The Role of Cultural Nativization in Comprehension of Short Stories in EFL Reading Contexts

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore the role of cultural nativization in reading comprehension of target language short stories in Iranian EFL learners. For this purpose, 3 American short stories were nativized into learners' own culture (i.e. Persian) following Alptekin's (2006) definition of cultural nativization. Then, 2 types of reading comprehension tests, one based on the original stories and one based on the nativized versions, were developed. To carry out the research, 2 groups of advanced EFL learners, including 29 males and 31 females, participated in the study. In order to collect the relevant data, each version of the reading comprehension test was administered to one group of the subjects. The results clearly illustrated that cultural nativization had a facilitative effect on comprehension of the stories. Surprisingly, this effect was not only at the literal but also at the inferential level of comprehension. The findings of the study bear implications for EFL teachers and material designers.

The role of prior knowledge in reading comprehension has been the subject of a considerable body of research over the past few decades. Studies on the effect of background knowledge on both first language (L1) and second language (L2) reading comprehension have generally found a significant, positive effect for background knowledge as either a main effect or as part of a complex interaction (Barry & Lazarte, 1998; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Chang, 2006; Floyd & Carrell, 1987; Hammadou, 2000; Johnson, 1982; Kendeou & van den Broek, 2007; Keshavarz, Atai, & Ahmadi, 2007; Leeser, 2007; Ozuru, Dempsey, & McNamara, in press; Rawson & Kintsch, 2004; Roller & Matambo, 1992; Yin, 1985).

The facilitative role of prior knowledge has been motivated primarily via schema-theoretic model of comprehension which has as one of its fundamental tenets that no text, whether spoken or written, by itself carries meaning; rather, it only provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or reconstruct the intended meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge (Hadley, 2003, p. 134). Thus, in relation to reading, comprehending a text is an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text, and efficient comprehension depends on the availability and activation of relevant schemata to relate the textual material to one's own knowledge (Davidson, 2004; Semino, 2002).

One of the most interesting and well-documented findings of schema-theoretic studies, particularly in L2 reading, has been the significant role that cultural schemata or cultural background knowledge plays in reading comprehension. It has been argued that non-native readers' failure to activate appropriate cultural schemata during reading may result in various degrees of non-comprehension. The reason is that while native readers, as Ketchum (2006) points out, already possess the necessary cultural background knowledge when approaching a written text, non-native readers must overcome an added challenge of cultural unfamiliarity when processing written communication (p. 23).

A growing body of empirical research has investigated the influence of cultural background knowledge on reading comprehension (Abu-Rabia, 1996, 2003; Carrell, 1987; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Johnson, 1981; Pritchard, 1990; Steffensen & Joag-dev, 1992; Steffensen, Joag-dev, & Anderson, 1979, Yeut Hung Chan, 2003, among others). In terms of methodology, most studies investigating the issue have included at least two groups of subjects with different cultural backgrounds and two passages assumed to be linguistically and rhetorically equivalent. One of the passages presupposed the cultural framework of the first group and another one the cultural framework of the second group. Results

generally indicated that each group was better able to understand the text which presupposed their own culture.

Recent trends in research on the role of cultural background knowledge in L2 reading comprehension have focused on two groups of subjects with the same cultural background and one text in two different contexts. That is, several culturally unfamiliar words in the original text are changed to more familiar ones in the modified version. Then each group reads either the culturally familiar or the culturally unfamiliar version of the text. The first study of this type was carried out by Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989). Based on the assumption that "very simple things like nouns referring to persons and places carry with them some fairly subtle semantic and pragmatic information" (p. 144), they changed several culturally unfamiliar words (e.g. Nicholas, Athen, Klein) from two English texts into more familiar words (Ben, Osaka, Daiei) for the Japanese participants. Leaving all other words intact, Chihara et al. could control other possible intervening variables such as the content and syntactic complexity of the two texts. The results of the cloze test showed that the participants performed significantly better on the modified, that is culturally familiar, cloze texts than on the original texts.

Chihara et al.'s (1989) study was later followed by Al-Fallay (1994, as cited in Oller, 1995), who examined the effect of cultural familiarity on Arab EFL students' cloze test performance over a three month period. In his study, he used two narratives. One was an English translation of a story originally written about an Arab setting, and the other was a story in English by an American with reference to events that took place in the United States. The American story was adapted positively to fit Arab expectations, and the Arab story was adapted negatively to violate Arab expectations. Five cloze tests over the Arab story and five over the Arabized version of the American story were presented sequentially in ten administrations over a three month period to the experimental group. The counterpart tests, consisting of five tests over the unmodified American story and five tests over the Americanized version of the Arab story were presented over the same period in matched administrations to the control group. Results indicated that the experimental group performed better on all ten cloze tests owing to the conformity of the textual material to their sociocultural expectations.

Sasaki (2000) investigated how schemata activated by culturally familiar words might have influenced students' cloze test-taking processes. Two groups of Japanese EFL learners with equivalent English reading proficiency completed either a culturally familiar or an unfamiliar version of a cloze test. Partially replicating Chihara et al.'s (1989) experiment, she changed several unfamiliar words in the original cloze test passage to more familiar ones in the modified version. Unlike Chihara et al., however, students were asked to give verbal reports of their test-taking processes, and to recall the passage after they had completed the test. Results demonstrated that those who read the culturally familiar cloze text tried to solve more items and generally understood the text better, which resulted in better performance, than those students who read the original text.

An important point regarding the texts selected for research purposes in the aforementioned studies is that the modified versions were different from the original versions only in a limited number of words such as names of persons and places. In Sasaki's (2000) study, for instance, only eight nouns including six proper nouns were changed into more culturally familiar words in the modified version.

Modification to the original English text through using more culturally familiar terms was extensively utilized by Alptekin (2002, as cited in Razi, 2003) who introduced the notion of cultural nativization in comprehension of the target language short stories. In his more recent work, Alptekin (2006) defines cultural nativization as "sociological, semantic and pragmatic adaptation of the textual and contextual cues of the original story into the learner's own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact" (p. 499).

By textual cues Alptekin (2006) means data having to do with settings and locations as well as characters and occupations (p. 499). Examples of Turkish nativization, or Turkification of textual cues are changing *New York City* to *Istanbul*, *church* to *mosque*, *William Randolph Hearst* to *Sukru Saracoglu*, and *organist* to *piano player* (p. 500).

By contextual cues Alptekin (2006) further means culture-specific customs, rituals, notion, structures, and values (p. 499). In fact, he defines nativization based on sociological, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions of culture, as described by Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990). The sociological dimension, as Alptekin (2006) argues, includes culture-specific contextual cues of customs and rituals such as religious conventions, courting patterns, social festivities, interpersonal relationships, and home and family life (p. 500). Examples of sociological adaptations are replacing *the traditional American*

Sunday dinner in the original story by *a Bayram (a religious holiday for Turks) meal* and *Sunday clothes* by *Bayram clothes* (p. 500).

Nativization through the semantic dimension, according to Alptekin (2006), involves the adaptation of culture-specific notions and structures, for example, conceptual and lexical changes made in areas such as food, currency, clothes, drinks, and institutions (p. 500). Finally, nativization through the pragmatic dimension, as Alptekin (2006) mentions, embodies substitution of native cultural values for target language cultural values; for instance, the sense of American individualism seen in the protagonist's actions in the original story is replaced by the sense of Turkish group solidarity conveyed through the protagonist's deeds in the nativized version (p. 500).

Alptekin (2006) argues that, unlike simplification, nativization maintains natural comprehension components such as textual patterns of redundancy. In addition, contrary to the lower-level processing of presumably equivalent texts in earlier research on schema theory, the lower-level processing of original texts and their nativized versions are nearly identical (p. 497).

Based on the concept of nativization introduced by Alptekin (2002, as cited in Razi, 2003), Razi (2003) investigated the impact of both nativization and reading activities on reading comprehension of English major students at a university in Turkey. He nativized an American short story in a way that reflected the learners' own culture; that is, he rewrote the story as if it were taking place in the city of Canakkale in Turkey. Therefore, in the nativized version all the names of persons and places were changed to Turkish names, and a number of concepts related to such cultural elements as religion, interpersonal relationships, clothes, jobs, and hobbies were changed so as to be indicative of Turkish culture. The first group was given the original short story; the second group was given the nativized version of the same short story; the third group was given the original short story with some pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities, and the fourth group was given the nativized version with the same reading activities. A reading comprehension test based on either the original or the nativized version was administered to each group. Significant differences in comprehension were observed between the four groups in favor of the group who received the nativized version of the short story with reading activities followed by the group who received the original text with activities. These two conditions were followed by the nativized-no-activity condition and the original-no-activity condition. Razi concluded that cultural nativization should be supported by reading activities, and readers' cultural schemata will not be activated by just nativizing the reading texts.

Erten and Razi (2003) carried out a similar study in which they nativized another American short story into Turkish culture in the same way. Again four groups of English major students at a university in Turkey participated in the study. The first group read the original version of the short story while the second group read the nativized version. In comparison to this pairing, the third group of students was given the original story with some reading activities while the fourth group was given the nativized version with the same activities. Comparison of the four groups' performance on reading comprehension test indicated that the groups who read the nativized version of the story, regardless of whether they received any activities or not, outperformed the other two groups who received the original story either with or without reading activities.

It seems that the results of these two studies, that is Razi (2003) and Erten and Razi (2003), are somehow contradictory: While the former suggests that nativization is effective only if it is supported by reading activities, the latter shows a positive effect of nativization on reading comprehension regardless of whether it is supported by reading activities or not. However, there seems to be a major problem with both studies. The weak point is that, in each study, the two groups who read the short story with reading activities were exposed to the story for 60 minutes while the groups who received the story without any reading activities were exposed to it for 45 minutes. Therefore, the claim that either nativization or reading activities would provide better comprehension is questionable. Performance differences among the groups might be the result of differences in time spent on working with the stories.

Razi (2004) replicated the experiment with other groups of English major students at the same university. However, this time all the groups were exposed to the story for 45 minutes. Results indicated that the two groups who received the nativized version of the story, either with or without reading activities, outperformed the other two groups who received the original story. Moreover, the groups who were supported with reading activities outperformed the others who did not do any activities. Razi concluded that both nativization and reading activities have significant effects on reading comprehension; however, nativization has a greater influence vis-à-vis reading activities.

Alptekin (2006) investigated the role of cultural nativization in both literal and inferential comprehension of American short stories. Two groups of Turkish advanced EFL students read either the original version of an American short story or a nativized version, textually and contextually modified to reflect the learners' own culture. Then they answered multiple-choice comprehension questions aimed at checking inferential and literal comprehension independently across the two versions of the story. The results indicated that the nativization of a short story from the target language culture facilitates L2 readers' inferential comprehension significantly, yet it does not affect their literal comprehension.

Studies on cultural nativization suffer from limitations in terms of generalizability of the results. They have typically examined the role of nativization in reading comprehension through nativizing just *one* short story into the language learners' culture. In other words, the empirical scope of each study is so limited that it is difficult to make valid generalizations about the findings. In order to increase the generalizability of the results, it is essential that, instead of one single story, several short stories be culturally nativized and for each story, two types of reading comprehension tests be developed and then administered.

Furthermore, since the above studies have investigated the issue exclusively in relation to Turkish culture and with Turkish EFL learners, the findings can hardly be generalized to other cultural contexts. They need to be confirmed by additional studies with learners from other cultures.

Another problem with previous studies is that, aside from Alptekin's (2006) which has examined nativization in relation to both literal and inferential comprehension, other studies have focused on reading comprehension as a whole. However, in order to arrive at a better understanding of the role played by cultural nativization in reading comprehension, it seems necessary to analyze the two elements separately.

Taking limitations of previous research into consideration, this study is an attempt to explore the role of cultural nativization in comprehension of short stories. More specifically, it investigates the issue in relation to Persian culture in students learning English as a foreign language. It is expected that the findings of this study will be of great importance to development of existing literature and providing insight into the nature of reading comprehension.

Methodology

Participants

Sixty EFL learners, including 29 males and 31 females, participated in this study. They were MA students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the Centre for Science and Research, Islamic Azad University of Ahvaz (the capital city of Khuzestan in southwest of Iran), and selected based on their availability. Their age range ran between 25 and 35. They were supposed to possess a good command of English language proficiency since they had studied English for four years for their BA in translation, English literature, or teaching English as a foreign language, and besides, they had passed at least one semester at the MA level. Since they had studied and passed several courses in advanced grammar, reading comprehension, conversation, basic and advanced writing as well as essay writing at the BA level, they were ranked the upper intermediate to advanced level. In addition, they had passed national university entrance examination from BA to MA level that includes a general English language proficiency test which is a simulation of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). One group was considered as the experimental and another as the control group.

Materials

The materials employed in this study consisted of three unsimplified unabridged short stories written by American writers: *The Chaser* by Collier (1952), *Art for Heart's Sake* by Goldberg (1993), and *Too Soon a Woman* by Johnson (2001). The rationale behind selecting unsimplified stories was that they were supposed to be at the appropriate level of difficulty in terms of lexical and syntactic complexity for advanced level learners.

Two important factors were taken into consideration in selecting the above short stories. First, care was exercised to choose stories of manageable length to give the subjects the chance of reading them in the allotted time without being frustrated. Therefore, the stories selected for the study were

under 2000 words in length, that is 1100, 1500, and 1800 words respectively. Second, the extent to which the stories lent themselves to nativization was taken into account in selection procedure. Every effort was made to select the stories which contained more cultural cues, both textual and contextual as defined by Alptekin (2006) and lent themselves well to cultural adaptation in the nativized versions.

Instrument

In this study, for each story, two types of multiple-choice reading comprehension tests were developed by the researchers. In one type, the comprehension questions were based on the original stories, while in the other, they were based on the nativized versions, overall six reading comprehension tests. The questions were identical in the tests based on the two versions of each story except for particular words or phrases with culture-specific references either in the stem or in the alternatives provided.

The reason behind the use of multiple-choice questions was the objectivity of this form of questions. They were posed following the rubrics rendered by Harris (1969), Hughes (2003), and Madsen (1983). The questions were at literal and inferential levels of comprehension, as described by Day and Park (2005), Farhady (2006), and McKenna and Stahl (2003). Accordingly, factual or literal questions were designed to test the readers' understanding of the explicitly stated information in the story, and inferential questions were posed to measure their understanding of the implicitly stated information in the text and their ability to make logical conclusions or inferences from the story based on their own knowledge and intuition.

The number of comprehension questions and each type of questions in the tests depended on the length as well as the content of the story on which the tests were based. Thus the two tests based on the first story, which was 1100 words in length, included 12 questions, 6 literal and 6 inferential; the two tests based on the second story which was 1500 words, included 14 questions, 8 literal and 6 inferential, and the tests based on the third story included 15 items, 9 literal and 6 inferential (See Appendix A for the questions based on the original and nativized versions of one of the stories).

In order to determine the time needed to read each story and answer the related comprehension questions, one of the stories was piloted. This pilot testing was performed on 5 MA TEFL students other than those who participated in the main study.

Procedures

Nativization procedure

The stories selected for the study were nativized into the language learners' own culture (i.e., Persian) following Alptekin's (2006) definition of nativization. To accomplish this, first, the textual and contextual cues of the original stories which reflected American culture were identified, and then these cues were adapted in the modified versions to reflect Persian culture, while keeping linguistic features and rhetorical structures of the stories unchanged. So this resulted in having two versions of each story – one native English and one nativized.

Textual cues that were nativized involved data having to do with settings, locations, occupations, and characters. Examples of the culture-specific textual cues in the original stories and their nativized forms in the culturally modified versions are given in table 1 below.

Table 1
Examples of Culture-Specific Textual Cues in the Two Versions of the Stories

Original version	Nativized version
Atlantic Art Institute	Khazar Art Institute
Metropolitan Museum	Fine Arts Museum
the United States	Iran
the prairie	the plain
homesteaders	farmers
Elizabeth	Esmat
Judson Livingston	Hamid Ansari

Contextual cues that underwent the process of nativization involved cultural elements which were identified in the texts, based on the sociological, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions of culture, including religious conventions, interpersonal relationships, currency, time and space relations, food, drinks, games, and other cultural concepts. Table 2 demonstrates examples of the culture-specific contextual cues in the original stories and their nativized forms according to Persian culture.

Table 2
Examples of Culture-Specific Contextual Cues in the Two Versions of the Stories

Original version	Nativized version
wine	fruit juice
five thousand dollars	five million tomans
Conestoga	wagon
ten pounds	five kilos
fifteen miles	twenty kilometers
She will think you are killed, or that some siren has caught you.	He will think you are killed, or that you have left him.
Let's make it Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.	Let's make it Saturday, Monday, and Wednesday.
the can with the porcupine grease	the can with the cooking oil
Maybe Peter dozed that way at Gethsemane as the Lord knelt praying.	Maybe children dozed that way at the mosque in Laylat-ul-Qadr as their parents recited Joshan-e-Kabeer.
We played Who's Got the Thimble? with a pine cone.	We played *Gol ya Pooch (Full or Empty)* with a pine cone.

Thus the three American short stories were rewritten by the researcher as if the events were taking place in Iran. The first story, *The Chaser*, is a story about a young man who is passionately in love with a young woman who is indifferent to him. The main character, Alan Austen, wants the love of Diana so badly that he decides to purchase a potion to gain her love. Therefore, he comes to the establishment of a mysterious old man who deals in magic potions in the neighborhood of Pell Street. The nativized version describes a young woman's dream of gaining his husband's love and attention

through a love potion. Here, the main character, Mina Molavi, wants the love of her husband, Bahman, who is indifferent and inattentive to her. Therefore, she comes to an old potion-maker in the neighborhood of Naser Khosro Street.

In the second story, *Art for Heart's Sake*, the main character, Collis P. Ellsworth, is an old businessman who is under the care of Doctor Caswell. Collis has recently suffered a heart attack after his disastrous purchase of a small railroad out in Iowa. While Ellsworth has just begun taking drawing lessons from Frank Swain, an art student, he decides to send his painting to Lathrop Gallery. In the nativized version, the main character is Amir M. Heidari who is under the care of Doctor Yavari, and who had a heart attack after his disastrous purchase of a small detergent factory in Karaj. Heidari takes drawing lessons from Ashkan Nazari and sends his painting to Nilufar Gallery.

The third story, *Too Soon a Woman*, is told in the first person narrative by an 11-year-old boy traveling west with his father and his two sisters, Sarah and Elizabeth, in a wagon pulled by a horse. Along the way, they pick up Mary, the main character of the story, who has run away from somewhere that she does not tell. In the nativized version, the boy is traveling west with his father and his two sisters, Shokat and Esmat, and they pick up Kobra, the main character, who is a distant relative of the father and who has lost her parents in an accident. (See Appendix B for the culture-specific textual and contextual cues identified in the stories and their culturally adapted forms in the nativized versions).

Administration procedure

In order to collect the relevant data, the two versions of the stories were given to the two groups of the subjects participating in the study. Therefore, the subjects in one group (hereafter original group) received the original versions of the stories and the participants in the other group (hereafter nativized group) received the nativized versions. In order to make the study manageable and avoid participant fatigue, each story was read in one session, that is, three sessions for each group. At the end of each reading, students were required to manifest their comprehension by answering multiple-choice comprehension questions developed by the researchers. The participants were served cake and fruit juice at the start of each session, bribing them to read and answer the questions with more care and attention.

During the test administration, questions concerning the content were not responded by the researchers, nor was the use of dictionaries allowed. However, the subjects were allowed to refer to the texts while answering the questions. They were required to mark their answers on a separate answer sheet. Both groups were given 20 minutes for the first story, 30 minutes for the second, and 35 minutes for the third short story, based on our time estimation in the pilot study. The stories were presented to both groups in three consecutive weeks, and the order of the presentation of the stories was the same for the two groups.

Results

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the effectiveness of nativization in comprehension of the stories, in the analysis of the data the three reading comprehension tests, both in the original forms and in the nativized forms, were considered as a single test with 41 questions in total. Initially the descriptive statistics – mean and standard deviation – were calculated for each group. Results indicated the mean score of the nativized group was greater than that of the original group. Standard deviations also showed greater diversity in the distribution of the scores of the original group. Table 3 illustrates the results of descriptive and inferential statistics.

Table 3
Independent T-test on Reading Comprehension Test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	*t*-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Nativized	30	29.3	5.54	3.363	58	.001
Original	30	24.4	5.74			

p<0.05   *t*-critical=2.000

As shown in the table, the observed value of *t* (3.363) was much greater than the critical value of *t* suggesting that the difference was significant, and so nativization of the short stories had a facilitative effect on students' reading comprehension.

To determine whether the difference between the original and nativized groups' reading comprehension is at literal, inferential, or both levels of comprehension, the two groups' scores in literal questions (23 items) on the one hand, and inferential questions (18 items) on the other hand, were analyzed separately. Results demonstrated that the nativized group excelled the original group in both literal and inferential questions since the differences between the two groups were statistically significant in both types of questions. The results of the comparison are depicted in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4
Independent T-test on Literal Questions

Groups	N	Mean	SD	*t*-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Nativized	30	17.40	3	2.924	58	.005
Original	30	14.93	3.51			

p<0.05   *t*-critical=2.000

Table 5
Independent T-test on Inferential Questions

Groups	N	Mean	SD	*t*-value	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Nativized	30	11.90	3.38	2.925	58	.005
Original	30	9.46	3.04			

p<0.05   *t*-critical=2.000

To sum up, analysis of the data revealed that cultural nativization of the short stories had a positive effect on reading comprehension of the stories, and this positive effect was not only at the literal but also at the inferential level of comprehension.

Discussion

The results of the study made clear the fact that nativization of short stories from the target language culture into Persian culture facilitates Iranian EFL learners' comprehension of the stories. The findings can be supported following a number of reasons.

One reason could be that the nativized stories enable readers to activate their appropriate schemata more efficiently than the original stories do. In other words, since the culture-specific textual and con-textual cues which reflected American culture in the original versions of the stories were adapted in the nativized versions to reflect Persian culture, in comparison to the original group, the nativized group could activate their schemata regarding the content of the stories more successfully, which re-sulted in better comprehension of the stories.

If a contrast is made between the two versions of each short story in terms of the basic elements of fiction, that is setting, characters, plot, style, and theme, it becomes evident that the style of writing and the theme are generally the same in the two versions. In fact, they differ in terms of the setting, characters, and to some extent the plot. In discussing the significance of setting in stories, Taloon (2006) argues that the establishment of an identifiable setting is a strong psychological preference in most readers. In their reading of narratives, readers like to know where they are, and look for "clear spatiotemporal indications" of just where and when a thing happened (p. 91). Needless to say, in the nativized stories, the settings are more identifiable to Persian readers because the story takes place somewhere in their own country. For example, a Persian reader of the nativized stories probably has a general idea of what the neighborhood of Naser Khosro Street might look like; in contrast, readers of the original stories possibly fail to recognize the neighborhood of Pell Street as a part of New York's Chinatown. In fact, readers' familiarity with the setting can trigger activation of the schemata about the incidents taking place in that setting.

Similarly, readers' conceptions of the characters in the nativized stories are more consistent with their cultural schemata. Generally speaking, when reading short stories and novels, readers make a person out of words and sentences. A variety of descriptions of some posited individual, together with descriptions – implicit or explicit – of that individual's actions and reactions, suffice to lead readers to conceive of a person of whom these references and insights are just glimpses. Nativization creates a sense of cultural intimacy between readers and their imagined persons because these persons seem more compatible with the readers' own culture. For example, in the first story, *Mina Molavi* in the nativized version is more in line with readers' cultural schemata than *Alan Austen* in the original version is, because in the context of Iran, it is difficult for readers to conceive of a young man deciding to purchase a love potion to gain the love of a young woman who is indifferent to him, but it is closer to reality to imagine a woman seeking such potion to gain the love of her indifferent and inattentive husband.

Moreover, while the plot is generally the same in the two versions of each story, there are differences in the culture-specific events that constitute the plot. For example, whereas in the original version of the third story, the characters *roast a porcupine* and later *use its tried-out fat for cooking*, in the nativized version, they *roast a mountain goat* and later *use its skin as a rug.*

To recapitulate, the nativized group found the setting, characters, and the events more realistic in the commonly used sense of the word which, as Montgomery, Durant, Fabb, Furniss, and Mills (2007) point out, means "lifelike" or "close to how I see reality" (p. 284). Therefore, they could better activate their schemata to relate the incidents in the stories to their own experience and background knowledge and thus understood the overall story much better than the original group did.

Another support for the results of the study comes from Stanovich's (2000) interactive compensatory model. It is likely that the nativized group who read the stories which were more in line with their background knowledge could compensate for their possible vocabulary deficiencies by drawing on their background knowledge in order to infer the meaning of the unknown words or phrases; as a result, their comprehension of the stories was enhanced. In contrast, the original group was at a disadvantage because they read the original stories which took for granted the cultural assumptions of native speakers of English. This argument is supported by empirical research indicating that readers' background knowledge, and more specifically their cultural background knowledge, can facilitate lexical inferencing during reading (Pulido, 2004, 2007).

Furthermore, based on Oller's (2005) pragmatic boot-strapping hypothesis, it can be argued that nativization of the short stories from target language culture makes pragmatic connections (π-links) between target language surface forms and their content (i.e. the persons, things, and events which the surface forms referred to) more accessible to the learners. Focusing on the surface forms referring to *persons*, the π-linkage between the word representing an Iranian name like *Doctor Yavari*, for instance, and the person it refers to is likely to be more accessible to the subjects than the π-linkage between the foreign name *Doctor Caswell* and the person to which it pertains. This is due to the fact that in the case of the former, both form and content are more culturally familiar to the learners and forming FπC links might be easier. There are so many other examples of contrasting names of persons in the original and nativized versions of the stories such as *Mr. Ellsworth* vs. *Mr. Heidari, Swain* vs. *Nazari, Judson Livingston* vs. *Hamid Ansari, old John* vs. *old Ali, Elizabeth* vs. *Esmat*, among others.

Regarding target forms referring to *things* again it can be argued that in the nativizied stories, where the surface forms fitted Iranian learners' cultural expectations, readers benefited from enhanced

access to pragmatic relations between forms and content. Therefore, building well-formed π-links between *milk, Iran, kilometer,* or *wagon* and their referents appears easier than forming successful FπC links between *cocktails, the United States, mile,* or *Conestoga*, and their related referents. In retrospect, discourse processing or more specifically, reading comprehension is facilitated as far as nativized stories are concerned.

Similarly, in relation to the events, the pragmatic connection between *an old potion-maker sitting on the rug and reading an old book* and the referent of this event in the world of experience for the subjects is more accessible vis-a-vis the pragmatic relations between *an old potion-maker sitting in the rocking chair and reading a newspaper* and its related referent. The same thing applies to other culturally contrasting events in the nativized and original stories.

To summarize, the nativized group outperformed the original group in reading comprehension test because they read stories with surface forms or, as Alptekin (2006) calls them, textual and contextual cues that they were culturally familiar with and that referred to familiar content and thus easily accessed the pragmatic relations between these forms and their content or referents in their world of experience.

The original stories contained a number of proper names referring to persons and places which were culturally modified in the nativized versions. Using Oller and Chen's (2007) terms, each of these proper names can be reduced to a triad consisting of a surface form (F) pragmatically mapped (π) onto a person or place (P), and if any such a triad, FπP, is incorrectly construed, "it is easy to see how the misconstrual will interfere with subsequent constructions in which that triad is a component" (p. 136). However, since the subjects in the study were at the advanced level of English language proficiency, they possibly knew what these proper nouns referred to. For example, they knew that *Coppel* was the surname of a person, either through the context or through their background knowledge. Therefore, it is not safe to assume that the FπP triad was incorrectly construed and that the misconstrual interfered with subsequent constructions. But it can be argued that the subjects in the nativized group, who encountered *Alavi* (the nativized form of *Koppel*), construed the FπP triad more correctly or successfully due to the cultural familiarity of the name, and they probably understood better subsequent constructions in which this triad was involved.

As mentioned earlier, the results clearly illustrated that cultural nativization enhanced the subjects' comprehension of the stories at the literal as well as the inferential level. In literal comprehension readers pay attention to explicitly stated information in the text and rely heavily on their linguistic resources. Comprehension is achieved either through recalling or by referring to the text and locating the required information. The nativized group's outperformance suggests that in the case of recalling, nativization probably reduces cognitive loads on readers' memory and helps them to recall explicitly stated information in the stories more easily and accurately. Alternatively, in the case of scanning the text and locating the information, nativization possibly enhances readers' automaticity in word recognition and their speed and accuracy in locating explicitly stated information in the texts.

The nativized group also excelled the original group in inferential comprehension. As argued by researchers, in inferential comprehension or inferencing, readers connect different parts of the text to one another and also connect text information to their background knowledge (Linderholm, Everson, van den Broek, Mischinski, Crittenden, & Samuels, 2000; Nassaji, 2007). Therefore, it can be argued that nativization enables readers to better connect textual information with subsequent and previous information presented in the stories as well as with their own background knowledge. To put it another way, when reading the nativized stories, readers are better able to synthesize, summarize, generalize, and extrapolate, and thus draw more inferences from the stories.

The role of nativization in inferential comprehension can be explained by reference to Oller's (1995) notion of abstract schemata or what have traditionally been referred to as story schemata. Abstract schemata, as Oller (1995, p. 286) maintains, are non-syntacticized, that is, not dependent on the syntactic arrangement of the surface forms in the text, and thus conductive to rich inferencing skills. Therefore, in the nativized stories, contextual and textual familiarity enables readers to recreate the writer's message in their mind through the activation of the relevant abstract schemata which, in turn, leads to richer and deeper inferences.

In fact, culturally familiar cues in the nativized stories helps readers to better identify and sympathize with the main characters of the stories and this will result in the readers' story schema activation. Identification and sympathy are two techniques used by story writers to establish a bond between the readers and the main character. Identification, or empathy, as argued by Nassise (2008), is when

readers can relate to the main character because they can identify who he is or which experience he finds himself in. The more the reader can identify with the character, the more real the experience seems and the greater the intensity of the story. In the current study, the nativized group could more strongly identify with the main characters because of the cultural proximity they felt between themselves and the characters. For example, in the second story, subjects could better identify with *Amir M. Heidari* who was under the care of *Doctor Yavari*, and who had a heart attack after his disastrous purchase of *a small detergent factory in Karaj* than with *Collis P. Ellsworth* who was under the care of *Doctor Caswell* and who had suffered a heart attack after his disastrous purchase of *a small railroad out in Iowa.*

Sympathy, as defined by Nassise (2008), goes beyond empathy and focuses on the emotional bond that the reader has with the character; for example, awful things have happened and the reader genuinely feels sorry for the character. In this study, when reading the third story, subjects probably could better sympathize with *Kobra,* in the nativized version, *who had lost her parents in an accident* than with *Mary*, in the original version, *who had run away from somewhere that she would not tell*. This is likely because in the cultural and religious context of Iran an orphan girl deserves more sympathy than a runaway girl does. This feeling of being at home with the plot is further reinforced by other familiar textual and contextual cues such as *little farms, cooking oil, dried bread*, and *wagon*, as opposed to "conceptual voids", as Alptekin (2006, p. 503) calls them, such as *little timber claims, porcupine grease, corn meal*, and *Conestoga*. In sum, culturally familiar cues in the nativized stories help readers to activate relevant abstract schema and to recreate the stories in their mind, and this increases the possibility of drawing richer and deeper inferences from the stories.

Nativization can be approached from a social semiotic perspective which emphasizes the strong connection between language and the social context in which it occurs (Halliday and Hasan, 1990). From this perspective, nativization can be viewed as a way of manipulating the context of situation of the story for the purpose of making it more retrievable for non-native readers. However, this manipulation is at the level of field and tenor since nativization has nothing to do with the channel or rhetorical mode of the language used. When reading short stories readers come into a situation which the writer has created. The story's characters, who have been placed in some kind of relationship by the writer, are engaged in some activity; then the reader comes into this situation from outside. He tries to construct in his mind a model of context of situation. He assigns to it a field, noting what is going on; he assigns to it a tenor, recognizing the personal relationships involved, and he assigns to it a mode, seeing what is being achieved by means of language. The participants or characters and their relationships in the nativized stories, and also the events happening in the stories are more culturally familiar to the readers, and this probably enables them to more easily reconstruct the context of situation of the texts in their mind giving rise to better understanding of the stories.

This study strongly supports the view that culture influences comprehension and interpretation. When reading a text, readers acquire meaning from the text by analyzing words and sentences against the backdrop of their own personal knowledge of the world which, in turn, is conditioned by their culture. In other words, culture influences knowledge, beliefs, and values, and they, in turn, provide an interpretive framework which the reader will utilize during reading. Since the nativized stories depict aspects of the readers' own culture, they are more in line with the readers' knowledge, beliefs, and values and thus more comprehensible to the readers in comparison to the original stories.

The close relationship between language and culture has become virtually axiomatic. Being the primary means of human communication, language is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. According to Kramsch (1998), language *expresses* cultural reality, *embodies* cultural reality, and *symbolizes* cultural reality (p.1). Therefore, a short story written in English language by an American writer expresses, embodies, and symbolizes the realities of American culture. According to Bock (2006), there are considerable differences, among stories from different cultures because each culture's stories contain characters, events, topics, and values that are common within that specific culture but not necessarily known or understood by other cultures (pp. 72-73). Indeed, nativization is a process of changing the cultural elements of the target language story into learner's own culture so that it can express, embody, and symbolize the cultural reality of the learner's life and experiences.

The findings of this study are consistent with the results found in Erten and Razi (2003) and Razi (2004) that nativization of short stories from target language culture into learner's own culture enhances their comprehension of the stories. However, they differ from Alptekin's (2006) study which indicated that nativization plays a facilitative role essentially in readers' inferential comprehension rather than reading comprehension as a whole because literal comprehension remains unaffected. A

possible explanation could be that the subjects in Alptekin's study read only one short story, either its original or its nativized version, whereas in the present study, the participants read three short stories in three separate sessions. Moreover, one of the limitations of Alptekin's study which might have influenced the results is that some of the participants in his study had graduated from English-medium high schools in Turkey where, as Alptekin points out, they had been familiarized to a degree with the culture of English-speaking countries. Thus, this study proposes the positive effect of nativization in both literal and inferential comprehension of short stories.

The results are also compatible with the findings of the studies on the relationship between cultural modification of texts and reading comprehension such as Chihara et al. (1989) and Sasaki (2000), which have shown that adapting texts to conform to the learners' cultural expectations makes them more comprehensible to the readers. The findings also lend further support to the larger body of research which has investigated the role of cultural background knowledge or cultural schemata in reading comprehension (Abu-Rabia, 1996, 2003; Carrell, 1987; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Johnson, 1981; Pritchard, 1990; Steffensen & Joag-dev, 1992; Steffensen, Joag-dev, & Anderson, 1979). In line with these studies, the current study suggests that readers comprehend better texts that deal with their own familiar culture and for which they have well-developed cultural background knowledge than texts that deal with a less familiar or unfamiliar culture and for which they lack the appropriate cultural schemata.

It is often quite a challenge for EFL learners to identify and associate themselves with the characters and the content of British or American short stories. This is because these stories take for granted the cultural assumptions of the native speakers of English. They typically contain references to people, events, locations, concepts, as well as customs and institutions related to the culture of the people for whom the stories have been originally written. Thus, it is not safe simply to assume that when reading the same story native and non-native readers with different cultural schemata will have the same amount of experience with the setting, ascribe the same goals and motives to characters, assign the same significance to events, imagine the same sequence of actions, expect the same emotional reactions, predict the same outcomes, and in short, achieve the same level of comprehension. However, this study showed that the influence of cultural schemata can be triggered by nativizing culture-specific textual and contextual cues in the stories, allowing non-native readers an enhanced chance to comprehend the stories without any lexical or syntactic simplification. Therefore, nativization can be introduced as a new technique for the activation of readers' cultural content schemata, which can be used by EFL teachers and material designers in selecting and adapting short stories for their advanced reading classes.

Furthermore, comprehending the surface forms of any target language is easier when they are related to factual contexts that are readily accessible to the learners. Therefore, the material utilized in language classrooms in general and reading classes in particular should be related to the learners' ordinary experience. As Oller (1995) puts it:

Bits of discourse cut loose from the moorings in experience that give them meaning ought not to be used in classrooms anywhere. The discourse that we introduce, use, and create in the classroom ought to involve the reasonable motivations normally provided by episodes of significant experience involving real material persons, events, places, and sociocultural relations with which our students can identify and find some common ground (p. 299).

To acquire a new language, it is essential that the students be enabled to make the connection between abstract representations of the new material and their own personal experience. Only to the extent that such links are actively made by the learners, is the desired learning assured. In relation to reading comprehension, learners may fail to understand items and situations in a text if they lack familiarity with the cultural practices in which they are situated. The reason is that meaning is not lodged somewhere in the text, but exists in the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. The reader must engage with the discourse presented in the text and, if he is outside of that discourse, comprehension will be at risk. Nativization is a way of placing readers in the discourse they are attempting to process. It enables them to relate the characters, setting, and the events in the story to their own life experience, and this in turn will improve their comprehension of the stories.

This study focused on the role of cultural nativization in reading comprehension of short stories in EFL contexts. Despite promising results, the study suffered from a number of drawbacks. In selecting stories for the study, an attempt was made to choose stories with more embedded cultural elements; still, the selected stories were not profusely culturally-laden perhaps because of their short length. As a

result, although the study was built on Alptekin's (2006) definition of cultural nativization, some of the cultural cues mentioned by Alptekin were not found in the stories. Another limitation was the function and form of the questions which were only at literal and inferential levels with the multiple-choice form, and other forms and functions of reading comprehension questions were not included. Finally, the study disregarded such variables as gender, age, and English language proficiency level. The suggestion recommended here for further studies is to take these variables into account.

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Appendix A

Sample Questions Based on the Original and Nativized Versions of <u>The Chaser</u>

Questions based on the original version

1. The old man's room contained all of the following furniture except ………. .

  a. a kitchen table

  b. a rocking chair

  c. an ordinary chair

  d. a cupboard

2. Where was the bottle containing the life-cleaner?

  a. In the drawer.

  b. In the cupboard.

  c. On the table.

  d. On the shelf.

3. The old man says that the love potion is quite imperceptible …………. .

  a. to any known method of autopsy

  b. in orange juice, soup, or cocktails

  c. in coffee, milk, wine or any other beverage

  d. to whoever is gay or giddy

4. The terms describing the setting of the story in the first paragraph suggest something   …………….
.

  a. exciting and interesting

  b. mysterious and sinister

  c. pleasantly surprising

  d. overwhelmingly desirable

5. How does Alan think about the effectiveness of the old man's potions?

  a. At first he is skeptical but then he becomes a fervent believer in the love potion.

  b. At first he is sure about its effectiveness but gradually he becomes skeptical.

  c. He remains skeptical to the end of the story.

  d. He remains sure to the end of the story.

6. Throughout the story we can see a conflict within Alan between …………. .

  a. suspicion or disbelief and the fear of losing Diana

  b. suspicion or disbelief and the desire to possess the love potion

  c. the desire to possess the expensive potion and the fear of losing all his money

  d. the desire to buy the glove-cleaner and the fear of being cheated by the old man

Questions based on the nativized version

1. The old man's room contained all of the following furniture except ………. .

  a. a bookcase

  b. a rug

  c. a pair of cushions

   d. a cupboard

2. Where was the bottle containing the life-cleaner?

  a. In the drawer.

  b. In the cupboard.

  c. On the floor.

  d. On the shelf.

3. The old man says that the love potion is quite imperceptible ………….. .

   a. to any known method of autopsy

   b. in orange juice, soup, or milk

   c. in coffee, milk, fruit juice, or any other beverage

   d. to whoever is indifferent and inattentive

4. The terms describing the setting of the story in the first paragraph suggest something ……………. .

   a. exciting and interesting

   b. mysterious and sinister

   c. pleasantly surprising

   d. overwhelmingly desirable

5. How does Mina think about the effectiveness of the old man's potions?

   a. At first she is skeptical but then she becomes a fervent believer in the love potion.

   b. At first she is sure about its effectiveness but gradually she becomes skeptical.

   c. She remains skeptical to the end of the story.

   d. She remains sure to the end of the story.

6. Throughout the story we can see a conflict within Mina between …………. .

   a. suspicion or disbelief and the fear of losing Bahman

   b. suspicion or disbelief and the desire to possess the love potion

   c. the desire to possess the expensive potion and the fear of losing all his money

   d. the desire to buy the glove-cleaner and the fear of being cheated by the old man

Appendix B

Culture-Specific Textual and Contextual Cues in the Two Versions of <u>Too Soon a Woman</u>

Original version	Nativized version
mile by slow mile	kilometer by slow kilometer
the prairie (2 occurrences)	the plain
Conestoga	wagon
Mary, who had run away from somewhere that she wouldn't tell	Kobra, a distant relative of pa who had lost her parents in an accident
Mary (22 occurrences)	Kobra
I'd rather go with a family and look after kids.	I'd rather go with you and look after kids.
her wide blue eyes	her wide black eyes
little timber claims	little farms
the homesteaders (2 occurrences)	the farmers
venison	bird meat
He brought in a porcupine once, and that was fat meat and good.	He brought in a young mountain goat once, and that was lean meat and good.
The porcupine was long gone, except for some of the tried-out fat that Mary had saved.	The mountain goat was long gone, except for its skin that we sometimes used as a rug.
some corn meal	some dried bread
old John (2 occurrences)	old Ali
He kissed the little girls goodbye.	He said goodbye to the little girls.
fifteen miles	twenty kilometers
Elizabeth (2 occurrences)	Esmat
ten pounds	five kilos
Her wet hair hung over her shoulders.	Her wet clothes clung to her.
Sarah (2 occurrences)	Shokat
What's that mark on your shoulder?	What's that mark on your arm?
You tore your dress on the brush.	You tore your sleeve on the brush.
the can with the porcupine grease	the can with the cooking oil
heated grease	heated oil
Maybe Peter dozed that way at Gethsemane as the Lord Knelt praying.	Maybe children dozed that way at the mosque in Laylat-ul-Qadr as their parents recited Joshan-e-Kabeer.
We played *Who's Got the Thimble?* with a pine cone.	We played *Gol ya Pooch (Full or Empty)* with a pine cone.