International Journal on e-Learning and Higher Education
Volume 19, Number 2, March 2024

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'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup': ODL Experience

The Influence of Content Schemata on ESL Learners' Comprehension of 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup': ODL Experience

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Abstract: *The role of content schemata in influencing learners' understanding of reading texts is crucial. This qualitative case study which involved 11 participants was conducted to explore how content schemata contribute to the learners' comprehension, to explore factors that contribute to the learners' understanding, and factors that hinder the process of understanding 2 short stories, i.e., 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup'. This study is guided by Schema Theory and Reader-response Theory. Data were gathered through Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities and written response in-depth interviews via Google Form. Both data were cross analyzed for patterns. The findings demonstrated clear indication of the role of content schemata in aiding learners' comprehension of the texts. Learners' comprehension of reading texts can be significantly hindered without sufficient background knowledge of the context of the texts. Language instructors as well as material writers can benefit from the findings of this study in selecting suitable reading materials which are within the learners' content schemata for teaching and learning purposes.*

Keywords: *Content schemata, Open Distance Learning, Reader-response theory, Reading comprehension, Schema theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

Open Distance Learning (ODL) or Remote Learning had taken by storm especially at the beginning of Movement Control Order (MCO 1.0) which had taken into effect in the beginning of March 2020, following the outbreak of the unprecedented COVID19 pandemic in Malaysia. Learners, teachers, instructors and lecturers worldwide were forced to be equipped with knowledge of using virtual learning platforms such as ZOOM, WebEx, Google Classroom, etc. to continue lessons as usual during lockdown. According to Özdemir and Gündoğan Önderöz (2022), it was reported that many countries suffered learning loss during the first wave of lockdown due to school closures and more significant especially between March 2020 and March 2022. Higher learning institutions all over the globe began adapting the existing eLearning strategy into an emergency remote teaching strategy (Wyk, Mooney, Duma & Faloye, 2020). As stated in Radzi (2020), most learners resorted to turning their living room into a makeshift study area and as members of the family were also forced to work from home, a used to be peaceful and uneventful life of students, could literally turned upside down. ODL was the only way to carry out lessons virtually as to limit physical contacts and to reduce risks of the virus infections. English language lessons had to be conducted virtually whereby lecturers and students logged in to a chosen virtual classroom platform for classes, which included ELC151 Integrated Language Skills 2 course for Part 2 diploma students of Universiti Teknologi MARA. Part of the on-going assessments for ELC151 is the requirement of students to respond to 2 short stories for Personal Reading Log (PRL) whereby students will be asked to compose 200-250 words answer to a question based on each short story. This study will be focusing on the role of content schemata in influencing learners' understanding of reading texts, especially contemporary short stories.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Short stories selected for students could be written by local as well as international authors. Students will be given several short stories for them to read several weeks prior to PRL assessments. Learners with insufficient content schemata often struggle to understand the short stories with content encompasses foreign culture and practices that could be unfamiliar to some

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students. According to Ramli (2021), learners' ability to read efficiently demands effort which includes making mental connections between the reading material and their background knowledge.

A study conducted by Altumigah and Alkhaleefah (2022) revealed that learners seem to be less aware of reading strategies as many have not been given sufficient exposure to strategies that can help them to understand text content. As a result, learners with limited prior knowledge on the content area of the short story may struggle to link the content of the short story to their schemata. Hence, this study attempted to explore how content schemata contribute to learners' comprehension of two short stories.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of this study are as follows:
1. To explore how content schemata contribute to learners' understanding of the texts by looking at how the learners process the texts
2. To explore the factors that contribute to the learners' understanding of the texts
3. To explore the factors that hinder the learners from understanding the texts

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions stated below guided this study:
1. How do the language learners process the texts?
2. What are some of the factors that contribute to the learners' understanding of the texts?
3. What are some of the factors that hinder the learners from understanding the texts?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study hopefully may aid textbook writers as well as language learning material writers to be more aware of the selection of reading passages to be included in their book. If they take into consideration of the learners'

struggles in understanding reading texts, they will be better able to select materials which content areas that are within the schemata of the learners (Radzi & Aziz, 2014). This study can also offer insights to language instructors and lecturers to be more selective in choosing reading materials to be used in the classroom.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 SCHEMA THEORY, READER-RESPONSE THEORY AND READING COMPREHENSION

Schema is the term developed by cognitive scientists which describes how readers process, organize and store information (Shen, 2008). According to Pankin (2013), Bartlett (1932) wrote extensively on schemas and Jean Piaget was credited as the one who created a cognitive development theory which mentioned schemas. Well known studies on Schema Theory include scholars such as Rumelhart (1975), Schank and Abelson (1977) and Anderson (1983). Louise Rosenblatt (1993) established Reader-response theory which was initially developed by Wolfgang Iser (1972), David Bleich (1975), Louise Rosenblatt (1978) and Stanley Fish (1980). As stated in Mart (2019), Reader-response theory emphasizes the mutual relationship between the reader and the text which is crucial in the interpretation of a literary work.

According to Khataee (2018), cultural familiarity has a positive impact on learners' comprehension of the reading material. Insufficient schema will cause learners unable to make inferences because this action involves creating meaning that is not explicitly stated by the writer of the text (Mills, 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research methods which are Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities and written response in-depth interviews via Google Form. Future researchers can consider including think aloud protocol as one of the data collection techniques in order to study in

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depth the learners' mental processes during the process of reading. They can also consider having participants with various levels such as beginner, intermedite and advance.

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

The participants involved in this study consisted of 11 Universiti Teknologi MARA, Arau Campus, Perlis Branch, Part 2 Diploma in Accounting Information System and Diploma in Geomatic Science students who were taking ELC151 Integrated Language Skills II course. The sampling strategy employed in this study is purposive sampling whereby these participants were students undergoing ELC151 course, which required them to read and respond to short stories.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Data for this study were gathered through Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities from March to April 2020 and written response in-depth interviews via Google Form, that were distributed to the participants via Whatsapp in July 2020. During the ODL class activities, students were asked to reflect on the content of both short stories. Discussions based on questions on the content of the short stories were actively carried out during 1 hour and 50 minutes lesson for each short story. Students were asked to type their responses in the Whatsapp chat so that all students as well as the lecturer could follow the discussion with ease. The written response in-depth interviews via Google Form consisted of 10 open-ended questions for each short story. The questions were constructed to explore the influence of content schemata on the participants' understanding of both short stories. This study was conducted from March 2020 to July 2020, when Movement Control Order (MCO 1.0) was imposed.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data from Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities as well as written response in-depth interviews via Google Form were cross analyzed for patterns to show the influence of content schemata on learners' comprehension of the two short stories. As guidance to analyse the data

collected, Creswell's (2012), "Figure 8.4: A visual model of the coding process in qualitative research" (p. 244) was based on. The participants' responses during classes, i.e. to the questions on the content of the short stories and their responses in the written in-depth interviews were analyzed for recurring patterns and the themes were identified.

Two contemporary short stories, i.e., 'The Hunted Fox' (Smith, 2010) and 'The Breakup' (Angus, 1999) had been given to students to read a few days before class activities were conducted. The storyline in each short story revolves around a female teenager as the protagonist. The readability formula used to check the readability index of both short stories is Gunning Fog Index. For the short story, 'The Hunted Fox', The Fog Index Formula scored 10.3 for text scale which falls under the category fairly easy to read. For 'The Breakup', The Fog Index Formula scored 6.8 for text scale for the short story, which also falls under similar category which is fairly easy to read.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 ANALYSIS OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) CLASS ACTIVITIES FOR 'THE HUNTED FOX'

The findings are discussed based on the questions asked by the lecturer during class. The students were asked several questions in connection to the content of the short story. Based on the students' responses, 3 main themes had emerged, i.e., ways learners process the text, contributing factors to learners' understanding and importance of background knowledge.

4.1.1 WAYS LEARNERS PROCESS THE TEXT

This main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ1) How do the language learners process the texts? Sample transriptions from several students are included below.

Sub-theme: Analyzing Character
Learners made character analysis, i.e., the main character, as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below. These suggest that learners analyzed the

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character by focusing on the protagonist's characteristics as to process the text.

Lecturer's question: Why do you think Patricia was being bullied?

S1: She fights for her friend who also is being bullied.
S2: Because she has things that others didn't. In this case, it was her intelligence which was stated in the short story that she was an 'A grade student'.
S3: Because she was depicted and seen as a nerd due to her intelligence and her physical looks, making her an easy target to pick on.
S4: Because when she tried to stand up for her friend against the bullies, she was then targeted next for belittling the bullies.

4.1.2 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO LEARNERS' UNDERSTANDING

The second main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ2) What are some of the factors that contribute to the learners' understanding of the texts? Sample transriptions from several students are included below.

Sub-theme: Association of Background Knowledge with Context
Students seemed to associate their background knowledge with the context of the short story, i.e., bullying, as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below. By associating their prior knowledge with the context of the short story, this had contributed to their understanding.

Lecturer's question: Why do you think Patricia was being bullied?

S3: Maybe she comes from Asian background? Stereotypically Asian culture has a high expectancy on beauty standards such as skinny, slim etc., that is why the bullies like to aim her. Also, Asians are thought to be smart, thus why the bullies pick on her.
S5: I also interpreted they my had a survival of the fittest situation in school where the tough ones need to be respected and looked up to. Similar to what happened in the 'Lord of the Flies' where a group of boys are stranded on an island and try their best to survive.

4.1.3 IMPORTANCE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The third main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ3) What are some of the factors that hinder the learners from understanding the texts? Sample transription from a student is included below.

Sub-theme: Content Familiarity Influenced Understanding
It seemed that learners depended on the aspect of the short story that appeared very familiar to them, as illustrated in the sample transcription below. Unfamiliarity of the content of the text may hinder the learners from understanding the text. The transcription below shows that the learner based what she is familiar with to the aspect of the short story which had influenced her understanding.

Lecturer's question: Why do you think Patricia was being bullied?

S3:   Don't white people usually wear tampons instead or sanitary pad? Sanitary pads are more common in the Asian part of the world as well as the Middle East. Judging by how she prefers to use a sanitary pad instead of a tampon as well as how she priorities about its hygiene, she might be of different culture from the bullies. Thus, making her an immediate target of the bullies.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) CLASS ACTIVITIES FOR 'THE BREAKUP'

The findings are discussed based on the questions asked by the lecturer during class. The students were asked several questions in connection to the content of the short story. Based on the students' responses, 3 main themes had emerged, i.e., ways learners process the text, contributing factors to learners' understanding and importance of background knowledge.

4.2.1 WAYS LEARNERS PROCESS THE TEXT

The main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ1) How do the language learners process the texts? Sample transriptions from several students are included below.

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Sub-theme: Analyzing Character
Learners made character analysis, i.e., the main character, as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below. Learners seemed to analyze the character by focusing on her characteristics as to process the text.

Lecturer's question: What do you think of the main character of this short story?

S3: She puts a price tag over her own relationship.
S4: She is insecure may be.
S6: She keeps comparing because it's a learning process for her about relationship at her age.
S8: She did not appreciate her boyfriend's efforts.

4.2.2 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO LEARNERS' UNDERSTANDING

The second main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ2) What are some of the factors that contribute to the learners' understanding of the texts? Sample transriptions from several students are stated below.

Sub-theme: Association of Background Knowledge with Context
Students seemed to associate their background knowledge with the context of the short story as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below. Associating their prior knowledge with the context of the short story had contributed to their understanding.

Lecturer's question: What do you think of the main character's relationship in this short story?

S7: Reminds me of Romeo and Juliet.
S9: So, it is a conversation through a phone call.
S10: Her bf insulted her hair and she thinks her hair looks better than Chelsea Clinton's.
S11: Girls are complicated and I admit it.

4.2.3   IMPORTANCE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The third main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ3) What are some of the factors that hinder the learners from understanding the texts? Sample transriptions from several students are included below.

Sub-theme: Content Familiarity Influenced Understanding
It seemed that the aspect of the short story that is very familiar to the learners is crucial for understanding, as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below. Unfamiliarity of the content of the text may hinder the learners from understanding the text. The transcriptions below demonstrate that the learners based what they are familiar with to the aspect of the short story.

Lecturer's question: What do you think of the main character's relationship in this short story?

S4:   Nike was rising in the 90s. It's intriguing for her that the bf only has 4 of them.
S8:   Just because her bf doesn't give her a pricey Hallmark card, that doesn't mean he doesn't love her.
S11: Handmade card is way precious than the one we buy at the shop.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN RESPONSE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS FOR 'THE HUNTED FOX'

The findings are discussed based on in-depth interview questions. Based on the written response, 3 main themes had emerged, i.e., ways learners process the text, contributing factors to learners' understanding and importance of background knowledge.

4.3.1   WAYS LEARNERS PROCESS THE TEXT

This main theme was derived from the in-depth interview questions that are based on Research Question (RQ1) How do the language learners process the texts? Sample transriptions from several respondants are included below. Sub-theme: Matching with Personal Experience Learners matched what the main character went through with their personal experience, as illustrated

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in the sample transcriptions below.
Interview question: Do you like the short story, i.e., 'The Hunted Fox'? If you like the short story, give ONE (1) reason.

S1:   Yes. It is because I can relate myself with the story.
S3:   I like it because the short story makes me feel empathy.
      Interview question: Did you relate what happened to the character (Patricia) with your personal experience? If your answer is 'Yes', explain briefly.

Majority of the respondents stated 'yes', which indicated that they related what happened to the main character with their personal experience.

S1:   It's not exactly like what happened to Patricia but in the same way, there were times when I was being an outcast in class.
S2:   I was always being bullied in secondary school.
S3:   Because I've been bullied in primary school and people made fun of me, they thought I was a toy that can be punched.
S5:   I was bullied too in high school, didn't have the courage to fight back so I just let it happen.

Interview question: Do you have friends or family members who have been bullied in school?

Majority of the respondents stated 'yes'.

4.3.2   CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO LEARNERS' UNDERSTANDING

The second main theme was derived from the in-depth interview question that is based on Research Question (RQ2) What are some of the factors that contribute to the learners' understanding of the texts? Sample transcriptions from several respondents are included below.

Sub-theme: Background Knowledge Accommodates Understanding
Learners' responses revealed that their prior knowledge accommodated their understanding of the short story, as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below.

Interview question: When you were reading the short story, i.e., 'The Hunted Fox', did you refer to your background knowledge regarding the character/ characters, the places, the fox, in the short story? Explain briefly.

S1: Yes, when I was reading the short story, I refer to the background knowledge. The character in this story shows us about the reality of school nowadays and how some of us are afraid to speak about the bullying.

S6: Yes. Someone looks through the classroom's window that a few boys are kicking a fox.

S11: Yes, because sometimes it is related.

4.3.3. IMPORTANCE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The third main theme was derived from the question that is based on Research Question (RQ3) What are some of the factors that hinder the learners from understanding the texts? Sample transriptions from several respondents are included below.

Sub-theme: Necessity of Background Knowledge
It seemed prior knowledge was necessary for them in order to understand the short story. The transcriptions below show that the learners made reference to their background knowledge. Comprehension could be hindered with the absence of background knowledge.

Interview question: In your opinion, is background knowledge important to understand the short story,
i.e., 'The Hunted Fox'? Explain briefly.

Majority of the respondents stated 'yes', which implied that background knowledge was a crucial element for them to comprehend the short story.

S1: Yes, so that it is easier for the readers to understand and relate to the story.

S2: Yes, because this story has many hidden points that we can learn.

S3: Yes, because without background, we never know how old the victim is and where the case happens.

S4: Yes, it is important because it will help the readers understand the story in detail.

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4.4 ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN RESPONSE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS FOR 'THE BREAKUP'

The findings are discussed based on in-depth interview questions. Based on the written response, 3 main themes had emerged, i.e., ways learners process the text, contributing factors to learners' understanding and importance of background knowledge.

4.4.1 WAYS LEARNERS PROCESS THE TEXT

This main theme was derived from the in-depth interview questions that are based on Research Question (RQ1) How do the language learners process the texts? Sample transriptions from several respondants are included below.

Sub-theme: Matching with Personal Experience
Learners matched what the main character went through with their personal experience, as illustrated in the sample transcriptions below.

Interview question: Do you like the short story, i.e., 'The Breakup'? If you like the short story, give ONE (1) reason. Majority of the respondents stated 'yes'.

S2:   Yes, because we can learn about the unmatured relationship.
S6:   Yes, because the story is related with my past story.

Interview question: Did you relate what happened between the characters in the short story, i.e., 'The Breakup', with your personal experience? State 'Yes' or 'No'.

Majority of the respondents stated 'yes', which suggested that they related what happened to the main character with their personal experience.

S2:   Unmatured relationship in my surroundings.
S5:   I am currently going through the same thing at the moment.
S6:   It reminds me about appreciation. You give someone something of value, but she did not appreciate what you give.
S11: I had experienced the accursed breakup.

4.4.2 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO LEARNERS' UNDERSTANDING

The second main theme was derived from the in-depth interview question that is based on Research Question (RQ2) What are some of the factors that contribute to the learners' understanding of the texts?

Sub-theme: Background Knowledge Accommodates Understanding
Learners' responses revealed that their prior knowledge accommodated their understanding of the short story.

Interview question: When you were reading the short story, i.e., 'The Breakup', did you refer to your background knowledge regarding the character/characters, the places, the famous people, mentioned in the short story?

Majority of the respondents stated 'yes', which shows that their background knowledge assisted their comprehension of the short story.

4.4.3. IMPORTANCE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The third main theme was derived from the in-depth interview questions that are based on Research Question (RQ3) What are some of the factors that hinder the learners from understanding the texts? Sample transriptions from several respondents are included below.

Sub-theme: Necessity of Background Knowledge
It seemed prior knowledge was a necessary factor for them in order to understand the short story. The transcriptions below show that the learners referred to their previous experience or background knowledge. There is a huge possibility that comprehension could be hindered with the absence of background knowledge.

Interview question: In your opinion, is background knowledge important to understand the short story,
i.e., 'The Breakup? Explain briefly.
Majority of the respondents stated 'yes'.

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S4: Yes, it is important because background knowledge helps the readers to understand the character and the settings of the story better.
S6: Yes, it is important to know why they need to breakup.
S11: Yes, because it can make us imagine what happens in the story.

Interview question: Which short story you found more difficult to understand?

Majority of the respondents stated, 'The Hunted Fox'.

S2: Because the story is quite difficult to understand.
S4: It is because bullying issues that were stated in the short story happened in different ways.
S5: Simply because bullying isn't a fun topic to understand.
S6: The breakup is about love. Nowadays, there are so many teenagers are falling in love. So, it is easy to understand that kind of storyline rather than the one in 'The Haunted Fox'.
S11: It has many plots.

4.5 CROSS ANALYSIS OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) CLASS ACTIVITIES AND WRITTEN RESPONSE IN- DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Table 1 below illustrates the main themes and sub-themes that had immerged from the data from Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities for both short stories, i.e., 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup'.

Data Analysis	Themes	Sub-themes
Open Distance Learning (ODL) Class Activities	Ways Learners Process the Text	Analyzing Character
	Contributing Factors to Learners' Understanding	Association of Background Knowledge with Context
	Importance of Background Knowledge	Content Familiarity Influenced Understanding

Table 1. The main themes and sub-themes from ODL class activities for 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup'

Table 2 below illustrates the main themes and sub-themes that had immerged from the data from written response in-depth interviews for both short stories, i.e., 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup'.

Data Analysis	Themes	Sub-themes
Written Response In-depth Interviews	Ways Learners Process the Text	Matching with Personal Experience
	Contributing Factors to Learners' Understanding	Background Knowledge Accommodates Understanding
	Importance of Background Knowledge	Necessity of Background Knowledge

Table 2. The main themes and sub-themes from written response in-depth interviews for 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup'

The cross analysis of the two data, i.e., data from Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities as well as written response in-depth interviews revealed 3 main themes with sub-themes which are clear indication of the role of content schemata in aiding learners' comprehension of the texts. This finding corrobarates with the study conducted by Truong (2021) which also revealed that learners utilized their prior knowledge while reading the text. The finding of this study also correlates with a study done by Noor (2008) which found that learners who possessed higher level of content schemata were able to activate their prior knowledge while attempting the text that was given to them to read.

5. CONCLUSION

This study attempted to explore how content schemata contribute to learners' comprehension of two short stories, 'The Hunted Fox' and 'The Breakup'. The analysis of the data from Open Distance Learning (ODL) class activities as well as written response in-depth interviews via Google Form implied that content schemata or background knowledge play a huge role in assisting learners to comprehend the texts. Students involved in this study revealed that they were continuously feeling motivated learning via ODL platform which had reflected in the findings of this study. This correlates with the study conducted by Thomas (2021) which also revealed that reading motivation and reading comprehension were not significantly affected by online learning during lockdown.

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6. SUGGESTIONS

Future researchers in the area of reading and content schemata should consider having respondents or participants with different levels of language proficiency. As for objectives, they could consider looking at how learners with different proficiency levels process the text. They should also consider choosing short stories written by local as well as international authors as to ascertain whether the learners are able to comprehend content in short stories written by local authors as compared to international authors. As for methods, they should take into consideration of having think aloud protocol as one of the data collection methods as this method is able to obtain mental processes i.e., concurrent verbalizations, while learners are reading the text. Think aloud protocol enables the researcher to observe the cognitive processes of the learners while attempting the reading task (Radzi & Aziz, 2013).

7. CO-AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Amizura Hanadi Mohd Radzi carried out the field work, prepared the literature review, the research methodology, the data analysis and interpretation of the results. Amiza Hazni Mohd Radzi provided assistance in the writeup of the whole article.

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