

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF READING LESSONS ON STUDENTS' GENERAL OR WORLD KNOWLEDGE

Asst. Prof. Dr. Hülya İPEK  
Anadolu University  
Education Faculty  
Department of English Language Teaching  
Eskisehir- TURKEY

### ABSTRACT

The aim of English language teaching programs is primarily to improve students' English language proficiency. The general knowledge or background knowledge students bring to the lessons are important in building language proficiency and for reading comprehension. Also, content or topics covered in language course books have important effects on the learner, such as increasing, motivation, interest, and comprehension. Besides improving language proficiency, language programs can add to the general knowledge of learners by incorporating topics that are new or interesting to the learners. Therefore, this study investigates whether the content of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading course contributes to the general or world knowledge of students. The data were collected through open ended questions about the topics in the reading books used in the reading lesson. 48 EFL students at an English Language Preparatory School participated in the study. Subjects were at the beginner and elementary level of language proficiency. Participants were asked questions on the topics covered in the units of the reading course book. The results revealed that students already some general knowledge on certain topics before taking the reading course and that most of the topics in the reading lesson added to the students' general knowledge and.

**Key Words:** Reading comprehension, world knowledge, general knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs is primarily to improve students' English language proficiency. Factors such as language aptitude, affective factors, and motivation are very important in learning a foreign language as they can support or hinder the process (Hedge, 2000). Various methods and materials are used to improve students' language learning processes. Furthermore, the general knowledge or background knowledge that the students are equipped with is important in the language learning process. Such knowledge is important since it aids and eases languages learning (Henry, 1999; Hedge, 2000; Hirsch, 2003).

Course books should not only be seen as instructional material but also as sources of knowledge and information that expand ones world knowledge. Arıkan (2008, p. 75) indicates that "as students read for comprehension, they do not only comprehend the linguistic forms but they grab the facts, thoughts, and values that come into being with their reading process." Although language teaching programs do not aim at adding to or improving language learners' world knowledge, it seems inevitable that learners are exposed to some level of world knowledge included in the teaching material.

Vellutino (2003) states that knowledge of events, activities, persons, places and things that are not part of the child's daily life constitute world knowledge. Such knowledge can have been learned through direct experience or vicarious experience such as reading or listening to stories or television. Such knowledge aid comprehension. Therefore, children with much world knowledge are better equipped to comprehend and benefit from text than children with less world knowledge. This argument also accounts for foreign language learners. Brantmeier (2003) asserts that topic familiarity can be a highly significant factor in L2 comprehension. The need for world knowledge is mostly obvious in reading in a foreign language. As Hirsch (2003, p. 20) says: "comprehension – the goal of decoding – won't improve unless we pay serious attention to building our students word and world knowledge". It is also noted that domain knowledge has useful implications for improving students' reading comprehension in that it increases fluency, broadens vocabulary, and enables deeper comprehension.

At least six types of knowledge are required to make sense of a text. Among these six types of knowledge are syntactic knowledge, morphological knowledge, topic knowledge, genre knowledge, sociocultural knowledge and general world knowledge. Topic knowledge, genre knowledge, sociocultural knowledge and general world knowledge are referred to as schematic knowledge and help the reader interpret the meaning of a text (Hedge, 2000).

In order to describe the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension Anderson and Freebody (1981, as cited in Shen, 2008) offer the "knowledge" hypothesis" which sees vocabulary as an indicator of good world knowledge which in turn supports reading comprehension. The most effective way to build excellent world knowledge is to read, especially books about social, scientific, literary, and mathematical contents (Pressley & Hilden, 2004). Extensive and diverse reading are regarded to be an important way of obtaining world knowledge and domain-specific knowledge and are said to increase reading fluency and proficiency (Vellutino, 2003).

Pressley (2000) asserts that skilled readers use text processing strategies such as using prior knowledge to interpret the text and revising prior knowledge among others and states that: "Once children can decode, they are empowered to read, read, and read, with greater fluency, vocabulary and world knowledge by-products of such reading, all of which contribute to comprehension skill (p. 556)." Pressley and Hilden (2004) indicate that the addition and interaction of word recognition, vocabulary, comprehension strategy, and world knowledge constitute skilled comprehension. Comprehension is defined as the process of constructing meaning from text based not only on semantic and syntactic knowledge but also on prior knowledge about the subject and schematic knowledge a text presupposes. Conversely, lack of required prior knowledge or background knowledge will leave students with inadequate information with which to construct meaning. Thus, in order to learn for themselves after formal education, students need to possess vast amounts of world knowledge (Henry, 1990; Anderson & Kulhavy, 1977 in Henry, 1990). Studies show that unfamiliar content causes more difficulty in terms of comprehension for readers than unfamiliar form (Carrell, 1987) and that "familiarity with the reading topic enhances the reconstruction of the main idea" (Afflerbach, 1986 in Yazdanpanah, 2007, p. 65). Yazdanpanah (2007) concludes that comprehension of a reading text requires matching the information extracted from the written message with the reader's schemata.

It is obvious that background knowledge and general and world knowledge are important in reading comprehension. Considering course books and reading texts used in foreign language classes, it can be argued that besides improving language proficiency, language programs can also add to the general knowledge of language learners by covering topics that are new or of interest to the learners. Therefore, the current study investigates whether topics in reading texts used in a reading course contribute to the students' general knowledge.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

In order to identify whether the topics covered in EFL reading lessons contribute to students' world knowledge 48 students enrolled in the school of foreign languages at the Anadolu University participated in this study. 23 students were at the beginner level and 25 students were at the elementary level. Students in each groups were exposed to 6 hours of reading lessons a week.

### Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of questions on the information covered in the chapters of the reading book was prepared. Questions derived from 6 topics in the beginner reading book, and 7 topics in the elementary reading book were applied. Considering that the students' language proficiency is low and that the study is not concerned with their English language proficiency, the questions were in the students' native language, Turkish, and students were asked to answer the questions in Turkish. The topics and questions for the beginner and elementary students are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Questions asked to Beginner and Elementary level students before and after reading

Beginner		Elementary	
Topics	Questions	Topics	Questions
1. Antiques Roadshow	What is "Antiques Roadshow"?	1. April Fools Day	In which country did "April Fools Day" originate?
2. Guardian Angels	What kind of an organization are the "Guardian Angels"?	2. Oldest University	Where is the oldest University?
	What do "Guardian Angels" do?	3. Basketball	Where did Basketball originate from?
3. Small Shops	What is the reason for small shops to close down?	4. Volleyball	Where did Volleyball originate from?
4. Charles Lindbergh	Who is Charles Lindbergh?	5. Football	"How often is the World Football Championship held?"
	What did Charles Lindbergh achieve?	6. Carnival	Where did Carnival originate from?
5. Emilia Earhart	Who is Emilia Earhart?	7. Labor Day	When do we celebrate Labor Day?
	What did Emilia Earhart achieve?		Where was Labor Day first celebrated?

### Procedure

In the first reading lesson students were handed out the questions on the topics to be covered in the reading book. They were asked to answer only those questions to which they know the answer to and not to make any wild guesses. Subjects were briefly informed about the aim of the questions. They were assured that their responses would not affect their reading grade in any way. This was done to eliminate any inhibitions on the students' part and to ensure that they would not read the future chapters. The initial responses of students were highlighted in order to define the responses given prior to reading the texts. Then, 2 to 3 days after each chapter was covered, the same questionnaire was applied and subjects were asked to answer the questions related to the last chapter covered. The teacher indicated to the students what question(s) they needed to answer particularly after each chapter. In case the subjects were not present when a particular chapter was covered or when they did not remember the answer to a particular question, they were asked to indicate as 'not present' or 'don't remember'. Students were allowed to make any changes to the answers they had given before reading the text. This procedure was followed throughout the whole term.

### Data Analysis

The right and wrong or missing responses to each question was determined for each participant. Responses that were correct were coded as correct. Those responses that were incorrect or where students did not provide any answer were coded as wrong. The data were analyzed using the McNemar's chi-square test to identify whether there has been a significant change in the number of correct responses given to each question before and after reading the texts. If the p value was below 0,005 the difference was regarded as significant and if the p value was above 0,005 no significant difference was observed. Due to absenteeism, the number of participants changed between 22 and 23 in the beginner level, and from 22 to 25 in the elementary level.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to identify whether reading topics covered in reading classes contribute to the world knowledge of the students, responses of participants to questions on the reading topics before and after reading were analyzed using the McNemar's chi-square test. The results for the beginner level are shown in Table 2 and the results for the Elementary level are shown in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 2, no student was able to give a correct answer to the question "What is Antiques Roadshow?" correctly. However, after reading, 20 students correctly answered the question and one student gave a wrong answer. The increase in the number of correct responses before and after reading is significant,  $p \leq 0,005$ . Similarly, for the questions "What kind of an organization are the 'Guardian Angels'?" and "What do 'Guardian Angels' do?" no student was able to provide a correct answer and . Similarly, After reading the text on "Guardian Angels" 21 students provided correct answers o the question "What kind of an organization are the 'Guardian Angels'?" and 20 students were able to respond correctly to the question "What do 'Guardian Angels' do?" and the difference proved to be significant for both questions,  $p \leq 0,0005$ . These results suggest that while students had no information on the topics "Antiques Roadshow" and "Guardian Angels" prior to reading, after reading they seemed to have gained that missing information. This result suggests that the information provided by both reading texts added to the general knowledge of the students.

For the question "What is the reason for small shops to close down?", however, 17 students responded correctly while 5 student gave no or a wrong response before reading the text. After reading the text, all 22 students were able to respond correctly but no significant difference was observed,  $p \leq 0,005$ . It can be said that the majority of students, 17 students, already knew why small shops close down while only few students, 5 students, seemed to have no information on this topic. After reading the text the 5 students were able to respond correctly to the question on why small shops close down. This suggests that the topic on small shops added to the world knowledge of these 5 students.

With regards to questions on Charles Lindbergh, no student was able to indicate who Charles Lindbergh was or what he had accomplished before reading the related text. However, after reading the texts all 23 participating students were able to indicate who Charles Lindbergh was and what he had accomplished which resulted in a statistically significant difference,  $p \leq 0,005$ . Similarly, no student was able to indicate who Emilia Earhart was or what she had accomplished before reading the related texts, 21 students were able to answer the question "Who is Emilia Earhart?" and 17 students could answer the question "What did Emilia Earhart achieve?" after reading the text. The difference in the number of students answering these two questions after reading the related texts proved to be statistically significant,  $p \leq 0,005$ . Again, it can be said that the information provided by the texts about Charles Lindbergh and Emilia Earhart have contributed to the world knowledge of the majority of students.

Table 2 : Changes in responses before and after reading in Beginner level

Antiques Roadshow					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statisticsa	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	20	1	21	21	,000b
Total	20	1	21	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Guardian Angels					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statisticsa	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	21	1	22	22	,000b
Total	21	1	22	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Guardian Angels					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statisticsa	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	20	2	22	22	,000b
Total	20	2	22	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Small Shops					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statisticsa	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	17	0	17	N	P
Wrong	5	0	5	22	,063
Total	22	2	22	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Charles Lindbergh					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statisticsa	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	23	0	23	23	,000b
Total	23	0	23	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Charles Lindbergh					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statisticsa	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	23	0	23	23	,000b
Total	23	0	23	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Emilia Earhart					

Table 2 : Changes in responses before and after reading in Beginner level (continued)

Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	21	1	22	22	,000b
Total	21	1	22	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	

  

Emilia Earhart					
Before Reading	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	17	4	21	22	,000b
Total	17	4	21	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	

Regarding Elementary level reading lessons, Table 3 shows that no student gave a correct answer to the questions “In which country did ‘April Fool’s Day’ originate?” and “Where is the oldest University?” before reading the related texts. However, after reading the texts, 23 students correctly answered the question “In which country did ‘April Fool’s Day’ originate?” and 22 students correctly answered the questions “Where is the oldest University?” and the difference in the number of students answering both questions correctly before and after reading proved to be significant,  $p \leq 0,0005$ . It seems that while students had no knowledge on these two topics before reading the text, they gained some knowledge on these topics after reading and such knowledge may have contributed to their world knowledge.

Considering the question “Where did Basketball originate from?” 9 students gave correct answers and 14 students gave either no or wrong answers before reading the text. However, after reading the related text the number of students giving correct answers to the questions on the origin of basketball increased significantly from 9 to 23,  $p \leq 0,0005$ . Similarly, there is a significant difference,  $p \leq 0,0005$ , in the number of students correctly answering the question “Where did Volleyball originate from?” before and after reading. While no students could provide a correct answer before reading the text on volleyball, 17 students were able to indicate where volleyball originated from after reading. These results too suggest that there has been a contribution to the general knowledge of the students.

With regards to the question “How often is the World Football Championship held?” 19 students correctly answered the question while 6 students did not provide a correct answer. After reading the text on football, all 25 students gave correct answers. However, the difference between students giving a correct answer before and after reading the text was not significant  $p \leq 0,005$ . This result suggests that the majority of students already knew how often the World Football Championship was held and that the text on this topic did not add to the world knowledge of most of the students. However, 6 students could provide a correct answer after reading. This suggests that the text contributed to the world knowledge of these 6 students.

Results on the origin of Carnival revealed that only 1 student knew where Carnival originated from and 23 students did not before reading the related text, after reading the text all participating students could indicate where Carnival originated from. This difference was shown to be significant,  $p \leq 0,0005$ . This result indicates that the text on Carnival contributed to the students’ world knowledge

Finally, the questions on the topic Labor Day revealed that 23 students correctly answered the question “When do we celebrate Labor Day?”,  $p \leq 0,005$ , no student was able to answer the question “Where was Labor Day first celebrated?” before reading the text. After reading the text on Labor Day all 24 students were able to indicate where it originated from,  $p \leq 0,0005$ . It can be said that while the information of the date of Labor Day was already present in the students’ world knowledge but that the information on where Labor Day was first celebrated did contribute to their world knowledge.

Table 3: Changes in responses before and after reading in Elementary level

April Fool's Day					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	23	2	25	25	,000b
Total	23	2	25	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Oldest University					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	22	3	25	25	,000b
Total	22	3	25	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Basketball					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	9	0	9	N	P
Wrong	14	2	16	25	,000b
Total	23	2	25	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Volleyball					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	17	5	22	22	,000b
Total	17	5	22	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Football					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	19	0	19	N	P
Wrong	6	0	6	25	,031 b
Total	25	0	25	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	



Table 3: Changes in responses before and after reading in Elementary level (continued)

Origin of Carnival					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	1	0	1	N	P
Wrong	23	0	23	24	,000 <sup>b</sup>
Total	24	0	24	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Labor Day - Date					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	23	0	0	N	P
Wrong	0	2	25	25	1,000 <sup>b</sup>
Total	23	2	25	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	
Labor Day – Place of origin					
	After Reading			Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Before Reading	Correct	Wrong	Total	Pretest & Posttest	
Correct	0	0	0	N	P
Wrong	24	0	24	24	,000 <sup>b</sup>
Total	24	0	24	a. McNemar Test b. Binomial distribution used.	

To summarize, the results revealed that students at the beginner level had no prior knowledge on 4 out of 5 topics. They provided either no or wrong answers to the questions. However, after reading these 5 topics, they were able to provide correct responses to the questions. Likewise, students at the elementary level had no prior knowledge on 5 topics but had some prior knowledge on 2 topics, the World Football Championship and the date of Labor Day. Statistical analysis revealed that there was a significant increase in the number of correct responses to the questions after reading the 5 texts in the beginner level and the 7 texts in the elementary level. There were still students' who could not provide a correct answer after reading. One reason might be that they did not comprehend the content. Another reason might be that they tried to answer or guess the answer to the questions although they were not present in the previous lesson where that particular topic was covered or did not provide any answer. As mentioned before, such cases were coded as wrong. Thus, it can be said that the majority topics covered in the reading lesson contributed to the general knowledge of the students which may serve as background knowledge and aid comprehension (Henry, 1999; Hedge, 2000; Hirsch, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

As language teachers we expect our students to correctly answer the comprehension questions after reading and are glad if they do so. However, it seems that EFL reading lessons not only improve students' language proficiency but provide them with information on various topics as well. It can be argued that the content of FL reading courses can aid language learners to establish domain knowledge which would ease text comprehension. Although not every topic or information covered in reading lessons may add to all of the students' world knowledge, it still seems that the topics covered contribute to the world knowledge of the majority of students. Stubbs (1982, p. 138 cited in Arıkan, 2008) indicates that English teachers have always been "responsible not only for the linguistic development of their pupils, but also for their psychological, moral and interpersonal development – and to expect them also to provide a world view and philosophy of life." This can be realized by choosing material that involve information that can add to the student's world knowledge.



Thus, it can be said that EFL reading lessons not only serve as a means to improve students' language proficiency but also serve as vicarious experience by which language learners gain world knowledge (Vellutino, 2003). Teachers and course book writers can take this into consideration and choose topics they believe will improve language proficiency and contribute to the general or world knowledge of the students.

#### BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESS OF AUTHOR



Dr. Hülya İPEK is an assistant professor at the Department of English Language Teaching, Education Faculty at Anadolu University, Turkey. She graduated from Anadolu University, Department of English Language Teaching. Dr. İpek Received her M.A. and Ph.D degrees in English Language Teaching from Anadolu University. Her research interests are affective factors in language learning and teaching, teaching and testing FL reading, speaking and listening.

Asst. Prof. Dr. Hülya İPEK  
Anadolu University  
Education Faculty  
Department of English Language Teaching  
Eskisehir- TURKEY  
E. Mail: [hipek@anadolu.edu.tr](mailto:hipek@anadolu.edu.tr)

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