

C. Procedure

Firstly, the respondents were asked to answer part A of the questionnaire that aimed to examine respondents’ affective reaction towards passage which discusses content they know well and passage which discusses content new to them in general. Then, they read

the two short passages (about 250 words) and answered part B of the questionnaire which contained 12 questions examining their reaction and perception towards the passages read.

D. Statistical Analysis

The SPSS version 13 was used to compute the frequencies of the responses and the Chi-square was used to determine the significance of the distributions. The readability of the passages was evaluated using Grammatik IV (1990).

III. FINDINGS

The distribution of the respondents based on gender is shown in Table 1. The ratio of male to female students was about 1 to 2. The distribution is reflective of the current composition of student enrolment at institutions of higher learning in Malaysia.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY GENDER

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	76	36%
Female	135	64%

A. Analysis of Part A of the Questionnaire

Part A of the questionnaire consisted of five questions for gauging the respondents' general reaction to passage read (refer to Table 2. Note: The English version of the questions was used to facilitate discussion). Specifically, questions 1, 2, and 3 examined perception of the impact of background knowledge on text read. Question 4 gauged affective reactions towards text and question 5 evaluated the preference for type of language learning material.

The respondents' responses to the five questions are shown in TABLE 2 below.

TABLE 2. THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS IN PART A

	Question	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
1.	<i>There is no difference in understanding a passage discusses content which I know or a</i>	24(11.4%)	102(46.3%)	41(19.4%)	41(19.4%)	3 (1.4%)

	<i>passage which discusses content new to me.</i>					
2.	<i>The content of a passage can make the passage more difficult or easier to understand.</i>		6 (2.8%)	15 (7.1%)	148(70.1%)	42(19.9%)
3.	<i>It is easier to understand a passage which discusses content that I know compare to a passage which discusses content that is new to me.</i>	1 (.5%)	18 (8.5%)	18 (8.5%)	135 (64%)	39(18.5%)
4	<i>It is more enjoyable to read passage which discusses content that I know than to read passage which discusses content that is new to me.</i>	9 (4.3%)	90 (42.7%)	30(14.2%)	59 (28%)	23(10.9%)
5	<i>It is easier for a learner to learn the language skills taught through passage that he has more knowledge of the conten discussed.</i>	2 (.9%)	2 (.9%)	26(12.3%)	133 (63%)	48(22.7%)

More than half of the respondents (questions 1,2, and 3) agreed that their prior knowledge of passage content had impacted on how they perceived the text that was read. With regard to enjoyment (question 4), a manifestation of affection, about 50% of the respondents disagreed that it was more enjoyable to read text that one had more knowledge of. About 86% of the respondents (question 5) agreed that it would be easier for one to learn the language skills taught through the use of text which one had more knowledge. In general the results obtained support the hypothesised assertion that background knowledge of passage read is related to reader's perception and reaction towards the passage.

B. Analysis of Part B of the Questionnaire

Part B of the questionnaire measured the respondents' prior knowledge of text read (Q2), their reaction to text read (Qs 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) and their opinion about the appropriateness of text for language teaching (Qs 9, and 10).

C. Comparison of Reading Passages Used

With the exception of paragraph length, the two passages were rated as almost equivalent by Grammatik IV. The comparison of the two passages used is given in Table 3.

TABLE 3. PASSAGE READABILITY ANALYSIS

	Passage A (Bahasa)	Passage B (Vietnam)
Readability Statistics		
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	8	8
Gunning's Fog Index	11 (Preferred level for most readers)	11 (Preferred level for most readers)
Paragraph Statistics		
Number of paragraphs	11	4
Average length	1.4 sentences	4.0 sentences
Sentence statistics		
Number of sentences	16	16
Average length	14.3 words	13.5 words
Passive voice	3 (18%)*	0
Word Statistics		
Number of words	229	216
Average length	4.71 letters	5.01 letters
Syllables per word	1.52	1.57

Note: *Passive voice - may make writing difficult to read or ambiguous for this writing style

As a whole the two passages were found to be fairly similar in nature. However, the text analysis produced by Grammatik IV also indicated that passage A could be ambiguous to read in term of style (refer to TABLE 3).

D. Analysis of Relationship between Prior Knowledge of Text Content and Reaction Towards Text

The analysis was conducted based on the respondents' prior knowledge of the text used. The respondents' self-professed prior content knowledge of passage was indicated by their responses to question 2 which asked which passage the respondent had more knowledge. The distribution of responses is shown in Table 5 below. Overall the number of respondents who claimed to have more knowledge of passage A was slightly more than those who claimed to have more knowledge of B. However, the difference was not significant.

TABLE 5. OVERALL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BASED ON KNOWLEDGE OF PASSAGE

	Pasaage A	Passage B
Have more knowledge	115	96

Questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 were used to measure the relationship between prior content knowledge and reaction to text read

E. Analysis of the Responses of Respondents Who Had More Knowledge of Passage A

For those who claimed to have more knowledge of Passage A, majority of them had reacted positively to passage A. The differences are significant at the .01 level. The results are shown in TABLE 6.

TABLE 6. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAD MORE KNOWLEDGE OF PASSAGE A

	Question	Passage A	Passage B	χ^2
1	Which passage is easier?	89	26	<.01
3	Which passage can you understand better?	88	27	<.01
4	If there are questions to answer, which passage are you more confident to answer?	80	35	<.01
5	Which passage are you more comfortable with?	90	25	<.01
6	Which passage attract your interest better?	69	48	<.05
7	Which passage do you think is easier to understand?	89	26	<.01
8	Which passage do you feel more confident reading?	78	37	<.01

F. Analysis of the Responses of Respondents Who Had More Knowledge of Passage B

More of the respondents who claimed to have more knowledge of Passage B reacted positively to passage B. With the exception of question 6, the differences of the other questions were significant at the .05 or lower level. The results are tabulated in TABLE 7 below.

TABLE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAD MORE KNOWLEDGE OF PASSAGE B

	Question	Passage A	Passage B	χ^2
1	Which passage is easier?	38	58	<.05
3	Which passage can you understand better?	35	61	<.01
4	If there are questions to answer, which passage are you more confident to answer?	27	69	<.01
5	Which passage are you more comfortable with?	32	62	<.01
6	Which passage attract your interest better?	27	69	<.05
7	Which passage do you think is easier to understand?	41	51	
8	Which passage do you feel more confident reading?	27	69	<.01

The data clearly indicated prior content knowledge of text content is positively related to reaction towards the text.

G. Prior Knowledge of Text Content and Perception of the Suitability of Text for Teaching English

The opinion of the respondents as to which passage was more appropriate for teaching English is show in the tables below. Overall, passage B was perceived to be more appropriate for use in the teaching of English.

TABLE 8. OVERALL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES REGARDING SUITABILITY OF PASSAGE FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

	Passage A	Passage B	χ^2
Appropriateness of passage for English text	30	181	<.01
Which passage can help learn English	55	156	<.01

To examine whether prior knowledge of content is related to perception, the data was analyzed again based on respondents' claimed prior knowledge of content. TABLE 9 shows the choice of respondents who claimed to have knowledge of passage A and TABLE 10 shows the choice of respondents who claimed to have knowledge of passage B.

H. Respondents Who Claimed to Have More Knowledge about Passage A

TABLE 9. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES REGARDING SUITABILITY OF PASSAGE FOR USE IN ENGLISH TEXT

	Passage A	Passage B	χ^2
Appropriateness of passage for English text	23	92	<.01

Which passage can help learn English	32	83	<.01
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I. Respondents Who Claimed to Have More Knowledge about Passage B

TABLE 10. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES REGARDING SUITABILITY OF PASSAGE FOR USE IN ENGLISH TEXT

	Passage A	Passage B	χ^2
Appropriateness of passage for English text	7	89	<.01
Which passage can help in learning English	23	73	<.01

The results indicated that passage B was preferred by majority of the respondents irrespective of their prior knowledge about the content of the passages. This observation was different from that obtained in part A (question 5, refer to TABLE 2) which most respondents said that it would be easier to learn language skills through a passage in which one had more knowledge.

IV. DISCUSSION

The study examines the relationship between affective reaction and content knowledge of passage read. As revealed by the results obtained, content knowledge and reaction to text are positively related. The analysis based on respondents' claimed content knowledge further support the results obtained in part A of the questionnaire. The finding supports earlier work by Jacobson (1973) and Wardhaugh (1969) which postulated that readers use their personal experience repertoire to help them to comprehend text and the works related to the schema theory (e.g. Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Pearson, 1984).

Although content knowledge is positively related to affective reaction towards the passage read, it is not found to be positively related to enjoyment. Many factors contribute towards enjoyment of reading. Hornburger (1985) stated that enjoyment of text read is related to cultural background, attitudes, interests, and aptitudes of the readers. Background knowledge also does not seem to positively relate to the preference for passage to be used in text and the perception of passage's capability of enhancing language learning. More than two thirds of the respondents were found to prefer passage B to passage A irrespective of their background knowledge about the passage. An explanation is ventured. Although the two passages were judged to be almost equivalent by Grammtik IV, the two passages were written in two distinctly different styles. Passage A was written in the so called 'literally creative' style while passage B was written in the descriptive style. As the descriptive style is commonly encountered in reading and is relatively 'easier' to follow, as a result, it is perceived as more appropriate for use in text for teaching.

This study also supports the belief that factors such as background knowledge and suitability of language structure have important implications in language learning. The factors: background knowledge, attitude, interest, and motivation, not only help a reader

to reconstruct meaning, but also play a prominent role in second language learning (Chastain, 1975; Krashen, 1981a, 1981b). Some affective variables seem to function as mediating variables, facilitating (or hampering) either the rate a learner learns new material, the level of learning a learner attains, or both (Messick, 1979). Sax (1997) claims that the learning of almost any intellectual subject carries with it affective components that may facilitate or hinder additional learning. Stevick (1976, 1980, 1982) has implicitly suggested that perhaps the learner's emotional attitude is the most important factor in language learning. Chastain (1975), in a study to examine the relationship between some affective factors and achievement in language courses, infers that "affective characteristics have at least as much influence on learning factors as do ability factors" (p.153). It is believed that positive affective reaction strengthens confidence and reduces anxiety. Krashen (1981a, 1981b) asserts that English input can only result in language development when motivation is high, self confidence is strong and anxiety is low. Affective factors not only work independently but also work as a combined factor. In turn, they influence the comprehension in particular and learning in general.

The results obtained have implications for material selection and design. If background knowledge could help to enhance affective reaction towards text read, it should be exploited in material selection so as to promote learning. However, motivating students to read genres they are not interested in can be difficult. For example, some students prefer to read informational text, and some prefer to read fictional text (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003) as enjoyment of text read is not solely determined by the prior knowledge one has.

V. CONCLUSION

The study was conducted to examine the hypothesis that prior content knowledge is related to affective reaction of passage read. The results have shown that background knowledge is positively related to reader's affective reaction towards text read. The positive relationship between content knowledge and affective reaction was clearly established. However, there was no positive relationship between background knowledge and enjoyment and between background knowledge and preference for text for teaching English.

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Appendix 1: Malay version of the questionnaire

Soalselidik

Tujuan soalselidik ini ialah untuk menentukan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi persepsi seseorang tentang sesuatu petikan. Kerjasama anda dalam pengisian soalselidik ini amat dihargai.

Jantina: Laki-laki Perempuan

Bahagian A

Sila tandakan (/) pilihan anda.

		Amat Tidak Setuju	Tidak Setuju	Tidak Pasti	Setuju	Amat Setuju
1.	Tiada apa-apa perbezaan untuk memahami sesuatu petikan yang isi kandungannya membincang hal-hal yang saya sudah ketahui (maklum) atau petikan yang membincangkan hal-hal yang baru bagi saya.					
2.	Isi kandungan sesuatu petikan boleh menjadikan sesuatu petikan itu lebih senang atau lebih susah untuk difahami.					
3.	Adalah lebih mudah memahami petikan yang isi kandungannya membincang hal-hal yang saya sudah ketahui (maklum) daripada petikan yang membincangkan hal-hal yang baru bagi saya.					
4.	Adalah lebih seronok membaca petikan yang isi kandungannya membincang hal-hal yang saya sudah ketahui (maklum) daripada petikan yang membincangkan hal-hal yang baru bagi saya.					
5.	Adalah lebih mudah bagi seorang pelajar yang mempunyai pengetahuan lebih baik tentang isi kandungan sesuatu petikan mempelajari kemahiran bahasa yang diajarkan melalui petikan tersebut.					

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Bahagian B

Sila baca dua petikan (A dan B) di bawah dan jawab soalselidik yang berikut:

PASSAGE A

The phrase **balik kampung** has two dramatically different meanings.

Around this time you hear it being used in the pleasant sense.

**Hari Raya ni balik kampung?
Insya-Allah.**

(“Going back to your home-village/home-town for Hari Raya?”
“Yes, God willing.”)

The word **kampung** in this context has connotations of warmth, family togetherness, old-world simplicity, viewed with more than a touch of nostalgia.

Alas, the phrase can also be used as an insult.

Balik kampunglah!

In this context, the **kampung** is looked down upon as a backward place and conveys the idea that the person being insulted is untutored and unpolished and cannot hold his own in the big city.

In Bahasa, the word **hulu** (usually pronounced **ulu**) has acquired derogatory associations although it actually means, “source of the river” or “upstream” (also the “handle” of a weapon or the “head” of a monarch). **Orang hulu** (literary it means “river source/upstream folks”), however, has ceased to be a simple description of people who come from remote villages. Take care not to use it, unless you want to get into a fight.

Orang darat (literary it means “land folks”) is another phrase to be avoided if you do not want a rural-urban battle royal. It has the same connotations as **orang hulu**.

Another phrase **orang bandar** (town-folks) is sometimes used by rural people to mean “arrogant urban folks who have forgotten their roots”. You have to listen to the tone of the voice to ascertain whether it is used in this sense or in a simple descriptive tone.

PASSAGE B

Vietnam is a country in transition. A trip to Vietnam is like going back in time. It is the Sixties all over again as the people struggle to catch up with the rest of the world, economically and socially.

Time seems to have stopped for this nation of 66 million, and things we take for granted – cars, colour television and even fashion sense – are luxuries. Many still dress in army green, a heritage from the war. Ballroom dancing is still in vogue at nightclubs.

Vietnam is opening its door to the outside world. With a history stretching back 4,000 years, it offers immense tourism potential. Ho Chin Minh City is rich in history and heritage. As our driver maneuvered through the city of four million, neoclassical-style buildings loomed in between fading buildings and shop houses. The various pagodas and temples, museums, the government buildings (the famous Reunification Hall included) and even the markets provide endless diversions for the tourists. The government also welcomes investments and joint ventures with Asean businessmen.

Ho Chin Minh City has a bustling feel about it. Hundreds of bicycles, motorcycles, vans, and the occasional car and army truck ply the streets in seemingly chaotic traffic. The *sik-lo*, the Vietnamese version of our Penang trishaws, is a common sight. The main mode of transportation is the bicycle. It is possible to rent one for 10,000d a day, while motorcycle can be hired for 20,000d.

Sila bulatkan pilihan anda.

		Petikan A	Petikan B
1.	Petikan manakah yang anda fikir lebih mudah?	A	B
2.	Petikan manakah yang isi kandungannya anda lebih ketahui (lebih maklum)?	A	B
3.	Petikan manakah yang anda dapat memahami dengan lebih baik?	A	B
4.	Jika ada soalan-soalan yang perlu dijawab, soalan-soalan dari petikan manakah yang anda fikir anda lebih yakin dapat menjawab?	A	B
5.	Petikan manakah yang anda lebih senangi?	A	B
6.	Petikan manakah yang lebih menarik minat anda untuk membacanya?	A	B
7.	Petikan manakah yang anda fikir adalah lebih mudah difahami?	A	B
8.	Petikan manakah anda berasa lebih yakin membaca?	A	B
9.	Pada pendapat anda, petikan manakah yang lebih sesuai digunakan sebagai petikan dalam teks Bahasa Inggeris?	A	B
10.	Pada pendapat anda, petikan manakah yang dapat membantu anda mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris?	A	B

Terima Kasih

Bio Data

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