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INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIVE PROCESSING MODEL OF READING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE SHORT FICTION IN THE LIBYAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: Using literary texts in the classroom has been widely practiced in the field of EFL teaching and learning. Many scholars ascertain that English literary texts provide language learners with a kind of authentic language used by native speakers in real contexts. Research studies in the EFL field illustrate that EFL learners' problems in reading English literary texts are due to two main reasons. Firstly, the complex structure of literary texts. Secondly, lack of familiarity with the cultural content of English literary texts. However, the present study sets out to suggest that collaborative work in the classroom can bridge learners' difficulties in constructing the meaning of literary texts. The research suggests a new model to improve the teaching of literary short fiction in one of the English departments in Libyan universities.The suggested model emphasizes three main tenets:

1. The role of background knowledge in processing literary short fiction. The background knowledge includes not only knowledge of English language but also familiarity with cultural content of the literary text as well as the formal organization of the literary texts.

2. Since language and culture are intertwined, the approach focuses on developing Libyan learners' cultural and intercultural awareness.

3. The approach suggests the use of Learning Conversations as a scaffolding procedure that allows more interaction and negotiation for co-constructing the meaning of the text.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach. The investigation is carried out across three phases. Phase 1 focuses on the assessment of the Libyan EFL participant problems in reading literary texts by interviewing the ten participants and using adiagnostic test.The second phase is interventional. It seeks to investigate learners' development in constructing the meaning of literary text through the suggested scaffolding procedure (i.e. Learning Conversations). The third phase of the investigation explores learners' reflections on the effectiveness of interactive work in reading literature. The study aims at providing evidence of Libyan EFL learners' perspective of the new model and the development of their understanding.

Key words: Learning Conversations, English as a foreign language (EFL), dialogic exchanges

USA, Michigan   *Generalization of Scientific Results*

Introduction

Research studies in English language learning and teaching have been seeking to find ways in which EFL/ESL learners can improve their reading comprehension. Different reading models have been suggested in order to provide insights into the strategies of proficient comprehension. Such models range from text decoding: bottom-up processing, which involves decoding the text words, phrases and sentences for constructing meaning (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), to prior knowledge activation: top-down processing which assumes that readers use their background knowledge of the language, the text and the world to construct the meaning of texts (Carrell, 1987). In addition, a focus on the employment of these two processes simultaneously has been stressed in the context of EFL/ESL reading comprehension (Rumelhart, 1977). Recent research, however, emphasizes the role of social interaction to enhance the comprehension of different text types including literary and non-literary texts (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, &Gamoran, 2003). That is, interaction between learners about the text content enables readers to share knowledge and appropriate strategies (Goldman, 1997).

During the past decade, there have been limited number of research studies conducted in Libya in relation to the teaching of literature as an authentic text (e.g. El-Naili, 2006; Elbadri, 2009; Abu-baker, 2012; Pathan, 2013). However, unsystematic observation by the researcher over a number of years' teaching in the university level teaching literature in Libya supported by anecdotal evidence from foregoing research suggest that pedagogical approaches to teaching reading comprehension in Libya are still committed to teacher-centred approaches, which have led to unsatisfactory results with respect to both academic achievement and language learning. For this reason, there is an urgent need for more research on alternative teaching and learning approaches, which provide insights into improving the learning of future generations. An interactive learning approach is a relatively new student-centred approach that appears not to have been practised in Libya to date. Therefore, this research is an attempt to compensate for this lack in the Libyan EFL learning context and stimulate future research into the field of interactive learning in the Libyan context. In addition, as language and culture are closely related, the study maintains the role of culture in comprehending literary texts. Therefore, the study considers the development of learners' cultural and intercultural awareness for deeper understanding of literary texts through collaborative interaction.

Thus, the rationale of the study arises from the need to explore an alternative approach for teaching English literature after perceiving the inadequacies of the current

approaches in the field. The new approach focuses on the co-construction of meaning for deep understanding which brought about by the active role of learners with the teacher guidance. More specifically, the study investigates whether or not an interactive learning approach holds the potential to make reading literature more effective in the EFL Libyan setting. Therefore, the role of interaction for learning is investigated.

Literature review

Cognitive processing in the 1970s was characterized by the construct of background knowledge based on Kant's philosophy, which stresses the role of previous experiences in processing new learning. Researchers investigated human language in the light of the interaction between a symbol system and the human mind. Readers' knowledge is considered as 'powerful, pervasive, individualistic, and modifiable' (Alexander & Fox, 2004, p. 42). Schema theory therefore emerged as one of the most important constructs of this era.

Schema theory conceptualizes the role of background knowledge for reading comprehension (Hedge, 2001). Nassaji (2002) proposes that schema theory deals with previous knowledge that readers already possess. According to this theory, reading comprehension is 'a process of mapping the information from the text onto these pre-existing knowledge structures, and that knowledge-based processes are

predictive and reader-driven' (Nassaji, 2002, p. 444). To put it simply, schema theory holds that different types of written texts are meaningless to readers, unless readers relate their previously acquired background knowledge to the text content (Alderson, 2000; Alptekin, 2006; Anderson & Cheng, 1999; Carrell, 1983; Carrell&Eisterhold, 1983; Grabe& Stoller, 2002; Johnson, 1981, 1982; Ketchum, 2006; McKay, 1987). The essential stored information required for interpreting texts is known as 'text schemata', whereas the prior knowledge is known as 'the reader's background knowledge' (An, 2013, p. 1).

Background knowledge that readers make use of during their engagement with reading texts is of different types (Carrell&Eisterhold, 1983; Nassaji, 2002; Oller, 1995). The most frequently referred to and discussed are content schema, cultural schema and formal schema. Content schema involves knowledge of the content (Carrell, 1983) and includes background knowledge and subject matter knowledge. Background knowledge refers to learners previously acquired information that is not necessarily included in the text content. Subject matter knowledge refers to the knowledge that is explicitly included in the reading text content (Alderson, 2000). Ketchum (2006) further suggests cultural schema as one type of content schema.

Cultural schema represents the familiarity of readers with the

cultural content of the text. Ketchum (2006) stresses the importance of cultural familiarity for full understanding of the text meaning intended by the writer (see section 2.2.4). As discussed earlier in this chapter, if the cultural content of the text is different from the readers' own cultural background, text processing can result in a different interpretation from that intended by the writer (Erten&Razi, 2009; Ketchum, 2006). Since some texts, like short stories, impose the inclusion of readers with 'real material persons, events, places, and socio-cultural relations' (Oller, 1995, p. 299), readers' familiarity with the cultural content of the reading text contributes to an overall understanding of the writer's intention (Oller, 1995; Ketchum, 2006).

The other type of background knowledge includes formal or textual schema. Formal schema refers to the familiarity with the language system. Additionally, it involves knowledge of text organization and the differences between one text genre and others (Erten&Razi, 2009). Formal schema embodies 'background knowledge of the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of texts' (Carrel &Eisterhold, 1983, p. 79). Different text types such as informative articles, short stories, or poems present information distinctively. Readers' unfamiliarity with the formal organizations of texts result in difficulties for text processing and understanding

(Carrel &Eisterhold, 1983; An, 2013; Carrell, 1987; Alderson, 2000).

The focus of schema theory on the role of background knowledge views reading comprehension as a combination of sources to support text comprehension. This view of reading comprehension is thought of as essentially relevant to EFL/ ESL reading contexts (Nassaji, 2002; Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980; Grabe&Stoller, 2002).

Studies investigating the role of background knowledge promote the role of schema in reading comprehension.They imply the need for readers or learners in the ESL/ EFL contexts to construct meaning i.e. learn how to learn. Since the mid-1980s, second language acquisition research SLA stresses the use of language in real life situations for learning.By the mid-1990s, SLA research applied socialization approaches to adult learners in second language learning contexts (Duff, 1995; Harklau, 1994). Research studies revealed how learners can be enabled to become culturally and socially competent in the communicative contexts. Such a focus indicates a shift from the cognitivist paradigm to the role of socialization.

Being inspired by the social constructivist paradigm, the role of social interaction has been the focus of many of ESL studies (Slavin, 1991; Anton, 1999; Stortch, 1999, 2005; Van Lier, 2014).Research focuses on having students working together to share their ideas, views, understanding and negotiate each

other's perspectives. Thus, the role of learners is not a passive recipient but an active participant in which learners are part of their own learning (Jones & Brader, 2002). Such views gave reading research a more holistic perspective. The goal of learning is no longer the knowledge held by individuals rather the intention is on meaning making arising from individuals' interaction with each other and the teacher

Social interaction in the classroom takes the forms of 'dialogic exchanges' and 'negotiation of meaning' for learning. Social constructivism assumes that knowledge development is not separately embodied within individuals (Tobin &Tippin, 1993); instead, it happens as a result of being engaged with others in a social interactive environment (Palincsar, 1998).

It is assumed that learners have to construct their own knowledge individually and collectively. Each learner has a tool kit of concepts and skills with which he or she must construct knowledge to solve problems presented by the environment. The role of the community - other learners and teacher - is to provide the setting, pose the challenges, and offer the support (Davis, Maher, &Noddings 1990, p. 3)

Vygotsky gives prominence to the role of social interaction for individual's learning and development. Mental activities develop into higher functions through social interaction

(Lantolf&Appel, 1994). Therefore, cognitive development is not only a matter of a systematic internal processing; rather individual cognitive development is a result of socially meaningful engagements (Lantolf&Appel, 1994). New concepts are acquired through social interactions. Accordingly, the Vygotskyan perspective emphasizes social and cognitive development. In this respect, it is similar to traditional cognitive approaches discussed in the previous section. However, its distinctiveness lies in stressing the social dimension. Vygotsky (1979) states 'The social dimension of consciousness [i.e. all mental processes] is primary in time and fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary' (p. 30). Sociocultural theory does not deny the innate biological capacities. Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995) state

Development does not proceed as the unfolding of inborn capacities, but as the transformation of innate capacities once they intertwine with socioculturally constructed mediational means (p. 109 cited in Zuengler& Miller, 2006, p. 39).

A number of EFL research studies have investigated the influence of interactive work on learners' development of text understanding. Chang (1995) compared the traditional method of whole-class teaching and an interactive reading approach in an English reading class. The results revealed that the average scores of the participants in the experimental

group that had been taught interactively were significantly better than that of the students in the control traditional teacher-centred class. Stevens, Slavin, and Farnish. (1991), Wang (2008), and Anderson and Roit (1993) drew the same conclusions of their experimental approach.

In investigating the role of social interaction in text comprehension, Wang (2008), examined the effect of collaborative strategic reading (CSR) on the reading comprehension of sixthgrade learners. CSR involves learners' engagement in a dialogue for shared understanding. Sixty-two pupils were divided into two groups. A control group received a traditional teacherdirected reading instruction and an experimental group taught with CSR instruction using story retelling strategy for fifteen weeks. The study used multiple measures: a questionnaire of English learning background and pre-tests and post-tests of reading comprehension. Based on the results, the researcher concluded that learner interaction through the use of CSR improved participant overall reading comprehension.

Huang's study was different (2004, cited in ZainolAbidin, &Riswanto, 2012). The study focused on developing high school students' strategic reading and critical thinking ability during classroom interaction. The conclusions showed that the group, which worked interactively, did not outperform the control group. However, qualitative analysis on postreading writing samples revealed that interaction among participants assisted their critical thinking and idea exploration. In addition, a majority of the participants' reflections from the post-intervention questionnaire viewed CSR as an effective teaching strategy that encouraged their autonomous learning skills. The somewhat contradictory results of this study propose a more in-depth investigation to scrutinize learners' reading developmental progress during interaction with other learners and the teacher in a language-learning context.

Drawing on the literature, this study is based on the premise that rooted in a social constructivist paradigm, learner interaction can support individual construction of meaning through scaffolding techniques. The study focuses on investigating the role of Learning Conversations. Learners will be encouraged to interact collaboratively to co-construct meaning during their group work. The teacher/researcher will mediate and scaffold in areas where learners seem unable to construct the meaning. At this point, the teacher mediates learners' current level to develop understanding.

Learning Conversations in the

classroom involve dialogic-based instruction to move learning and understanding to a higher level. They stress the role of teachers for mediating learning. Teachers mediate the learning process to conduct the conversations and guide the talk at an appropriate level in order to activate learners' existing knowledge (schema activation; see section 2.3.1) and develop new understandings (Harnett, 2008). Learning Conversations give rise to more thoughtful questions that elaborate the relation between learners' existing schema and the correction of misunderstanding rather than merely selecting correct answers from the learners (Rohler&Cantlon, 1997). Such process of elaborating the relation between new learning and learners' existing knowledge is at the core of social constructivism.

Wells and Arauz (2006) argue that the ordinary classroom activity of asking and answering questions does not provide learners with the opportunity for discussing their ideas or commenting on other learners' responses. Such activities typically involve the teacher asking a question followed by a learner answer and the teacher evaluates the response, initiation-response-evaluation (IRE). The three processes tend to close dialogue with few opportunities for further thoughtful questions. Researchers stress the role of other types of interaction besides the IRE procedure for achieving deeper learning and making learning settings more dialogic (Mercer, 1995; Gibbons, 2015).

Learning Conversations require teachers to encourage learner's active participation in extended dialogue to enable them to articulate, reflect upon and modify their understanding (Mercer, 2000) what Swain (2009) refers to as languaging. During Learning Conversations, teachers encourage interactive talk to develop gradually. Dialogic interaction contributes to meaning making and assists learners in deeper understanding and reflection (Myhill, 2006; Aljaafreh&Lantolf, 1994). It is a prerequisite for effective intervention to identify the learners' needs which in turn guide the nature of the dialogues to emerge: 'no language teaching program should be designed without a thorough needs analysis' (Long, 2005, p. 1). At this point, it must be stressed that such interventional meditation for learning is not restricted to a specific age group or particular learning contexts.

Research Questions

The discussion of the role of background knowledge in comprehending texts and identifying the role of social interaction for learning led to the emergence of the following research questions with an overall aim of investigating the effect of both types of interaction-social and

psycholinguistic- in enhancing EFL Libyan students' comprehension of short fiction:

1. What are the perceived problems of EFL Libyan learners in reading short stories?

2. How effective is schematic activation including text organization and text cultural content in supporting EFL Libyan learners' understanding of short stories?

3. How is learners' construction of meaning supported through Learning Conversations?

4. What are the perceptions of Libyan students of using Learning Conversations in an interactive on-line VLE in relation to support their comprehension of short stories?
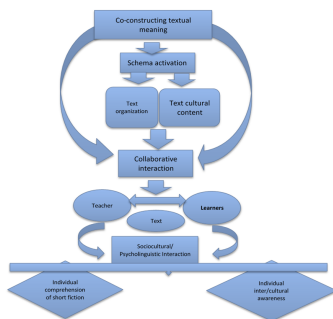
Theoretical Framework

The present research focuses on the role of two different kinds of interaction for the reading of literary texts at the university level in Libya. The first is psycholinguistic interaction between the reader and the text and the second interaction is collaborative interaction for learning through VLEs. These two different types of interaction have led to the design of the study, which explores learner-centred virtual learning environments (VLEs) in the Libyan context. In this study, there is an emphasis on the role of the teacher in providing learners with the relevant background knowledge to notice, develop and extend their cultural and intercultural awareness of the text they are going to read

(Psycholinguistic interaction). In addition, the study focuses on the role of the teacher in mediating the learning process using Learning Conversations as a scaffolding procedure for mutual understanding. In line with this study, Sinclair (2008) emphasizes that teacher's mediation can foster learners' awareness of the learning process and the subject of learning. Accordingly, the teacher needs to identify, prior to and during the reading process, the degree and level of scaffolding offered to learners through the Learning Conversations. Learners will engage actively through dialogues with other learners and with the teacher to negotiate the meaning of texts.

Teacher intervention through Learning Conversations raises awareness of the learner's needs and identifies any further problems in setting learning goals. Activities prior to the reading process focuses on the problematic areas identified by each learner in reading literary texts. The purpose of this is to build relevant language and cultural knowledge and to encourage learners to reflect on their problems and cognitive processes while reading. In other words, Learning Conversations as a scaffolding procedure are used to engage the learners in discussions for negotiating the meaning with the help of their teacher to guide the learners to deeper levels of understanding and provide learning opportunities. Learners, therefore, are not 'the processors of input or

producers of output' (Gibbons, 2003, p. 248). Rather, Learning Conversations, as employed in this study, create opportunities for mediating learning in order to appropriate the scaffolding level and help learners negotiate for meaning.

Figure 1 Stages of Intercultural Interactive Processing Model of Reading EFL short fiction

Participants of the study

Considering the research focus, the researcher has employed a purposeful sampling strategy. The sample of the current study comprises a group of 10 upper-intermediate Libyan EFL learners who volunteered to participate. The participants all specialize in English language and linguistics. They study English literature as a compulsory university course. The participants are registered in semester 5 in Benghazi University, which is one of the oldest and the largest universities in Libya. The purpose of selecting semester 5 Libyan EFL learners is to avoid beginners of reading English short fiction in

semesters 2 and 4 or very advanced learners of semesters 6 and 7. The participants range in age from 20 to 22. They are all Libyans and Arabic is their mother tongue. The students involved in the study have not experienced a dialogic interactive approach to learning due to the more traditional Libyan teaching approach, which is primarily lecture-based. Therefore, the participants fit the purpose of the present study because they are all learners of EFL and have been exposed to English literary materials. In the analysis of the data, the participants were given numbers from 1 to 10 instead of using their names for ethical considerations.

The texts used in the study

The online learning sessions founded on four literary texts ran across five reading sessions. They were all English short stories, which are included in the university curriculum and taught in the Department of English Language and Linguistics in Benghazi University. The stories were of different length: two short stories and two longer ones to investigate if there would be any influence of the text length on the learners' interest or their reading ability while reading the stories. The original forms of the texts were used with no changes or modifications to the text. The researcher's work was on setting the pre-reading activities, which intended to provide the learners with some background information and activate their schema. The

researcher's work also involved setting comprehension questions that focus on learners' ability to construct the meaning as well as to consider the text cultural content while reading.

The four stories included in the sessions were:

Session 1: The Cask of Amontillado by Edgar Allan Poe

The Cask of Amontillado is a short story written by Edgar Allan Poe. It was first published in in 1846. The story is set in an underground catacomb in Italy, during Carnival. The events of the story are about two friends: Montresor and Fortunato. Montresor decides to take revenge on Fortunato for an insult, which remains unstated in the story. Fortunato has a passion for wine used by Montresor to bring Fortunato to his death.

Session 2: The Ambitious Guest by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Ambitious Guest is a short story about a young man who visits a family living in a dangerous area of Crawford Notch, which is located through the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The family built a shelter to save themselves from the frequent rock fall from the mountain. On arrival, the guest shared his ambitions and dreams with the family. However, they all perished because of the bad weather in the shelter which they thought will save them.

Session 3: The story of an hour by Kate Chopin

The story was written in 1894. It was about Mrs. Mallard, who has a heart problem. She received bad news of her husband's death in an accident. Her reaction to the news included sadness and happiness due to the life she had with him. However, the 'news' turned out to be a joke that led to the subsequent death of Mrs. Mallard.

Chopin in The Story of an Hour addresses the societal tradition of that period in which women were subordinate to men. Some information about the issue was presented to learners prior to reading. Constructing the meaning of the text involves a consideration of the cultural content of the period.

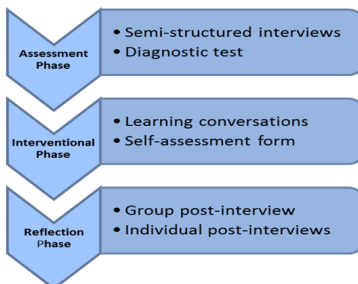Sessions 4-5: Young Goodman Brown by Nathaniel Hawthorne

This story is the longest one. It was presented through two learning sessions. The events of the story took place in 17th century Puritan New England. Hawthorne addresses the Puritan belief that all of humanity exists in a state of corruption. The symbolic manner of the story shows how Young Goodman Brown takes a journey in the forest during a dark evening for self-investigation. After his return, he lost belief in the people of his village including his wife.

Methods of data collection

In accordance with ethical guidelines of the University of Aberdeen, the researcher was granted an ethical approval. Following the ethical approval, the design of the study in terms of the data collection methods and the activities to be used with the

participants in the online learning sessionswas directed by the research questions.The study is organized into three phases to consider the potential learning problems of reading and understanding EFL literature, an assessment of the learners' needs is essential to guide the design of the intervention. An initial assessment of learners' needs is assigned. This phase is referred to as the Assessment Phase. Subsequently, the study examines the effect of the interventional scaffolding of the dialogic exchanges through the Learning Conversations which involve a closer investigation of the joint work of the teacher (researcher) and the learners in co-constructing the text meaning. Accordingly, collecting data from the Learning Conversations in each session is fundamental. This stage is referred to as the Interventional Phase. Following the Interventional Phase, participants have to reflect on the effectiveness of the interventional classes on developing their construction of the text meaning. This phase is labelled the Reflection Phase.

Stages of the data collection

Data analysis

Following the data collection process, two different types of analysis were applied to the transcribed data. Content analysis was used with the initial interviews and the post interviews as well as the self-assessment forms of the learnersto interpret the findings by coding the data into meaningful categories.Discourse analysis however was applied to the Learning Conversations of the online learning session in an effort to scrutinize the learners' talk during the online dialogic interaction of the Learning Conversations.

Analysis of the assessment phase Initial interview dataanalysis

During the initial interviews, the participants raised important pedagogical issues related to reading English literature in the Libyan context. Such issues represent the teaching and learning practices common in the Libyan learning setting. They can be summarized in the following in the following points:

1. Learner overreliance on memorization

The first issue concerns the role of memorization, which was stressed by three of the participants.Student 5 pointed out that in literature courses they are required to memorize information introduced by the teachers and to reproduce the information in the exams.

S 5 Not only to read it. There is teachers who read the story and wants us to memorize some important points, which will they will come in the exams.

As the teachers require students to learn some textual features, learners over-rely on memorization, which they find difficult. One of the students explained that memorizing the formal features of the literary texts for the exams is very difficult as they study a considerable number of texts.

S 9 It is not only about memorizing staff - memorizing this and so. We take a lot of stories, so (masaletalhafedsatakonsaaba fi elemtehan, ahyanannansamathlan al point of view men kesa le kesa) memorization for the exam will be difficult. Sometimes I can't remember, for example, the point of view of one story to another.

The data holds that the traditional teaching practices applied in the Libyan university limit the active role of the learners. The data indicate that learners rely on the information from the teachers without thinking or making sense of the text from their own point of view. Teachers transmit some formal features of the text and the learners are required to memorize them. Such practice considers education as a process of storing information to be recalled later for the exams. In other words, learners memorize some features of the stories for passing their exams without necessarily an understanding of underpinning principles.

2. Learner engagement/ Preparation

Another pedagogical factor that emerged from the coding of the initial interview is related to the learner engagement in the reading process. Learners expressed their needs in the EFL literature class stating that they need to prepare the literary text before class. Four of the participants indicated that preparation would help understanding the content of the text.

S 8 I think, I need some time to read the story before the class. I think, this will help me understand more (translation).

In respect of the above data, the participants pointed out some practices for their engagement in the reading process involving learners' schematic familiarity with the text content. The participants explained that reading the story before class would help their understanding. Moreover, the data reveal that learners needed some kind of knowledge of the text in order to engage in the reading process. Teacher transmission of some formal information about the text without learners' awareness of the text content leads them to lack interest and engagement as they do not possess the essential schema that engage them in the reading process

3. Opportunities for learner discussion

Another pedagogical issue that four of the participants proposed during the initial interview is the role of discussion. In spite of the dominance of the traditional (i.e. teacher-centred) classroom in the Libyan education, Libyan learners are aware of the importance of discussion in terms of deepening their understanding.Student 5 also explained that discussion can

highlight some important points that the learner might not be aware of.

S 5 Also I want to see other students a point of view about the stories because sometimes the story that has more than one idea. May be a student see it from aside and another see it from another side.

4. Difficulties in understanding the text

The coding process of the initial interviews also indicated that Libyan EFL learners in the Department of English language and Linguistics have many different problems with the literary text itself. These problems range from the lexical level (e.g. understanding individual words from the text) to textual (e.g. following the development of the story).The data reveal that the learners lack the lexical knowledge that make it possible for them to read short fiction without support. However, the learners are more aware of the reasons why the words in literary texts are difficult on the basis of their experiences of reading EFL literary texts. The participants emphasized the different reasons for the difficulty of vocabulary in literary texts. Firstly, two students explained that there are some words that their meanings cannot be found in the dictionaries. Some of these words are either non-English words or they are old English words such as 'thee' and 'thou'.

Additionally, student 5 explained that the dictionary meaning of some words does not fit in the text. The data indicate that as some words are used in an indirect or figurative way

for specific meanings the literary writer intends to convey therefore, the denotative (i.e. dictionary) meaning does not fit in the text. Accordingly, based on their experiences, the learners find it difficult to relate the denotative meaning of the word to the context in which it is used.

S 5 It was also difficult for me to understand it because when I search it in dictionaries sometimes I do not find the meaning for the word or sometimes I don't found the word ever. Also, I find the meaning but not suitable to the story. Its meaning.

Difficulties experienced in understanding vocabulary in literary texts discussed in the previous section have the effect of preventing Libyan EFL learners' understanding of the story development.In addition, comprehension difficulties are usually related to the specific organization of literary texts (. i.e. the formal organization of the text) and structure designed by the writer. Libyan EFL learners usually find it difficult to follow the development of the story as they lack familiarity with organization of the text.

5.Lack of awareness of cultural reference in the text

Cultural references are another difficulty that learners explained in the initial interviews. The data reveal that different cultures or different periods of history presented in literature do not correspond to familiarity of learners' own views or beliefs. Therefore, lack of awareness with the cultural content in the

literary text impedes their understanding.The learners raised an important point regarding the cultural content of literature. They indicated that they need to be made more aware of the cultural norms in the text. Student 3 below stressed the role of the teacher for providing the learners with information of the cultural information involved in literature.

According to the initial semi-structured interview data, Libyan EFL learners' difficulties in learning English literature are not only related to the nature of English literary texts such as the lexicon of the text, the cultural reference, and comprehending the development of the events, but also to traditional teaching practices and deficiencies in educational resources.

In spite of the traditional approaches that dominate teaching practices in Libya, learners are aware of the importance of their active role in the learning process. During the initial interviews, learners stressed that there should be more questioning and discussion in the class. Therefore, there should be a further exploration of the effectiveness of involving them in the process of reading literature.

Another important concern is the deficiency of the resources that contribute to develop the Libyan EFL learners' reading habits. There is a scarcity in the reading materials and learners do not usually engage in reading activities that would contribute to developing their reading skill in general and reading EFL literature in particular. In addition, there is poverty of

technological tools such as the use of classroom computers and internet connection that might contribute to encourage learners' reading and discovery. However, it must be stressed that the learners are aware of the importance of reading and efforts are made to provide materials for developing reading.

Analysis of the diagnostic test

The initial interview data was triangulated with the diagnostic test to investigate learners' difficulties in understanding the meaning of literary texts. Two questions constituted the diagnostic test. The first question included ten open-ended questions. The second question was a multiple-choice question including 6 items. In order to classify the learners' responses of the diagnostic test into different categories, the responses were classified manually for the collation of the results. These results are then listed in tables.In order to identify which category was more problematic, the frequency of errors is summarized below.

Frequency and percentages of incorrect responses

Error type	Frequency of errors	Percentages
Literary devices	14	70%
Ironic language	17	85%
Direct language	9	45%
Text development	37	74%
Cultural content	11	55%
Text meaning	19	63.3%

The analysis of the Preparation Phase identified some of the difficulties that this group of Libyan EFL learners have in reading short fiction written in English. The findings suggest that a number of challenges hindered the understanding of the text meaning. The discussion has elaborated the categorized problems by analysing the initial semi-structured interviews and the diagnostic test. The interviews demonstrated a significant identification of the participants' problems and their needs. The diagnostic test data alone would not have effectively demonstrated and justified the difficulties.

On the basis of the categorized problems that have been identified through the initial interviews and the diagnostic test, the Learning Conversations were designed to scaffold the learners' requirements and difficulties. It is assumed that providing learners with the formal and cultural schema of the text, presenting a glossary of the text and allowing more collaboration among the learners will lead them to construct the meaning of the text and better understand its literary devices such as irony, which \was identified as the most problematic in the diagnostic test.

Analysis of the Intervention Phase Findings on the role of the pre-reading information

In the Intervention Phase, learners' questioning in the prereading activities also confirms their lack of familiarity with the cultural content of the stories. In The Cask of Amontillado, for instance, the learners did not have prior knowledge about the season of Carnival and asked questions during the pre-reading discussion. The data extract below is a part of the learners' discussion:

T The story was set in carnival.

S 10 Carnival for celebration.

S 2 Celebration for what?

S 10 I think it is Halloween.

S 3 Carnival is festival after fasting for 40 days for Christian peopleafter fasting.

S 3 Carnival was in Rome.

In order to compensate their lack of familiarity with the text content, the learners responded differently to the reading text. First of all, the learners sometimes provided personal and individual responses to the pre-reading activities, which intended to build their schema in relation to the text content. Furthermore, the learners related unfamiliar concepts to religious, cultural and personal perspectives of their own familiarity. For example, in The Cask of Amontillado, the learners related the use of the casks to an earlier experience of using casks for storing milk rather than for wine as the latter contradicts their cultural and religious beliefs.

S 2 Nice wooden box.

S 9 It is similar to cartoon where they save milk.

S 3 oh yes, Katolihhhhh.

However, by presenting the cultural context of the stories in this study prior to reading, it can be postulated that 'learned' cultural background knowledge contributed

to the learners' construction of the text meaning. In The Story of An Hour, the learners justified the joyfulness of Mrs. Mallard's reaction when she heard the news of her husband's death in the light of the cultural background of the story. Learners' familiarity with the kind of life that women had at the period led them to understand the character's reaction. Another example is in The Cask of Amontillado. Learners' understanding of the nature of Carnival and the manner of celebrating it led them to justify Montresor's choice of the setting for his crime. This finding confirms Ketchum's claim (2006) who argues that non-native speakers lack the cultural competence that enables them to construct the meaning of the texts without support.

In line with schema theory and the role of background knowledge in reading texts, it can be argued that the pre-reading information compensated the learners' lack of familiarity with the cultural content of the text. In this respect, the present study is in line with earlier research findings (Alptekin, 2006; Erten&Razi, 2009; Sasaki, 2000). These studies support the claim that nativizing texts into the learners' cultural schema develops learners' understanding of the texts as it replaces the foreign cultural content of the text with the learners' native cultural familiarity. However, familiarizing learners with the cultural content of the literary text, rather than nativizing stories, to

enable them to construct the meaning in the light of the writer's intention and the cultural context of the literary text itself, distinguished the present research. Furthermore, the cultural content of the English reading stories enabled the learners to develop their cultural and intercultural awareness of the stories.

The cultural information had an effective role during the reading process more than the information of the formal organization of the text. This finding concurs with the finding of Floyd and Carrell (1987) who concluded that the cultural information affected the process of reading comprehension more than the formal organization of the text. It also confirms the findings of Johnson (1981) whose results emphasize that the role of the cultural origin of the reading texts is more important for understanding the text than the semantic and syntactic complexity of the texts. It should be emphasized here that in the present study the introduction of the formal organization of the stories contained limited information including what, where and when. The learners did not appear to rely very often on formal information. This was confirmed through the learners' reflection when they stressed that the diagram, which presents the formal information, should include more information. It was also emphasized in the Intervention Phase when the learners needed more information about the formal organization for

Young Goodman Brown. Although the learners were presented with some information of the formal organization, it was difficult for them to understand the organization of the text. They needed more information, which indicated which part of the text was real and which was a dream.

Findings on the role of the dialogic exchanges

It was revealed through the analysis of the Learning Conversations that the learners internalized the pre-reading information through discussion and negotiation. This information was used later in constructing text meaning. This is in line with Vygotskian principles concerning the dialogic nature of cognitive development, which is socially constructed. Accordingly, the social context is central for the development of cognition (Thorne, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Lantolf, 2000). The data below show the dialogic exchanges between the teacher and the learner:

T So, why do you think the character chose such time and place?

S 2 He is dangerous, many are busy in having fun, eating foods and dancing

In addition to the role of pre-reading information in the reading process, it should be noted that the analysis of the Learning Conversations reveals that dialogic exchanges were useful for both less and more confident students. It can be argued therefore that collaborative reading contributed to improving the range of learners' reading comprehension in the present investigation. From a social constructivist perspective, the scaffolding provided by more confident readers contributed to the development of the learning of less confident readers. For example, more confident readers used some of the cognitive concepts such as the definitions of some literary terms as well as the pre-reading information, which benefited low performance learners during the discussion by relating them to the reading texts. In other words, more confident readers used their linguistic knowledge as well as the pre-reading information to achieve comprehension of the texts during collaborative reading.

The analysis of the Learning Conversations also revealed that learners engaged effectively to help each other for developing understanding. The learners scaffolded each other many times in the learning process. Sometimes, they clarified the text language in their own words, explained the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, corrected other learners' ideas about the text, or summarized what had been already discussed to other learners who were in the process of developing understanding. In The Ambitious Guest, for instance, student 2 did not take a turn in the discussion for constructing the meaning of the metaphor used in the text. However, the learner developed understanding through other learners' discussion. The data below show that student 2 later in

the discussion scaffolding student 10 using the knowledge that he developed through the other learners' discussion.

S 10 Still not understand. S 2 (...)
S 10, the writer used word roar that refers to a lion when it cried out, the sound is like that the storm, done.

As learners may have different perspectives, beliefs and background information, the present study concluded that different views shared through discussion, bridged the gaps in the learners' understanding and contributed to the construction of text meaning. For instance, some of the learners reflected in the post-interviews that they developed more understanding during the discussion because they always 'discover more ideas' and 'more points of view' through the discussion. Others explained that their understanding was 'corrected' when 'discussed' with others. In the words of one student 'a lot of thing was wrong and I correct it when I work with the class.'

The data revealed that exploratory talk through questioning included complementary turns among the learners during the discussion where they could share different ideas and interpretations of the text drawing on prior knowledge as well as their understanding of the texts. The complementary nature of the discussion was confirmed in the present study through the triangulation of the data. It is stressed by student 5 in the Preparation Phase considering the different views which could emerge stating 'May be a student see it from a side and another

see it from side'. The complementary role of the discussion was also revealed through the analysis of the Learning Conversation. In The Ambitious Guest, for instance, understanding the text involved more interaction between the readers and the text itself, rather than relying on the pre-reading information. The learners' discussion of the story shows that they had complementary discussion relying on the learners' understanding of the story. In other words, every learner understood and remembered a different piece of information about the text. This led them to complement one another during the discussion for meaning making of the text. This was confirmed by the learners' reflection in the post interviews when student 9, for example, stated 'everyone had a point and I can understand more through these point'.

Despite the benefits of the discussion for meaning-making of the texts, it was confusing for some learners. The different views included in the discussion made some learners feel confused about the meaning. For instance, in The Cask of Amontillado, student 3 stated 'Really I feel lost after the idea of revenge'. Student 6 in the post interviews also confirmed the confusion of ideas included in the discussion when the student indicated 'Ok - but in other times I said a lot of views made me lose my focus'. This was addressed in the present study through the direct intervention of the teacher to indicate which responses provided by

the learners were related to the meaning as illustrated in the analysis of the Learning Conversations, increasing the learners' concentration on the relevant answers.

It should be stressed here that the discussion in the present study also involved focusing on learners' background knowledge and prior learning for meaning making of the texts. However, throughout the sessions some learners found it difficult to understand independently without scaffolding including online information as well as teacher intervention. For instance, in the analysis of the Learning Conversations student 2 has a good background knowledge of some literary terms. The learner was able to define the linguistic features of symbols and personifications. However, he was not able to construct the meaning of these devices within the literary text itself without scaffolding. Teacher intervention through providing the learners with examples of personification was effective in leading them to finding their own examples as shown in the data below.

T Give me examples of personification

S 2 Personification is a figure of speechwhere human

*   qualities are givento animals, objects or ideas.*

*   It means representing a non-humanthing as if it were human.*

T Ok. See this example Time ran yesterday.

S 2 Oh yes, the flame of the candle danced in the dark.

This is example of personification but in the story the traveller,

the guest are words used to represent death.

S 5 Mrs. Hana I can give an example of personification, which I have found it while I was reading the story?

T Yes please.

S 5 This sentence was told by the father when the stranger came and the sound of graves were strong and horrible. the old mountain has thrown a stone at us, for fear we should forget him'. The sentence is in the first page at the end of the page.

Although the online information facilitated the learners' role of constructing the meaning, teacher scaffolding was crucial. The role of the teacher in the present research is validated in the analysis of the dialogic exchanges of the collaborative reading process. Accordingly, the use of the Learning Conversations emphasizes the role of the teacher which includes the roles of a facilitator as well as a direct instructor as it will be revealed in the following sections.

Conclusions

The underlying aim of the present study was placed on exploring the effectiveness of learners' familiarity with the structure and the cultural content of EFL literary texts in a collaborative learning setting. Earlier studies that emphasized the role of learners' prior knowledge in the process of reading comprehension were very rich but very limited investigation concentrated on

investigating the role of prior knowledge in a collaborative learning setting. Learners' prior learning and background experiences are critical in the present investigation for effective mutual understanding.

Through the analysis of the data, it was clear that Libyan EFL learners did not rely only on the prior learning for constructing the meaning of the texts. Their everyday experiences and their cultural and religious perspectives provided an integral part of their responses to the texts. This suggests that learners as social beings are influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which they live. The effectiveness of using the learners' cultural background was clearly revealed through the dialogic activities in which the learners were engaged during the reading process.

Hence, an excessive emphasis on the learners' native cultural background as stressed by earlier research might be misleading. Aspects of the cultural content of the reading texts in the socio-cognitive reading context introduced in this study would have the Libyan EFL learners as knowledge producers. Accordingly, the present investigation reveals that a consideration of both the cultural content of the text and learners' native culture has the potential of engaging the learners in a process of developing their intercultural awareness without excluding their cultural values.

Accordingly, the Intercultural Interactive Processing model of the present study demanded learners' involvement in their own learning with teacher guidance. It included the use of several tools such as the teacher's input and scaffolding, Learning Conversations and learners' reflections through the self-assessment forms. A consideration of the learners' use of the self-assessment forms was constantly incorporated in the designing of the subsequent learning sessions. Thus, the active role of the learners in the present research views learning as a dynamic process which fosters learners' responsibility through the use of Learning Conversations and self-assessment tools in the VLE. The analysis of such tools developed the teacher's awareness of the learners' needs as shown in the analysis of the Learning Conversations and the self-assessment forms. These tools enabled the teacher to provide the learners with materials (e.g. pre-reading input) and scaffolding (e.g. while reading examples) which respond more closely to their needs. The collaborative learning process of the teacher and the learners led to a progressive framework, which supports learners' development.

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