

# Impact of Cultural Affinity on Reading Skills in L<sub>2</sub> Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

*When it comes to EFL learning, is there any direct relation between cultural affinity<sup>1</sup> and andragogy? In the Indian context, learners are much more aware of the cultural nuances represented in the Indian English texts, compared to those in the texts emerging from an alien culture. It is often hypothesized that Indian texts should be given priority, as they can facilitate students in learning the language by virtue of their cultural cognateness. Empirical experiments were conducted to investigate the impact of cultural differences (Indian and British texts) on 18 college entrants. Results and statistical measurements show that remarkably better comprehension and linguistic attainments are ensured by cultural affinity. However, the paper concludes with the argument that the core British texts can also provide wider cultural exposure and greater linguistic challenges that can accelerate the process of learners' cognitive maturity.*

**Keywords:** andragogy, cultural affinity, EFL classrooms, reading and comprehension, short stories.

The study has been motivated by the assumption that the learners' cultural affinity<sup>1</sup> can lead to better linguistic attainments in EFL classrooms. Of all the contextual variables that impact andragogical practices, the level of cultural affinity of learners with the text materials is of some premier importance. In the Indian L<sub>2</sub> classrooms, cultural aspect of the text materials, learners' cultural background and their level of awareness are always expected to play a vital role in the andragogical process of teaching English through literature. They might lead to an improved comprehension of texts as language learning materials. In discussions about teaching-learning of a foreign language like English, questions of context and culture are to be foregrounded, since the 'foreign-ness' of the material must have a complex interaction with the 'native-ness' of the learners. The andragogical acts in the rural setting have been investigated empirically to find out the learning outcome through a contrastive set of materials, one foreign and the other native.

A foreign text as the L<sub>2</sub> learning material poses certain challenges to the learners in the forms of newer cultural references and situational contexts. The text would necessarily present newer worlds, provide perspectives and new information, and offer access to newer experiences and insights. The language (learners' L<sub>2</sub>) itself offers different structures, cultural meanings and linguistic nuances. However, it can be a very effective training for the learners to use English in different unfamiliar social and cultural contexts. Only special care is needed to ensure a very practical selection of the text types that should encourage diverse learner responses. But, can the text and all its cultural implications help the learners to grasp the structural complexities of the foreign language? Should learning the language itself have the priority to get into the cultural text thereafter/therefrom?

In this context, the primary objective of our study is to examine how cultural orientation negotiates

with the process of learning English. The basic questions here are:

- i. whether pre-existing knowledge about a certain culture and society comes to help in learning and understanding a text (that is the product of the same culture), even though written in a foreign language; and
- ii. whether the absence of any knowledge about a foreign culture and society significantly tells upon learning their language.

In fact, language and culture are quite inseparable (Chen, Benet-Martinez & Ng, 2014). For Sapir (1929, p.208) and Whorf (1956, p.216), language is a cultural guide for its users to somehow conceptualize the world, culture and society. But Mead (2009) or Geertz (1973, p.189) proposed that learning a foreign language (e.g. English) accords unique opportunities to gain insights into a hitherto unfamiliar culture. So, British texts should be explored in original English only but no translation. Such texts may tease the learners off their cell, their linguistic comfort zone. However, gradual immersion into a different culture can facilitate the enterprise of learning the language.

Our critical concern here centres around the options of text selections for English classrooms in India—whether ‘culturally harmonic’ or ‘culturally estranged’ text, or an admixture of both. The basic research questions include:

- Should English texts be from the core British literature or should they reflect the native culture of the learners?
- Which culturally classified text type creates a comfort zone for the learners?
- Should the learners’ level of comfort be the determining factor for choosing the text type?
- What should be the chief criterion for the

curriculum designers in selecting the text types in the future?

For our empirical experiments, four English texts were used, two used in each round. The choice of texts was made carefully to ensure that two short stories written by Indian authors (“Father’s Help” by R.K. Narayan and “The Lost Child” by M.R. Anand respectively) must talk about Indian society and culture (so that the subjects have some cultural affinity). The last two stories by British authors (“The Selfish Giant” by Oscar Wilde and “Araby” by James Joyce) have presented the socio-cultural experiences that are alien to the subjects.

Every round of experiment that took place on one day has two sessions—a 3-hour reading session (2 texts assigned) followed by an MCQ session (for 2 hours, 60+60 questions to be attempted).

#### Experiment-I

The FIRST experiment was conducted in two rounds, as detailed below:

*Table 1: The scheme of the first experiment*

Rounds	Text used	Participants		Objective (to test)
		Male	Female	
I (Day 1)	“The Lost Child” “Father’s Help”	8	10	Comprehension (structure & content)
II (Day 2)	“The Selfish Giant”, “Araby”			

The 18 participants (both male and female indiscriminately) were the 12<sup>th</sup> standard pass-out, newly admitted Bangla-speaking college students (aged between 18-20 years) from the rural areas of Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal. As learners of English as L<sub>2</sub> at school, they have a very mediocre proficiency in English. It was made sure that none of them read any of these four stories beforehand.

In round one, 18 participants were given two select texts to read and comprehend on their own

(without any prompt or instruction). They were given 3 hours time to read and comprehend the first two Indian texts shown above.

On the same day, after this 3-hour long reading session followed by a small break for half an hour, they were given a set of 120 multiple choice questions (60 MCQ from each story) that have the following scheme (In MCQ test they were allowed to consult the hard copy of the stories):

*Table 2: The thrust linguistic and textual areas explored by the first experiment*

	Criteria	MCQs (Time 1 hr.)
Structure	Grammar	10
	Vocabulary	10
	Sentence & Narration	10
Content	Characters & Relationships	10
	Society & Culture	10
	Message & Appeal	10

For the MCQ test (containing 60x2 questions), 2 hours' time was allotted without any section-specific break-up.

The second day was devoted to the next round of the experiment. While in the first round, two Indian texts were used, the second round

conducted on the alternate day dealt with the British texts and followed the same methodology. As on the first day, this round on the second day also lasted for 5 hours and 30 minutes (3 hours for reading and comprehension break for 30 minutes +2 hours for MCQ test)

## Experiment-II

On the third day, the SECOND experiment was conducted. This experiment which was in the form of an oral interaction with the subjects was designed as a kind of support to/confirmation of the findings in the first experiment. In this oral session, all 30 subjects were invited to produce a summary of these stories extempore in their own words and to answer a few other questions relating to their level of comprehension. Each of the participants was interviewed for about 10 minutes and was guided to their overall understanding and take on the whole narrative with all its aspects. The findings in this experiment were not quantified.

## Results

A summary of the learners' correct responses to the MCQs (no 60 for each text) on all four texts (2 Indian and 2 British) has been presented below (ranking maintained):

*Table 3: Summary of the subjects' MCQ responses—Indian vs British texts  
(Under the head Indian, the first column is for the story “The Lost Child”, the latter for “Father’s Help”. Similarly, under the head British, the first column is for the story “The Selfish Giant”, and the last one for “Araby”)*

Learners (ranked)	Texts			
	Indian	British		
L-rank1	57	57	45	44
L-rank2	54	56	45	46
L-rank3	55	58	43	41
L-rank4	54	56	45	42
L-rank5	56	53	44	43
L-rank6	53	58	42	43
L-rank7	52	57	42	44
L-rank8	54	53	41	42
L-rank9	51	54	42	39

Learners (ranked)	Texts			
	Indian	British		
L-rank10	49	52	43	42
L-rank11	50	55	42	37
L-rank12	48	53	40	38
L-rank13	47	50	41	36
L-rank14	44	48	39	37
L-rank15	46	49	36	36
L-rank16	45	43	38	35
L-rank17	44	47	34	34
L-rank18	42	46	36	35

One-way ANOVA was conducted to look at the significance of differences in these responses across the media (Bangla vs English). It yields the result that the *t-value* is -20.888665, and the *p*-value is <.00001 (at *p*<.05). It means that the differences in subjects' responses are highly significant.

The Experiment-I, round1 is designed to investigate learners' responses to the Indian texts. The following figure shows the subjects' performances in comprehending Mulk Raj Anand's "The Lost Child"

(In all the figures data labels over the bars indicate hard counts. Abbreviations used:

Snt & Nrn=Sentence and Narration; Chr & Rln=Character and Relationships;

Sty&Clt=Society and Culture; Msg& App=Message and Appeal):

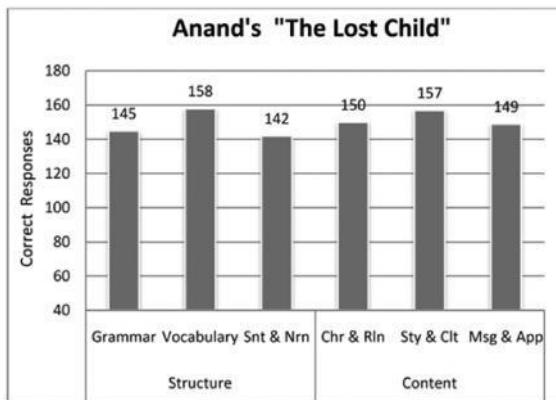


Figure 1: Learners' responses to the MCQ test after the reading session conducted on Mulk Raj Anand's "The Lost Child"

It shows that in both the areas (linguistic structure and textual content) they have done fairly well consistently, though in the 'Content' area it's marginally better. The subjects exhibited some relative weakness in handling the MCQs on grammar, syntax and narration.

Now their performances in comprehending the other story can give us an idea of whether the trends shown so far are consistently visible in the case of the other text material or not. The result follows:

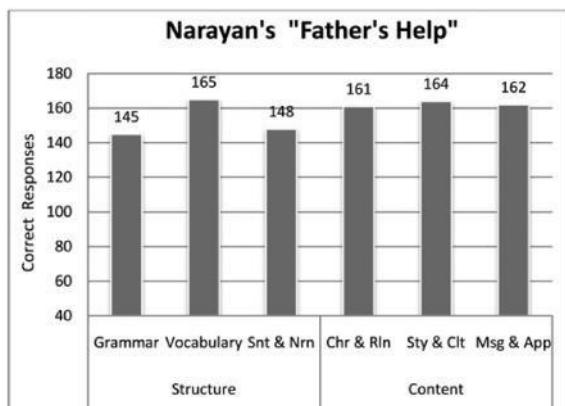


Figure 2: Learners' responses to the MCQ test after the reading session conducted on R.K. Narayan's "Father's Help"

The figure clearly exhibits that almost the same trend has emerged from the Narayan text as well. But compared to their performances in "The Lost Child", the subjects showed improvements in comprehension of R.K. Narayan's "Father's Help". Let's compare them directly:

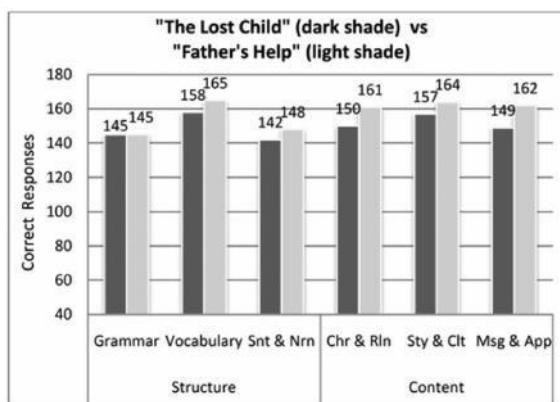


Figure 3: Comparative learner responses to the MCQ test after the reading sessions conducted on the two Indian short stories

This shows that the subjects' comprehension level improved consistently when they went for the second Indian story. Results of the paired t-test indicate that there is significantly a large difference between the learners' comprehension of "The Lost Child" ( $M=50.1$ ,  $SD=4.6$ ) and comprehension of "Father's Help" ( $M=52.5$ ,  $SD=4.4$ ),  $t(17)=4.3$ ,  $p<.001$  ( $\alpha=0.05$ ). It may be ascribed to their previous experiences with the task or to the fact that they could connect to the second story much better.

The next figure gives us a summary of the findings (taking all the responses to the Indian short stories together) discussed above:

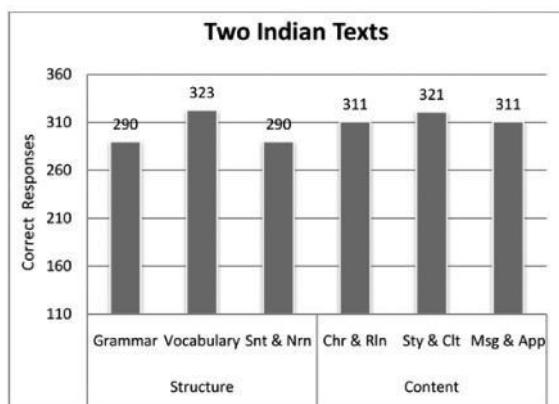


Figure 4: Summative learner responses to the MCQ test after the reading sessions conducted on the two Indian short stories taken together

Figure 4 is summative showing the subjects' greater reading and comprehension proficiency (while dealing with the Indian texts) in terms of their responses to MCQs relating to the tasks on vocabulary, society and culture.

Experiment-I, round2 dealing with the two British texts has yielded the following results:

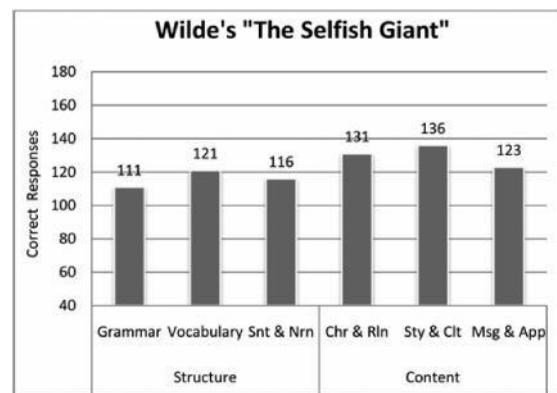


Figure 5: Learners' responses to the MCQ test after the reading session conducted on Oscar Wilde's "The Selfish Giant"

Here in the 'Content' area, the subjects' performances are better, but now the improvement is more consistent. In Figure 6 below, their performances in the other British story are presented:

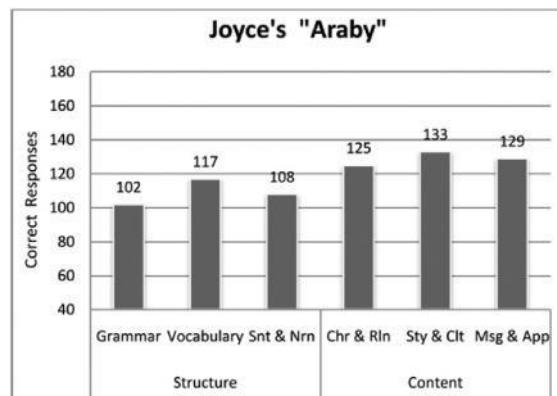


Figure 6: Learners' responses to the MCQ test after the reading session conducted on James Joyce's "Araby"

The figure displays clearly that almost the same trend characterized the subject responses to the Joyce text as well. But compared to their performances in "The Selfish Giant", the subjects' performances have betrayed some decline in comprehension of James Joyce's "Araby". Let's compare them directly:

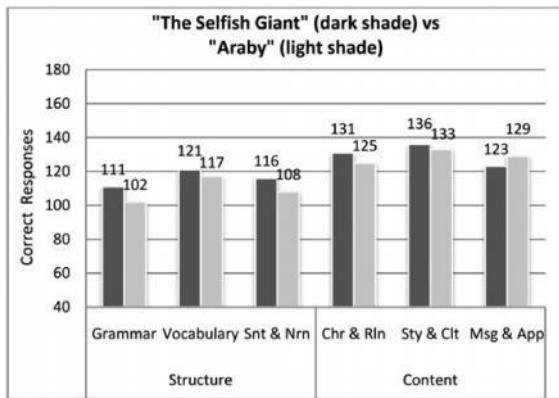


Figure 7: Comparative learner responses to the MCQ test after the reading sessions conducted on the two English short stories

This shows that, when subjects went for the second British story, their comprehension level went down consistently (except in the last category, *i.e.* ‘Message and Appeal’). To look at the level of significance of differences, a paired t-test was conducted. Results in the test indicate that there are significantly large differences between the learners’ comprehension of “The Selfish Giant” ( $M = 41.0$ ,  $SD = 3.3$ ) and comprehension of “Araby” ( $M = 39.7$ ,  $SD = 3.7$ ),  $t(17) = 2.8$ ,  $p < .013$  ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

The next figure gives us a summary of the findings (taking all the responses to the British short stories together) discussed above:

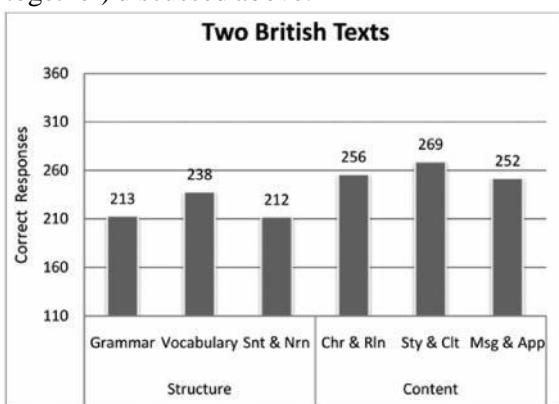


Figure 8: Summative learner responses to the MCQ test after the reading sessions conducted on the two English short stories taken together

Both in the cases of the Indian and British stories, the content area enjoys more correct responses, indicating the subjects’ greater reading proficiency and comprehension in this area. These two summative figures (Figure 4 and Figure 8) will be used now to look at the comparative proficiency level across the Indian and British texts. The following figure (Figure 9) makes a cross-cultural comparison between the responses to the Indian texts and those to the British texts to check whether the learners’ level of cultural affinity makes any difference in their perception and comprehension.

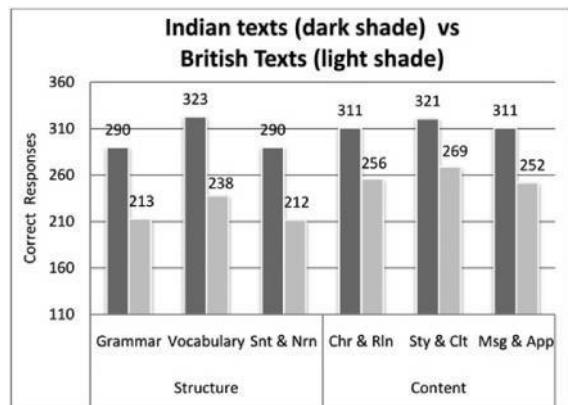


Figure 9: Inter-language comparison between learner responses to the MCQ test after the reading sessions conducted on the Indian and English short stories taken together

A paired t-test was conducted and the results thereof indicate that there is a significantly large difference between the learners’ comprehension of two Indian texts ( $M = 51.3$ ,  $SD = 4.6$ ) and comprehension of two British texts ( $M = 40.3$ ,  $SD = 3.5$ ),  $t(35) = 20.9$ ,  $p < .001$  ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

Thus, the points made here are:

- The element of cultural affinity or familiarity plays a positive role in helping learners comprehend English texts better, and

- ii. Owing to their cultural affinity, Indian students can develop their reading skills and comprehension much faster and with greater consistency when dealing with Indian texts.

In fact, it is always a good idea to incorporate those English texts that would naturally allow the learners to connect to their own socio-cultural experiences. But it is also true that new challenges can encourage and nourish their problem-solving efficacies, be it in a mathematics class or a foreign language class. A different language or culture may be unfamiliar only, but never fully alien owing to the same common core, *i.e.* the linguistic and cultural universals. These universals can provide a common ground to get productively engaged with the queries into linguistic and cultural differences (Wierzbicka, 1997, p.275). Fantini called this (learning a new language and getting into a new culture) only a way of expanding the learners' horizons, rather than exploring a completely new world (1997, p.11). The learners must feel that the communicative constraint tends to rise above their perceptions and ethnocentricity (Kramsch, 1993, p.271). Exploring the British texts is challenging but not a truly deterring task for them.

Widdowson (1996, p.67) and Toolan (1997, p.99) talked about the relevance of alternative texts in foreign language education. In the Indian classroom context, this observation has certain implications. All the participants in the experiments have studied English as L<sub>2</sub>, and the school curricula accommodate both British and Indian texts representing varieties of English and ethnicity. In a globalized world, such a presentation of cultural diversities and different language contexts is really relevant (Cortazzi&Jin, 1999, p. 201). Learners are thereby confronted with challenges like:

- i. Inter-cultural differences;

- ii. Diverse linguistic/communicative contexts;
- iii. Context-dependent linguistic/communicative demands;
- iv. Challenges inherent in language use in different cultural backgrounds.

Finally, it can be argued that the greater the number of English texts with cultural and linguistic diversities and ethnic groups using the language, the better for the learners for the best possible orientation as English users. So the curricular designers should exploit the possibilities of future textbooks where there would be enough linguistic challenges and orientation for the learners, confronted with a good number of cultural encounters, with newer ethnic groups using English in diverse contexts.

#### Notes:

1. Affinity is the natural understanding of something. Here 'cultural affinity' of the learners means their innate attachment to the cultural practices and tenets that often come from their shared experiences of cultural practices and their nuances.
2. Both the 10<sup>th</sup> or 12th levels (namely, West Bengal Madhyamik and Higher Secondary) were under the state board/council; and all the test subjects studied under this board/council with English as their L<sub>2</sub>.

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