

INVESTIGATING YOUNG ESL LEARNERS' COMPREHENSION
OF STORIES SITUATED IN NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE
CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature has long been regarded as appropriate and engaging materials for teaching language to young learners. Teachers of English as a second language (ESL) have found narrative texts to be effective in building language and comprehension skills. A massive volume of children's literature, however, are produced for the native speakers in mind, thus bearing cultural references and settings that may be unfamiliar to non-native speakers. Viewed from the Schema Theory perspective – which holds that comprehension of texts is made possible through existing mental frameworks – the lack of familiarity with the culture upon which a story is situated may result in comprehension being more difficult to achieve. This is especially so when young readers with little engagement with non-native cultures read culture-laden narrative texts.

In response to this issue, this study explores the extent to which culturally-acquired prior knowledge affects young ESL learners' comprehension of narrative texts situated in native and non-native cultures. 21 Year 3 pupils from a Tamil vernacular primary school in Sungai Buloh, Selangor, Malaysia read two narrative texts situated in non-native cultures (Roman-Catholic Filipino and Great Plains Indians) and one narrative text situated in native culture (Malaysian Hindu Indian). Participants' level of comprehension for each text was measured through written comprehension tests and verbal story retelling tasks.

Transcripts from the story retelling task were analysed for inaccuracies in comprehension. The inaccuracies were then categorized and checked for possible causes. Finally, to check the value of story retelling task as a comprehension assessment tool, scores from the story retelling task and scores from the comprehension tests were checked for correlations.

Overall, participants scored higher in the comprehension test based on the text situated in the native culture. Scores from the story retelling task also confirmed that participants had more sophisticated comprehension of the narrative text situated in the native culture. While retelling the texts, participants made inaccuracies that appeared as enhancements, alterations, substitutions and omissions. The retellings of the narrative text situated in the Roman-Catholic Filipino culture bore the most number of inaccuracies while the retellings of the narrative text situated in the Great Plains Indian culture were significantly shorter than the retellings of the other two texts. When scores from the comprehension tests were compared against scores from the retelling task, a significant correlation was found, suggesting that in assessing the comprehension of culture-laden narrative texts, story retelling may be used as an alternative method of assessment.

ABSTRAK

Sastera kanak-kanak telah lama dikenalpasti sebagai bahan yang berkesan di dalam pengajaran bahasa kepada kanak-kanak. Guru-guru yang mengajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua telah mendapati bahawa teks berbentuk cerita membantu memperkukuhkan pencapaian bahasa dan kemahiran pemahaman. Namun, kebanyakan sastera kanak-kanak diterbitkan untuk kegunaan penutur jati lalu memaparkan aspek budaya yang kurang difahami oleh golongan yang bukan penutur jati. Dilihat daripada sudut pandangan *Schema Theory* – yang menjelaskan bahawa pengertian sesuatu teks adalah bergantung kepada kerangka mental sedia ada – pemaparan ciri-ciri budaya asing yang kurang dikenali akan mengakibatkan sesuatu teks itu lebih sukar untuk difahami.

Kajian ini bertujuan menyiasat sejauh mana pengetahuan budaya mempengaruhi tahap pemahaman kanak-kanak akan teks berbentuk cerita yang berlatarbelakangkan budaya jati dan budaya asing. 21 orang murid Tahun 3 daripada sebuah sekolah jenis kebangsaan (Tamil) di Sungai Buloh membaca dua buah cerita pendek yang berlatarbelakangkan budaya asing iaitu budaya Filipina Roman-Katolik dan budaya *Great Plains Indians* dan satu cerita pendek yang berlatarbelakangkan budaya jati iaitu budaya kaum India beragama Hindu di Malaysia.

Tahap pemahaman peserta kajian diukur melalui tiga ujian pemahaman dan tiga aktiviti bercerita semula. Ketidaktepatan di dalam pemahaman cerita-cerita yang dibaca dikenalpasti melalui transkrip aktiviti bercerita semula dan dikategorikan sebelum dikenalpasti punca-puncanya.

Akhir sekali, untuk memastikan keberkesanan aktiviti bercerita sebagai instrumen penilaian tahap pemahaman teks berbentuk cerita, perhubungan di antara markah ujian pemahaman dan markah daripada aktiviti bercerita semula disemak.

Secara keseluruhan, peserta kajian menunjukkan pencapaian yang lebih tinggi di dalam ujian pemahaman serta aktiviti bercerita semula bagi teks cerita yang berlatarbelakangkan budaya jati. Di dalam aktiviti bercerita semula, ketidaktepatan di dalam pemahaman dikenalpasti sebagai ketidaktepatan yang berbentuk penambahbaikan, pengubahsuaian, penggantian dan pengabaian jalan cerita.

Ketidaktepatan di dalam pemahaman paling kerap dikenalpasti semasa aktiviti bercerita menggunakan teks cerita yang berlatarbelakangkan budaya Filipina Roman Katolik manakala penceritaan semula teks cerita yang berlatarbelakangkan budaya *Great Plains Indian* adalah jauh lebih singkat daripada penceritaan semula menggunakan teks-teks yang lain. Apabila kesemua markah ujian pemahaman dan aktiviti bercerita semula dinilai, suatu perhubungan jelas kelihatan di antara pencapaian di dalam ujian pemahaman dan pencapaian di dalam aktiviti bercerita semula. Ini menunjukkan bahawa bagi penilaian pemahaman teks berbentuk cerita yang mengandungi banyak unsur budaya, aktiviti bercerita semula boleh digunakan sebagai instrumen penilaian alternatif.

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To acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the miseries of life. ~W. Somerset Maugham

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