The Effect of Topic Familiarity and Pre-Reading Activities on Reading Comprehension and Lexical Inferencing

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Abstract

The present study investigated the effect of topic familiarity and pre-reading activities on reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. Sixty four Azari learners of English, with comparable English proficiency, were assigned to four groups: (1) plus familiar topic, plus pre-reading group (+F+P); (2) plus familiar topic, minus pre-reading group (+F–P); (3) minus familiar topic, plus pre-reading group (–F+P); (4) minus familiar topic, minus pre-reading group (–F–P). The participating groups were provided with reading materials which met the experimental conditions to which they had already been assigned, and were tested on reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. Results of MANOVA tests and pairwise comparisons run on the data obtained from two comprehension tests and one lexical inferencing test revealed a significantly positive effect of topic familiarity on both EFL readers’ comprehension and lexical inferencing. Pre-reading activities, however, improved neither reading comprehension nor lexical inferencing. The statistically significant superiority of +F–P group over the –F+P group in terms of both reading comprehension and lexical inferencing tests further implied that providing readers with pre-reading activities on an unfamiliar topic could barely make up for the lack of topic familiarity in either reading comprehension or lexical inferencing.

Keywords: reading comprehension, topic familiarity, pre-reading task, lexical inferencing

Introduction

The primary goal of reading is to obtain information from a text, no matter whether it is to look for some specific information, to learn something new from texts, or just to gain general comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). As conceptualised by Pulido (2007), “comprehension involves constructing a mental representation from propositional content for the purpose of understanding a message, be it written or aural” (p. 167). Research on second language (L2) reading has demonstrated that learners can also gain some further understanding about the language through which information is encoded. For example, while reading a text for meaning, L2 readers can learn new words they encounter (e.g., Pulido, 2003; Rott, 1999), improve their knowledge of partially known grammatical forms and structures (Leow, 1997), and process brand new grammatical forms (Lee, 2002; Lesser, 2004).

Reading has also been taken to be a dynamic process in that reader variables including background knowledge, aptitude, and memory constraints come to interact with text variables (e.g., text structure, length, and lexical and linguistic complexity) as a reader gets involved in constructing a mental representation or comprehending a
text (Lesser, 2007). It has also been suggested that lexical inferencing during reading is likely to play an important role in text processing (e.g., Hamada, 2009). Regarding text comprehension and vocabulary acquisition through reading, Pulido (2007) argues that, although there are some common processes between the two, “constructing a mental representation” during reading a text does not necessarily entail engaging in the same processes required for acquiring new lexical items that a reader comes across during reading.

L2 vocabulary development through reading has proven to be complex. In order to establish form-meaning connections for new lexical items through reading (or text processing), readers have to notice and attend to new lexical items. This kind of lexical inferencing would in turn require the use of context cues and linguistic as well as non-linguistic knowledge (Hamada, 2009). While the quality of processing during reading is of paramount importance for lexical development to occur, text processing and comprehension are argued to be affected by reader-based factors such as background knowledge, knowledge of reading strategies, and top-down and bottom-up strategies (e.g., Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Schellings, Aarnoutse, & van Leeuwe, 2006). The impact of such reader-based factors on reading comprehension and lexical inferencing thus requires further attention in the literature on second language acquisition.

Background Knowledge and Text Processing

A great body of research in cognitive psychology lends support to the idea that background knowledge facilitates performance on a variety of cognitive tasks, including reading comprehension (e.g., Barry & Lazarte, 1995; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Chen & Donin, 1997; Hudson, 1982; Johnson, 1982; Lee, 1986; Lesser, 2007). The facilitative role of prior knowledge has been accounted for primarily by schema-based models of comprehension which propose that pre-stored schemata or scripts enhance comprehension. More recently, construction-integration models of comprehension hold that background knowledge is kept as an associative network of propositions that can be activated by bottom-up strategies when the reader interacts with the textual data (Nassaji, 2007). In either view, the readers’ background knowledge appears to contribute to text processing.

Lesser (2004) examined the effects of text mode (i.e., reading vs. listening), topic familiarity, and pausing on beginning Spanish learners’ comprehension, and their processing of Spanish future tense morphology. Although learners who received a familiar topic passage performed better on comprehension measures, there was no effect of topic familiarity on processing the future tense. In another study, Lesser (2007) investigated the impact of topic familiarity and working memory on beginning Spanish learners’ comprehension and processing of grammatical forms. The results revealed that topic familiarity and background knowledge not only led to better comprehension, but it also promoted learners’ ability to make form-meaning connections in the text.

Carrell (1987) investigated the simultaneous effects of culture-specific content schemata and formal schemata on ESL reading comprehension, as well as the potential interaction between them. Two groups of high-intermediate ESL students, 52 in total, were required to read, recall, and answer questions about each of the two texts.
For each of the two groups of readers (students of Muslim and Catholic/Spanish backgrounds), one text had culturally familiar content and the other text had culturally unfamiliar content. Within each group, half of the participants read the text in a familiar, well-organized rhetorical format; the other half, however, read the text in an unfamiliar, altered rhetorical format. Results showed that participants who received texts with familiar content and familiar rhetorical form outperformed those who received texts with unfamiliar content and unfamiliar rhetorical form. Interestingly, the results for the “mixed” conditions (i.e., familiar content and unfamiliar rhetorical form; unfamiliar content and familiar rhetorical form) indicated that content schemata affected reading comprehension more than formal schemata.

In similar vein, Johnson (1982) investigated the effects of content schemata on 46 Iranian university students. In his study, half of the participants read a text with familiar content while the other half read a text with unfamiliar content. Participants were tested on their comprehension of explicit and implicit information in the texts by answering multiple-choice questions. Results showed that the text with familiar content was better understood by ESL students than the one with unfamiliar content.

The above two studies, however, investigated the simultaneous effects of formal and content schemata on students’ reading comprehension. There might be a threat to the structural comparability between the familiar and unfamiliar passages. Furthermore, none of these studies presented any explicit criteria—for example, self-report questionnaires—for judging some topics as familiar and some others as unfamiliar to the participants.

**Background Knowledge and Lexical Inferencing**

Studies conducted to date have reported that greater levels of background knowledge and expertise in a given subject matter contribute to efficient attention to input during reading, enabling better textual and lexical interpretation (e.g., Ellis, 2001; Lee, 1986; Nassaji, 2007; Robinson, 2003). The syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge activated in response to the context cues within the text can constrain the subsequent textual and lexical processing. When processing a text for meaning, readers also have a chance to utilize local cues in combination with global cues to infer the meaning of unknown words encountered during reading (Hamada, 2009).

Research within a lexical inferencing paradigm has observed strategies and knowledge sources that L2 learners use to infer the meaning of unknown lexical items. In one study on the effectiveness of glosses for vocabulary acquisition through reading, Jacobs, Dufon, and Fong (1994) examined the extent to which text recall scores were correlated with incidental vocabulary gain scores. Intermediate learners of Spanish were asked to read an expository passage (613 words) and then recall the passage in their L1, English, immediately. This was followed by an L2-L1 translation of the target words (TWs) in the study to measure lexical gain. Participants were assigned to three groups in this study. Two of the groups contained glosses for the TWs, either in English or in Spanish. The control group received no glosses. For all the three groups combined, Jacobs et al. reported a modest positive significant correlation between level of text comprehension and immediate vocabulary gain ($r = .39$). These findings were however not maintained 4 weeks later.
Investigating incidental vocabulary gain through reading, Pulido (2003) examined the effects of background knowledge on immediate incidental vocabulary gain of nonsense words through tasks on brief narratives that depicted either culturally familiar or unfamiliar versions of everyday scenarios. He found that vocabulary gain was initially greater among the participants at all proficiency levels when they read brief narratives depicting more familiar topics in comparison to less familiar ones. However, the obtained gain disappeared over time, as shown by a multiple-choice measure which tapped participants’ ability to recognize L1 translation equivalents of nonsense words.

In a cross-sectional study, Lee and Wolf (1997) observed that native Spanish speakers mostly used background knowledge to infer meaning, followed by advanced, intermediate, and then beginning learners of Spanish during a retrospective think-aloud task. In another study, Mondria and Wit-de Bower (1991) examined the effects of contextual richness on the guessability and retention of words in a foreign language and found that in the process of guessing there was a distinct interaction between contextual factors, word factors, and reader/learner factors. These two studies demonstrated that background knowledge and rich semantic contexts affected lexical inferencing in discrete sentence contexts.

Although a bulk of studies have already explored the effects of topic familiarity and pre-reading activities on reading comprehension and word-meaning inferencing under varying circumstances, it is not clear if pre-reading activities can compensate for the lack of topic familiarity in reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. The present study set out to replicate the previous studies and at the same time contribute to the field by examining the compensatory potential of pre-reading activities.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the present study:

1. Would topic familiarity affect L2 English readers’ comprehension and lexical inferencing from that text?
2. Would activating readers’ background knowledge through previewing and pre-questioning help them enhance their ability in guessing the meaning of unknown lexical items and getting propositional meaning from a familiar text?
3. Would building background knowledge through previewing and pre-questioning make up for the lack of topic familiarity in terms of text comprehension and lexical inferencing?

Method

Participants

To investigate the above three concerns, 78 female EFL learners of English, who were high school junior students from the same school in Ardabil, Iran and bilingual in Azari-Turkish and Persian, were asked to participate in the study. Sixty four learners whose scores ranged from 22 to 34 in a proficiency test were selected. Then, participants were randomly assigned to four groups, including plus familiar topic, minus pre-reading group (+F–P, n = 16); plus familiar topic, plus pre-reading
group (+F+P, \( n = 16 \)); minus familiar topic, plus pre-reading group (–F+P, \( n = 16 \)); minus familiar topic, minus pre-reading group (–F–P, \( n = 16 \)).

The proficiency test given to the participants included three components: grammar (20 items), vocabulary (20 items), and reading comprehension tests (15 items) in a multiple-choice format. The one-way ANOVA run on the proficiency scores of the four participating groups showed no statistically significant difference among them (\( F = .63, p = .990 \)).

**Materials**

**Passages**

Two passages were used in the present study, and the topic familiarity of the passages was later confirmed through a self-report questionnaire. The first passage entitled *Getting Driving License* was familiar to participants. A second passage, *Working for a Company in a Foreign Country*, was based on a topic that was unfamiliar to participants.

Both texts were of approximately equal length (between 154 and 166 words), consisting of the same number of sentences, and were, in general, similar in terms of their readability levels; using the Fog’s index, the readability levels of the passages were computed to be 15.75 and 16.17 respectively.

**Pre-reading Tasks**

Two pre-reading activities were developed for each passage: previewing and pre-questioning. During previewing, participants were provided with the topic, some key words and concepts and some information about the content of the passages. During pre-questioning, participants received a set of written questions and a one-sentence oral summary of the reading passage, and were asked to develop some questions based on the passage.

**Target Words**

Five lexical items, representing concepts associated with the passage topics, were chosen from each of the two passages and were underlined within the texts. In order to make sure the participants were unfamiliar with the 10 underlined vocabulary items prior to the study, a vocabulary pre-test was administered. The participating groups were provided with 45 lexical items including those 10 vocabulary items and were asked to write their Persian equivalents. The performance showed that participants were unfamiliar with the underlined words.

**Measures and Procedures**

The post-test package used in the current study included a multiple-choice reading comprehension test, a comprehension recall protocol to check reading comprehension, and a translation recognition test to check lexical inferencing. The multiple-choice reading comprehension test, which was developed following Taglieber, Johnson, and Yarbrough (1988), included 8 items for each text. The test
included items which addressed both text-explicit and text-implicit (inferential) information. The comprehension recall protocol was based on Lesser’s (2007) study on the effectiveness of topic familiarity on reading comprehension and required participants to write down as much as they could remember from the text without referring back to it. The translation recognition test, which was prepared following Pulido (2007), intended to check any improvements in terms of lexical inferencing; the test included 10 items, five of which came from the familiar text and the other five came from the unfamiliar one. The participants in the +F−P and +F+P groups were required to answer the items relevant to the familiar text and the participants in the −F−P and −F+P groups were instructed to answer those items which had been extracted from the unfamiliar text.

Participants were tested in two sessions. In the first session, the +F−P group was given a familiar topic without pre-reading activities and the +F+P group was given a familiar topic as well as pre-questioning and previewing tasks. As soon as participants completed the pre-reading activities, they worked on the tests. The topics covered in the pre-reading activities and the texts provided were the same. During the second session, the −F+P group received an unfamiliar topic as well as pre-questioning and previewing activities; the comparison group (the −F−P group) received an unfamiliar topic without previewing and pre-questioning tasks.

After participants in each group received their own texts, they were asked to read the texts and were tested for reading comprehension by recalling the texts in the written form without making any reference to the texts and by answering eight multiple-choice questions on explicit and implicit information in the texts. Participants were given 15 minutes to answer the open-ended question and recall the texts in the written form and five minutes to complete each multiple-choice test.

Having answered the multiple-choice test and completed the recall task, the participating groups were given the translation recognition test. Participants were asked to read the passage carefully, notice the underlined vocabulary items, guess their meanings, and choose the best option from the four possible Persian equivalents for each underlined word.

Data Analysis

The multiple-choice comprehension and translation recognition tests used in the present study were scored separately. Regarding the multiple-choice reading comprehension test, for each multiple-choice question only one correct answer was provided and participants were assigned one point for selecting the correct answer. The dependent variable in the multiple-choice reading comprehension test was measured as the number of correct answers, yielding a maximum score of 8.

The comprehension recall protocols written by the participants were marked by two independent raters who rated the answers only for information content but not grammatical mistakes. The dependent variable in the open-ended question was measured as the number of propositions, related to the content of the texts contained in the participants’ recall protocols of the texts. The scores from the two raters were averaged to produce the final score for each participant; the interrater reliability calculated was .85.
To measure the differential effects of the two independent variables on participants’ lexical inferencing, their scores on the translation recognition test were analyzed statistically. Every correct answer in the translation recognition test was assigned one point. Since there were five items to be scored, the maximum score for the test was 5.

**Results**

The data obtained from the comprehension test were put into SPSS. A MANOVA test was run to examine the effects of topic familiarity and pre-reading activities on comprehension and lexical inferencing. Table 1 represents the descriptive statistics for the comprehension scores of the four groups of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ F–P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–F–P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 represents the effects of topic familiarity and pre-reading activities on reading comprehension.

**Table 2**

*MANOVA results for the reading comprehension test*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>65.67</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.89</td>
<td>7.57</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>173.31</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1849.00</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results obtained from the MANOVA test, presented in Table 2, showed that the difference among the four groups was statistically significant regarding reading comprehension ($F = 7.57, \ p < .001$).

To find out the precise location of difference among the four participating groups, pairwise comparisons were run (Table 3).
The first research question addressed the effects of topic familiarity on the comprehension of the propositional content of the text. A closer look at the mean scores of the groups with familiar and unfamiliar passage topics (Table 1) revealed that the groups that received a familiar topic, i.e., +F+P (M = 6.43, SD = 1.75) and +F–P (M = 5.50, SD = 1.89) comprehended the propositional content of the text better than the groups which received an unfamiliar topic, i.e., –F–P (M = 4.18, SD = 1.68) and –F+P (M = 3.93, SD = 1.43). The post-hoc analysis run (Table 3) also showed that the difference between +F+P and –F+P, on the one hand, and the difference between +F–P and –F–P, on the other, were statistically significant (p < .001 and p < .05).

The main effect of pre-reading activities on the comprehension of a familiar topic passage was addressed by research question 2. Looking at the mean scores of +F+P (M = 6.43, SD = 1.75) and +F–P (M = 5.50, SD = 1.89), it becomes clear that +F+P did better than +F–P in terms of reading comprehension. However, as it is clear in Table 3, the difference did not reveal any significance (p = .124).

The third research question asked whether pre-reading activities would make up for the lack of topic familiarity in terms of reading comprehension or not. As it can be seen in Table 3, the mean score of –F+P (M = 3.93, SD = 1.43) was lower than that of +F–P (M = 5.50, SD = 1.89), and this difference was statistically significant (p < .05). Based on the results obtained, it can be argued that pre-reading activities could not make up for the lack of topic familiarity regarding reading comprehension.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the translation recognition scores of the four participating groups regarding lexical inferencing.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics for the lexical inferencing test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+F–P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–F–P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results obtained from the second part of the MANOVA test run on the data and presented in Table 5 showed a statistically significant difference among the four participating groups in terms of lexical inferencing ($F = 4.84, p < .05$).

### Table 5
**MANOVA results for the lexical inferencing test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>13.92</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>.004**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>57.43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>257.00</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To examine the exact location of difference among the four groups regarding lexical inferencing, another pos-hoc test was run. The results of the post-hoc test are reported in Table 6.

### Table 6
**Lexical inferencing according to topic familiarity and pre-reading activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+F−P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.034*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−F−P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+F−P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.034*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−F+P</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the effects of topic familiarity on reading comprehension, the first research question addressed the effects of topic familiarity on participants’ lexical inferencing. As it is shown in Table 6, the +F+P group ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.13$) outperformed the −F+P group ($M = 1.25, SD = .77$), and the +F−P group ($M = 2.00, SD = 1.03$) outscored the −F−P group ($M = 1.25, SD = .93$) in a significant way ($p < .001$ and $p < .034$). From what was illustrated, it becomes clear that topic familiarity had a significant effect on participants’ lexical inferencing.

The first part of the second research question addressed the effects of pre-reading activities on participants’ lexical inferencing on a familiar topic. A closer look at the mean scores of the groups that received a familiar topic with and without pre-reading activities (Table 4) showed that the group which received a familiar topic as well as pre-reading activities ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.13$) guessed the meaning of unknown words better than the group which received a familiar topic without pre-reading activities ($M = 2.00, SD = 1.03$). However, as it is evident in the post-hoc test (Table 6), the difference between these groups did not reach statistical significance ($p = .370$). By and large, the presence of pre-reading activities did not benefit lexical inferencing significantly.
Another main concern addressed through the third research question was whether pre-reading activities would make up for the lack of topic familiarity in terms of lexical inferencing or not. As it is indicated in Table 6, the mean score of \(-F+P\) (\(M = 1.25, SD = .77\)) was lower than that of \(+F-P\) (\(M = 2.00, SD = 1.03\)), with this difference reaching statistical significance (\(p < .05\)). It stands to reason that pre-reading activities could not make up for the lack of topic familiarity regarding lexical inferencing.

**Discussion**

Research question 1 addressed the effects of topic familiarity on EFL learners’ comprehension and lexical inferencing. The first part of this question can be answered by examining the total scores of the two comprehension tests, i.e., multiple-choice reading comprehension test and comprehension recall protocol.

The results obtained from both comprehension tests presented in the preceding section showed that the \(+F-P\) group outperformed the \(-F-P\) group, and the \(+F+P\) group outperformed the \(-F+P\) group significantly. In other words, the groups with a familiar topic showed superiority over the groups with an unfamiliar topic in both plus-pre-reading and minus-pre-reading conditions. This finding is in line with the findings of several studies (e.g., Barry & Lazarte, 1998; Carrell, 1987; Hudson, 1982; Johnson, 1981, 1982). Moreover, it is in line with Nassaji’s (2007) view of the connectionist principle. According to this principle, knowledge emerges in the course of reading as the reader constructs a textbase primarily via bottom-up processing or decoding of the textual input. The textbase contains the propositional meaning of the text, which then “becomes integrated into the readers’ global knowledge, forming a coherent mental representation of what the text is about” (Nassaji, 2007, p. 453). In other words, the reader would be able to construct the “coherent mental representation” of a text only when s/he has prior knowledge about the topic of that text. Stressing the importance associated with background knowledge in reading comprehension, Clarke and Silberstein (1977) argue that:

> [t]he reader brings to the task a formidable amount of information and ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. This knowledge, coupled with the ability to make linguistic predictions, determines the expectations the reader will develop as he reads. Skill in reading depends on the efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world. (pp. 136–137)

The second part of the first research question (the effect of topic familiarity on lexical inferencing) can be answered by examining the results of the lexical inferencing test. Results of the translation recognition test, regarding research question 1, replicated those for the reading comprehension test; in the translation recognition test the \(+F-P\) group outperformed the \(-F-P\) group, and the \(+F+P\) group outperformed the \(-F+P\) group. On the other hand, plus-topic-familiarity was superior than minus-topic-familiarity in both plus-pre-reading and minus-pre-reading conditions. The finding can be explained in terms of Frantzen’s (2003) view on two types of variables that influence lexical inferencing (i.e., context-related variables and reader-related variables). According to Frantzen, a reader uses not only contextual factors such as the text, the immediate co-text, and one or two words from the immediate co-text, but also reader-related factors such as background knowledge.
about the topic of the text to guess the meaning of unknown words.

Research question 2 looked into whether activating readers’ background knowledge through pre-reading activities would help them enhance their ability in lexical inferencing. Regarding both the reading comprehension and the lexical inferencing tests, the answer is negative. This finding ran counter to the findings of both Taglieber et al. (1988) and Chen and Grave (1995) on the possible effects of pre-reading activities on EFL readers’ comprehension. This unexpected finding can be justified from two perspectives. First, it might be due to the different kinds of pre-reading activities investigated in these different studies. While Taglieber et al. investigated the effects of the pictorial context, pre-reading vocabulary, and pre-questioning on reading comprehension, and Chen and Graves (1995) examined the effects of providing background knowledge on reading, the present study explored the influence of previewing and pre-questioning on EFL reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. Second, it is likely that the participants in this study used pre-reading activities to activate their prior knowledge, integrate the information from the text with their activated background knowledge, but they might fail to recall what they understood from the text, or to answer the questions related to the texts.

The third research question examined whether pre-reading activities would make up for the lack of topic familiarity in terms of reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. The results obtained from the comprehension and the translation recognition tests showed that +F–P group outscored the –F+P group significantly in the translation recognition test; that is, pre-reading activities could make up for the lack of topic familiarity neither in the comprehension test nor in the lexical inferencing test. This finding rejects the prediction that pre-reading activities would make up for the lack of topic familiarity regarding both reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. The results also showed the superiority of topic familiarity over pre-reading activities in both reading comprehension and lexical inferencing.

**Conclusions and Implications**

This study was designed to investigate 1) whether topic familiarity would affect reading comprehension and lexical inferencing of EFL readers, 2) the extent to which pre-reading activities would enhance EFL readers’ reading comprehension and lexical inferencing, and 3) whether pre-reading activities would make up for the lack of topic familiarity in terms of reading comprehension and lexical inferencing. With respect to the first issue, it was found that topic familiarity had a significant effect on readers’ comprehension and lexical inferencing. Concerning the second issue, the results revealed that the group which was provided with a familiar topic with pre-reading activities outperformed the group which received a familiar topic without pre-reading activities in terms of both the comprehension and the translation recognition test, though this difference was not big enough to reach significance. Regarding the third issue, it was concluded that pre-reading activities could not make up for the lack of topic familiarity in either reading comprehension or lexical inferencing.

The findings of this study imply that since readers’ background knowledge can significantly affect their reading comprehension, attention should be given to the topic which a text conveys. If the topic appears to be unfamiliar to the readers, it has to be illustrated in one way or another before getting the readers involved in the
comprehension of the text and the whole reading process. Inferring the meanings of unknown words, as one of the top-down strategies, should also be fostered in the EFL classroom settings where students can benefit from the context and their background knowledge in guessing the meanings of the unknown words.

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