THE EFFECTS OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE, INTEREST AND TOPIC FAMILIARITY ON READING

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to evaluate the effects of background knowledge, topic familiarity and interest on reading skill.

In writing this, our greatest aim is to present such a work that will be used by all language teachers, by students in the foreign language department and by all those whose prospect is to be language teacher as a handbook.

Key Words: Reading, Topic Familiarity, Background Knowledge, Interest.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research is a quantity research about the effects of the topic familiarity, background knowledge and interest on reading. We examined a lot of source to measure the effects of these topics. We found some researches helped us that what kind of way we will follow. We compared their findings with our research results.

While we were making our research (while we were studying on our research), we prepared some reading texts and a questionnaire and we adapted them upon some student groups. These student groups were from Tek Seçenek Course, Boyut Course and the first class of Atatürk University of Department of English Language Teaching. They all were educated through learning English. Moreover, we considered the sex age differences and their achievement status. So we saw the factors which affected reading on positive and negative directions.

The data that we took at the end of our research will help the teacher to choose which reading passages are more effective for students. You will see whether the students’ background knowledge is enough or not.

The result of this research will show whether the effects of students’ interest and topic familiarity is important on reading or not. Furthermore, it will help to develop the reading skills of students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game (Goodman, 1976). Background knowledge is student’s social class, family status, education level, type of education, training and his past experience or work. Topic familiarity is the familiarity of a subject of a discussion, a talk, a programme, an essay, a conversation or the interest.

There are a lot of researches about the topic familiarity and background knowledge. For example; Barbara C. Schmidt – Rinehart, (1994). Background knowledge has been operational in a variety of ways: Cultural knowledge, technical knowledge, religious knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, topic familiarity and contextual visuals.
Results from earlier studies indicate that learners at different proficiency levels use background knowledge of different degrees.

This study of which main purpose was to investigate the effects of topic familiarity on second language is a natural expansion of Long’s study, adding proficiency level as a variable. In order to attribute the familiarity variable to topic familiarity, it was important to ensure that the passages were as quotable as possible in terms of length, word rate and vocabulary. A comparison of the two passages indicated that the passages were almost identical in each of the categories.

Madeline Ehrman’s (1987) research shows sex differences in general social behaviour, verbal ability, the use of language and language learning strategies. Maccoby and Jacklin’s work on sex differences suggests that females are superior to males in many social skills, with females showing a greater social orientation. Karin Bugle and Bram P. Bunk (1986) explain that female and male students differ in background: They select different subjects in school, have different interests, reading habits and aspirations. Males generally watching television for a long time are enthusiastic about sports. Dutch females tend to prefer social, home, and artistic activities and read relatively more and different books and magazines than males. Females appear to be more interested in fashion, pop stars, human relations, romance and art. They read more fiction and literature, where as males prefer to read about automobiles, technology, economics, politics and sports. These differences influence the knowledge that male and female students possess as they face their final examinations. To determine whether such differences in background knowledge are responsible for sex differences in performance on reading tests. It is necessary to have an adequate operational of existing prior knowledge. This is in part due to the fact that “prior knowledge” and “schemata” are rather global concepts, and that it is very difficult to indicate exactly what knowledge people who can be considered experts in a certain domain possess and how this knowledge is structured. James F. Lee (1986) concludes that non-native readers show virtually no significant effect of background knowledge in reading, understanding or recalling a text. Carrel concludes that foreign language learners relied heavily on context, familiarity and transparency in order to comprehend the passage. The results of Carrel’s three-way ANOVA showed main effects for all three components of background knowledge but only for native speaker. Joann Hammadou (1991) explains that the name of prior knowledge and its role in comprehension is repeated in many discussion of language proficiency most current theories of foreign language proficiency incorporate prior knowledge within the larger realm of “context” as either influencing proficiency or as a part of the very construct of proficiency. Beginning readers might be expected to show significant differences between recall or familiar and unfamiliar texts; more proficient readers might show much smaller or no differences, possibly triggering a statistical interaction effect. Surprisingly no such effects were found. Although the more proficient readers did comprehend more of what they read. The differences between most-familiar-topic recalls and least – familiar – topic recalls did not diminish with this increased comprehension. Or conversely, the least proficient readers did show signs of lessening comprehension, but it was not based on less familiarity.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Resource Question

By this research, we wanted to investigate background knowledge, topic familiarity, interest of students and also to measure sex and age differences.

3.2. Setting

In this research we studied with a university and two private courses. These were Atatürk University, Boyut Course and Tek Seçenek Course. Atatürk University was founded in 1957. There were 40 students in my research. They were in the first class of university. They entered the university exam and won the department of English Language education. Then they started to be educated as a student – teacher.

Boyut course was founded in 1995 and there were 19 students.
They were educated through learning English because they were preparing for university examination.
Tek Seçenek Course was founded in 1990 and there were 18 students. They were learning English for entering the university.

Our research started on March 25th, 2002.
3.3. Participants

In this research we prepared a questionnaire and two reading passages to see the effects of interest, topic familiarity and background knowledge on reading.

We adapted them to the 77 students and 40 of them were from Atatürk University, 29 of them were girls and 11 of them were boys. 18 of the chosen students were from Tek Seçenek Course, 9 of them were girls and 9 of them were boys. Their ages were from 17 to 30.

3.4. Measure

We developed a questionnaire to find the effects of background knowledge, topic familiarity and interest and interest on reading. While preparing it, we considered Joann Hammadou (1991). Interrelationship among prior knowledge, inference and language proficiency in foreign language reading, Barbara C. Schmidt – Rinehart (1994). The effects of topic familiarity on second language reading Comprehension, Madeline Herman and Rebecca Oxford (1988). Effects of Sex Differences in Language Learning Strategies, James F. Lee (1986). Background Knowledge and L2 Reading Karin Bügel and Bram P. Bunk (1996). Sex Differences in Foreign Language Text Comprehension: The role of Interests and Prior Knowledge. Our questionnaire includes 15 questions, we prepared two reading passages; first is Kurban Bayram which Turkish people familiar with this religious festival but Manchester which is one of the English city that Turkish people are unfamiliar with it. Each reading passage has 5 questions which measure what affect their success on reading texts. Sample question: If the reading passage is current, I can understand it very well.

The answers of the questionnaire are:

A) Strongly Agree
B) Agree
C) Undecided
D) Disagree
E) Strongly Disagree

We adapted the questionnaire into Turkish because we wanted to make it clearer so that we could have consistent data. We gave points, such as:

A) Strongly Agree : 5 points,
B) Agree : 4 points,
C) Undecided : 3 points,
D) Disagree : 2 points,
E) Strongly Disagree : 1 points to have right results.

We classified the questions into 3 groups:

1. Interests (1, 4, 7, 10, 13)
2. Topic Familiarity (2, 5, 8, 11, 14)
3. Background Knowledge (3, 6, 9, 12, 15). The whole questionnaire can be seen in Appendix.

3.5. Findings

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS – SCALE (ALPHA) Reliability Coefficients
N of Cases = 78, 0
N of Items = 17
Alpha = 0.978
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
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<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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As it is seen in table-1 the questions; 3, 6, 5, 8 are near to “Strongly Agree”. These questions show that background knowledge and topic familiarity are effective on reading. The questions; 2, 4, 15 are near to “Undecided”. It shows that sometimes they do not agree these topics. On the contrary they answer the question as if these topics are important. The questions; 13, 10, 7 are near to “Disagree”. It shows that interest is not important to understand the reading passage.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
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We can understand from Table 2 that topic familiarity and background knowledge are more important than interest. Because interest can change according to student’s ages and genders but they think that background knowledge and topic familiarity are important. They think they do not be able to understand the reading text about familiar topics or if they do not have enough vocabulary proficiency and compel to understand the reading text.

Table 3. ANOVA

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<th>Mean Square</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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</table>
As we see in the table- 3, while the students are answering the questionnaire they have nearly same opinion on topic familiarity and interest but they give different answers on background knowledge.

Table-4.

As we see in the table 4, topic familiarity is so important that when it decreases in the graph line also the success of test- 1 decreases. And students get lower Marks in test- 1 which they are unfamiliar.

Table-5.

As we see in the table 5, the students understand the passage easily which they are familiar because topic familiarity affects to perceive the passage so that they can take high marks.
Graph-1. The effects of Gender on Unfamiliar Topic Manchester

(T 1 = Manchester)

It is seen from Graph 1, females are more successful than males on unfamiliar reading passage Manchester. Male’s rate of success is 60 % and females’ is 64.7 %. Actually there is no great amount of difference between their successes; nevertheless females are more interested in an unfamiliar topic than males.

As a conclusion we may say that females are capable of understanding unfamiliar topic. Their interest, background knowledge, topic familiarity do not affect their capacity to understand an unfamiliar topic.

Graph-2. The effect of Gender on a Familiar Topic Kurban Bayramı

(T 2 = Kurban Bayramı)

It is seen from Graph 2; males are more successful than females on familiar reading passage Kurban Bayramı. Males’ rate of success is 98.5% and females’ rate of success is 95%. You can understand from this table that the numbers between these rates are not high.

Males are much more interested in familiar topic than females. Its reason may source from male’s interest of sacrificing and also males give more importance to their religious custom.
Graph-3. The Effects of Gender on Topic Familiarity

It is seen from this table that the topic familiarity affects both males and females. But females think that when the topic is familiar, they may understand it more easily. Males’ rate of participation to this topic is 3.70 but females’ is 3.75.

Both females and males are near to be agreed. They think that topic familiarity is important to understand reading texts. In our research the passage Kurban Bayram is a familiar subject so they both are successful to understand it.

Graph-4. The effects of Gender on Background Knowledge

This table shows that females’ answers about background knowledge are “Agree” but males’ answers are “Undecided”. Females’ rate of participation is 3.7 and males’ rate of participation is 3.4. There are more differences between females’ and males’ answers.

Females think that background knowledge is effective on reading passages. In our opinion, background knowledge of females may be better than males’ because they study day by day and repeat everything what they learnt in the lesson.
Graph-5. The Effects of Gender on Interest

It is understood from this tablet that, both females’ and males’ answers are near the questionnaire answer of “Agree”. Females’ rate of participation is 2.93 and males’ rate of participation is 2.87. But females’ rate of participation is near the answer of “Undecided”.

Both females and males think that interest is not important to understand a reading text. Its reason may be not only males interested in football and not only females interested in making up or etc. Because they had their personalities and think that everybody should be interested in any or all topics.

Graph-6. The Effects of School on an Unfamiliar Topic Manchester

(T1= Manchester)

It is understood from this Graph 6 that, Atatürk University is the most successful school. The rate of students’ answers of Atatürk University on unfamiliar topic is 78%, Boyut Course’s rate is 50% and Tek Seçenek Course’s rate is 48%. Atatürk University is more successful than Boyut Course and it is more successful than Tek Seçenek Course.

To us, the reason of success on unfamiliar topic of the students of Atatürk University is to be educated at a university. Their background knowledge is better than the other students. Their building up knowledge is much more than others. The students of Boyut Course are more successful than the students
of Tek Seçenek Course. It shows that they are more ready to enter the university entrance examination and also they are related with English Literature so they can understand the passage Manchester easily.

**Graph-7. The Effects of School on a Familiar Topic Kurban Bayram**

This Table (Table 7) shows that the students of Atatürk University are the most successful ones about the familiar topic. The rate of the students’ answers of Atatürk University is 100%; Tek Seçenek Course’s students’ answers rate is 95% and Boyut Course’s students’ answers’ rate is 90%. Tek Seçenek Course’s students’ are more successful than Boyut Course’s students.

According to us, the familiar topic Kurban Bayram is effective on students. Its effects are much more effective on the students of Atatürk University. Its reason may be that Kurban Bayram is their religious festival and they are familiar with this topic. So they can understand that passage easily and their answers are nearly perfect.

**Graph-8. The Effects of School on Interest**

It is seen from this tablet hat, the answers of three school’s students are “Undecided” and the order from high bar to the lower one is; Atatürk University – Tek Seçenek Course – Boyut Course. The rates are: 3, 1 – 2, 8 – 2, 7.

We understand that the interest is not important for all of the students. According to them there is no effect of interest on reading text. They do not make him distinction of interest. They are interested in every topic because these topics are important for human life and they are unconscious about that.
Graph-9. The Effects of School on Background Knowledge

This table shows that the students have chosen the questionnaire answer of “Agree” about the background knowledge. The rate of Atatürk University is 3.7. Boyut Course and Tek Seçenek Courses’ answers’ rates are 3.5 and 3.5.

The students of Atatürk University agree that background knowledge is important to understand the reading text better than without having background knowledge about it.

The students of Tek Seçenek and Boyut Courses don’t have enough information about English grammar and vocabulary. Because they are at the beginning of preparation classes but the students of Atatürk University have better and enough information about grammar and vocabulary than the other ones.

Graph-10. The Effects of School on Topic Familiarity

According to this table, all the students of Atatürk University, Tek Seçenek Course and Boyut Course answer the questionnaire questions by choosing the questionnaire answer of “Agree”. The rate of Atatürk University is 3.8, Boyut Course’s students’ answers’ rate is 3.6 and Tek Seçenek Course’s students’ answers’ rate is 3.5.

With the help of Table-10 we can easily say that according to all students the topic familiarity is important to understand a reading passage better and this position affects the ability of reading and understanding the chosen passage. Because there aren’t high and meaningful differences among the rates of student groups. If so, the questionnaire answers’ rate of Atatürk University is higher than the other courses’ students’ answers’ rates.

As a result all of the students think that, they must be concerned to understand any reading text.
The age group whose rate of success fewer than 100% are the ages among 21 and this rate is very few. The ages between 17 and 21 and 26 – 30 understand the reading text very well. Nearly almost all the groups are successful to understand familiar topic until the age of 21, people are interested in the topic Kurban Bayram. Because they are familiar with it. They are curious about how to sacrifice a ram or what the reason of sacrificing is. After the age of twenty – five, the people know the necessity of sacrificing for our religion. But between the age of twenty – one and twenty – five may be a period of transition. They may not be interested in this traditional custom fort his reason they are less successful than the others.

This table shows us that the ages of nineteen, twenty and twenty – nine are the most successful ages. But the most unsuccessful age is twenty – five. The highest rate is 80% and the lowest rate is 32%. The curiosity of unknown topic increases until the ages of twenty. So at the age of nineteen and twenty they can do what they can do best. But at the age of twenty, they are over the hill. Its reason may be that; while the curiosity about unfamiliar topic is decreasing the anxiety of future increases. For that reason this situation affects the achievement of students.
After the age of twenty-six and twenty-nine the people who have a job may begin to be interested in different topics. So they are able to understand unfamiliar topics.

Graph-13. The Effects of Age on Interest

We can understand from this table that the effects of age on interest are virtually the same except the age of 30. The age of 30 never consider the interest. But others do not know whether interest is effective on the reading text or not.

The students think that every topic is important. Moreover the information given in the passages are important rather than the interests. Because they should know not only the topics they are interested in but also the topics they have to know are required for them.

Graph-14. The Effects of Age on Background Knowledge

At the age of seventeen, their answer is “I agree” for the question related to the background knowledge. In contrast, at the age of 18 their answer is “I do not agree”.

Except this age almost everybody chooses the same answers for the questionnaire question dealing with the background knowledge. So we can say that everybody, the students from the chosen groups, except the students at the age of 18 have nearly the same idea.

We can understand from this table that at the age of 17, namely the step of preparation the university entrance examination, they think that the background knowledge is very important because they use their background knowledge and experiences while preparing.
After winning the university entrance examination they relax. At that time they think that background knowledge is not important after winning the university entrance examination anyway. But after starting the university they understand that background knowledge is important for them every time.

Graph-15. The Effects of Age on Topic Familiarity

Almost every group of age think that topic familiarity is important on reading text and they answer the questionnaire as “I Agree” except the age 26.

We can understand from the table that the age groups who are at the beginning of learning steps, think that their knowledge is not enough so they can understand the familiar topic easily.

4. CONCLUSION

This research is a kind of quantity research we aimed to consider the effects of background knowledge, topic familiarity and interest on reading.

We found very interesting results in this study. For example, the students who are trying to be ready to win the university entrance examination and place in Atatürk University we have seen and understood that their interests are not effective on reading texts. But the topic familiarity and background knowledge are effective and important to understand the reading passage.

We understand from this research that at the age of eighteen they have a transition period and at this age the students are eager to relax psychologically so they do not pay attention to the background knowledge. They think, “If we are able to win the university entrance examination it means we know all the grammatical structures and have enough vocabulary proficiency”. After this period, they understand that their background knowledge is only enough for winning the university entrance examination and there is a lot of information and knowledge to learn a foreign language. (Look at the table-14).

Until the age of 20 the students are interested in the familiar topics as “Kurban Bayram”. For example they can not understand the reason of sacrificing a ram. And after the age of 26 they are conscious about why they are sacrificing or congratulating the Kurban Bayram. But at the age of 20 and 26 or between this ages they have anxiety about their future so this age groups are not interested in the familiar topics. They want to do what they can do best so there may be some differences between these age groups.

Thus, interests do not affect reading skill everytime. We hope that the results of this research will help to analyze the reading passages of university entrance examination, and the language teachers to choose which reading topics are more useful for students to learn and to understand a second language well. In this way we will understand and see whether the students’ background knowledge is enough or not. And also it will help the students to develop the reading skills.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Test-1.  M A N C H E S T E R

The city of Manchester is the heart of a huge industrial area of Lancashire. For centuries this inland city has been the centre of the cotton trade. Cotton is not grown in Lancashire, of course, but it is made into cloth there, to finished material is exported all over the world. All around Manchester there are many smaller towns where the cotton industry has developed and where soap chemicals, dyes, rubber goods and paper goods are manufactured. Manchester itself is now famous not only for the production of machinery of all kinds, but also as a great trade centre of England, second only to London.

It was not only so. Until the building of the Manchester Ship Canal the cotton goods had to be transported to Liverpool, over thirty miles away and there loaded onto cargo ships which carried them all over the world. Naturally, this increased the cost of the goods and reduced the profits of Manchester’s trade.

Why is this no longer necessary? Because this famous canal goes all the way from Liverpool to Manchester a distance of thirty–five miles. It is wide and deep enough to carry large ships easily and safely. It has transformed Manchester from an inland city into one of Britain’s greatest ports. Huge docks and warehouses, stores and factories have sprung up along its banks and, every hour of the day and night, great ships from all over the world are loading or unloading cargo at the port.

This Ship Canal was opened to traffic on January 1st, 1894. It is a very good example of engineering skill and perseverance. Five railway lines crossed the route chosen for the canal and bridges had to be built for them. River and streams also stood in the way. They could not be allowed to follow into the canal because they would have interfered with the water level. These were only a few of the problems the engineers had to solve.

At last, however, the work was finished. On January 1st, 1894, seventy–one ships sailed for the first time the mouth of the River Mersey where Liverpool stands, right up to the city of Manchester. On May 21st of the same year Queen Victoria herself sailed up this wonderful water way to perform the official opening ceremony.

1. The City of Manchester is _____.
   A) Surrounded by a large agricultural area
   B) On the mouth of the River Mersey
   C) More than thirty miles away from Liverpool
   D) In Yorkshire

2. The people living in Lancashire are mainly employed in _____.
   A) Growing cotton
   B) Working on the railway
   C) Sailing ships up the canal
   D) Working in factories
3. Before the Canal was built, Manchester’s export cotton goods were _____.
   A) sent to London
   B) sent to all the smaller towns near
   C) carried in large ships to Liverpool
   D) transported to Liverpool to be loaded on ships

4. Which of these statements is true?
   A) Queen Victoria’s ship was the first to sail up to Manchester
   B) The Manchester Ship Canal is about fifty – three miles long
   C) The port can be used only during daylight
   D) There are many industrial towns in Lancashire

5. The Manchester Ship Canal is very beneficial to the city because _____.
   A) it allows large ships to sail into the port of Manchester
   B) it was opened in 1894
   C) it is thirty – five miles long
   D) it is thirty – five railway bridges over it

Test-2. KURBAN BAYRAM

Kurban Bayram, one of the two big religious occasions observed by Muslims in Turkey, begins two months and ten days after Ramazan Bayram, the Candy Festival, which follows the holy month of Ramazan. The name Kurban Bayram means ‘Sacrifice Festival’ and refers to the custom of slaughtering a ram as a sacrifice in the first three days of a four-day holiday. The meat of the sacrificed sheep is shared with others. A few days before the start of Bayram, houses are thoroughly cleaned and new clothes purchased, for it is customary, to put on the best for Bayram, Candy is bound and various sweets are prepared, the main one being ‘baklava’. One the first day of Bayram the family raises early shortly before the first call to prayer. The master of the house and his sons put on their best clothes and go to the mosque to perform their Bayram prayer. This prayer has special importance. It can not be performed individually like the regular daily prayers, but must be done collectively. It brings rich and poor to stand side by side United in a common bond.

During all four days of Bayram, presents are exchanged and thousands of people travel from place to place to visit relatives and friends. Children are well dressed any happy as they run from one amusement to another. Not only does every one within the family but also his or her friends and neighbours enter into the holiday spirit. People wander freely from one home to another. No matter how tired they get, they don’t stop. They know and believe that Bayram is a chance for closer and better acquaintance with friends, neighbours and relatives.

1. Who observes this religious occasion?
   A) Christians in Turkey
   B) Muslims in Turkey
   C) Armenians in Turkey
   D) Jewish in Turkey

2. What does the name ‘Kurban Bayram’ refer to?
   A) The custom of slaughtering a ram as a sacrifice
   B) the custom of slaughtering an individual as a sacrifice
   C) it refers to congratulate the National Bayram
   D) to buy a cock
3. What is done with the meat of the slaughtered sheep?

   A) The meat of the person is eaten by the sheep
   B) The meat of the sacrificed sheep is eaten by the individuals of family
   C) The meat of the sacrificed sheep is shared with others
   D) The meat of the sacrificed sheep is shared with rich people

4. How many days do the Kurban Bayramı last?

   A) 6   B) 3   C) 5   D) 4

5. How do thousands of people spend their time during all four days of Bayram?

   A) They spend their all time by sleeping
   B) They study lesson during the Bayram
   C) They spend their Bayram by feeding and making ram walked
   D) They give each other presents and they travel somewhere for visiting relatives and friends