

CULTURIZE AND NATIVIZE: LOOKING INTO THE ROLE OF CULTURAL FAMILIARITY TO IMPROVE ESL READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

In this 21st century, English has become a global language that one must grasp to remain competitive in the various field. Reading is one of the most crucial receptive language skill that contributes to second language (L2) learners' English language proficiency. The ability to read and comprehend texts coherently is essential for academic success, particularly to many L2 learners who rarely have conditions to use the English language in their daily lives. Teachers and educators across the world pay serious attention to improve learners' language success. However, the area of reading comprehension remains to be an alarming problem faced by non-native English language learners, including in Malaysia as indicated by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009+, 2012 and 2015 reading literacy results. The recent reform by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) introducing the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) aligned Cambridge English textbooks in Malaysian schools raised concern among teachers and educators regarding the culturally unfamiliar content of the book becoming an additional challenge for the intermediate and low-intermediate English as a second language (ESL) learners. In ESL and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, the cultural familiarity of a text is one of the significant research areas when it comes to learning and teaching. Thus, this article aims to review studies on the interrelation between cultural familiarity and text nativization to assist L2 learners in understanding a text comprehensively. This share will focus on the sense or the dimension of culture in language learning, the technical process of text nativization and the findings of previous studies on cultural familiarity and nativization.

Keywords: Culture, cultural familiarity, nativization, ESL reading comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Secondary education is a crucial phase for learners as they enter a new academic world, which is more demanding than their primary education. In Malaysian secondary schools, ESL learners face different challenges to accustom with such as teaching method, demand for learning independently, increasing assignments and new types of assessment. In Malaysia, the learners must pass the English subject in the national examination, for instance, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) to allow them to enrol public universities even though it is not a compulsory subject to attain the exit certificate from the public schools. Besides that, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) examination is obligatory for pre-university learners if they wish to enter undergraduate programs at public universities in Malaysia (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Hence, at these circumstances, reading becomes a fundamental ability that learners' need to rely on to assist their advancement to the higher education institutions.

In 2009, The PISA administered by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (as cited in Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2012) reported 44% of fifteen (15) years old Malaysian learners did not reach the minimum proficiency of reading literacy, followed by 56% of intermediate and 0% advance learners. According to Abdullah and Peters (2015) and Abdullah, Zain, Nair, Abdullah, and Ismail (2016), this unfortunate result possibly is a consequence of weak education system, explicitly in reading literacy and there is a necessity for policymakers, experts and educators to address this problem. The overall PISA reading, mathematics and science literacy result demanded the MOE revising the national education system and announced the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) in 2012, introducing Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) and Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM) the new Primary and Secondary School Standards-Based Curriculum. Simultaneously, the launch of the CEFR to reform the English language education by developing a roadmap to lift the education level to an international standard (Azman, 2016).

The implementation of the CEFR in Malaysia is still in its early stage hence on a positive note, Uri & Aziz (2018) highlighted few issues to be taken into consideration to refine the implementation at schools. One of the issues raised is about the domain of culture and language learning. Uri and Aziz recommended a need for the MOE to produce resources such as textbooks and learning materials locally according to the Malaysian context as the current textbook subscribed by the ministry is the Cambridge English textbooks with content from the British. In addition to this, Malaysian English Language Teaching Association's (MELTA) president Prof Dr S. Ganakumaran (as cited in "Let's have our own textbooks", 2018) stated that learners from semi-urban and rural areas face a hard time in learning English as the cultural and foreign practices in the textbook are unfamiliar both to the teachers and learners. On a similar notion, Dr. Surinderpal Kaur, the deputy dean of postgraduate studies at the Universiti Malaya (UM) Faculty of Languages and Linguistics (as cited in "Let's have our own textbooks", 2018) pointed out that culture-specific topics are not relatable by Malaysian learners especially when the content gets into British-ness. She also suggested the ministry should come up with something similar but locally based.

As stipulated by Yahya, Ibrahim, Ramli, Yusof and Othman (2017) local cultural content that learners experience in their daily life need to be translated into content for the syllabus and exercised in teaching to allow learners to establish connections with

the reading text. In addition to this, Chen, Yunus, and Maarof (2016) conducted a study to investigate the factors that are affecting ESL reading comprehension among Malaysian secondary school learners and reported three (3) important findings from the learners' perspective. First, generally, the learners are not interested and motivated to read, which subsequently affect their reading comprehension. Second, the learners were unable to relate to their reading text as they lacked prior knowledge. Third, the learners' deficiency of vocabulary knowledge hampers their reading comprehension. The two (2) central aspects of the findings are the reader factor and the text factor. It can be inferred that the text factor heavily influences the reader when it comes to reading comprehension, and therefore, the study emphasised the teachers to use the suitable technique to teach reading comprehension according to the learners' ability, prior knowledge, vocabulary knowledge to cultivate their interest and their drive to read a text. Hence, it is crucial to explore the role of cultural familiarity and nativized text on reading comprehension.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SCHEMA THEORY

In general, Rumelhart, (1980) refers schema as building blocks of cognition for the process of inferring sensory data, in retrieving data from memory, in generating actions, in determining goals and subgoals, in assigning resources and generally guiding the flow of processing in the system. He further added schemata is a representation of knowledge about all concepts such as objects, situations, events, the sequence of events, actions and series of actions stored in memory. In reading, the central principle of schema theory is the hypothesis that a printed or written text does not transmit the meaning on its own. Relatively, the text's role is to navigate directions for learners as to in what way they ought to retrieve or construct meaning based on their prior attained knowledge (Rumelhart, 1980).

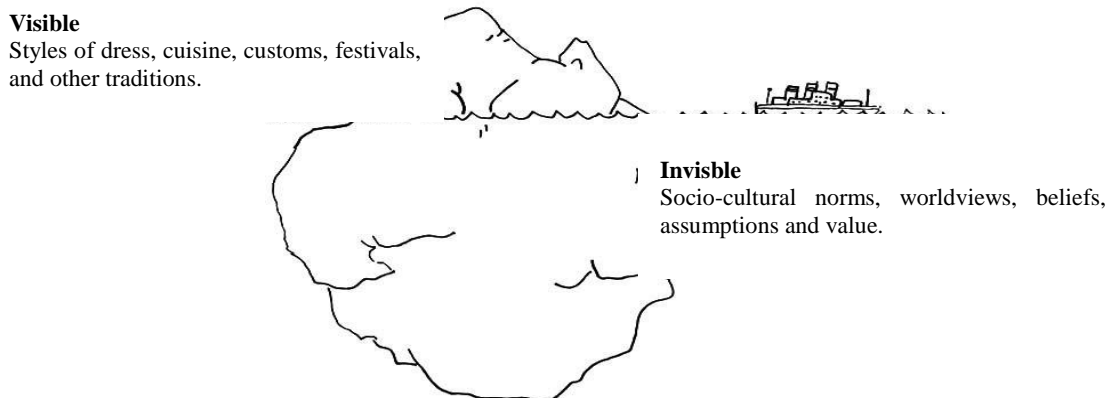
Erten (2018) categorised various types of background knowledge associated to L2 reading comprehension into four (4) categories, namely, formal schema, content schema, and most related to the present study the cultural schema. Erten further added that the cultural schema is an extensive variety of the content schemata since it includes the activation of appropriate knowledge to grasp the writer's message comprehensively only if the learner has a sense of cultural belonging. Similarly, Altarriba and Forsythe (1993) emphasised that readers are not always able to make inferences, which are required to understand the text as intended by the author without sufficient cultural schemata.

Altarriba and Forsythe (1993) further explain, "When a person reads a passage, the schemata that embody his or her background knowledge provide the framework for understanding the character, setting, and event of the passage. It follows that readers who bring different schemata to the situation will give different interpretations to a story. An individual who reads a passage that presupposes the schemata of a foreign culture will comprehend the passage differently than a native of the foreign culture" (p.146) and thus highlighted that prior knowledge and cultural schemata significantly affect the reading comprehension processes.

CULTURE AND THE PROCESS OF NATIVIZATION

There is a various definition of explaining the word *culture*. From a second language (L2) perspective, Hinkle (2001) described that the word *culture* is to differentiate domains of people's lives. Hinkle further explains the term *culture* from two different aspects, specifically, visible and invisible aspect (p.5) as illustrated below.

Figure 1: Visible and invisible aspect of culture adapted from Hinkle (2001)



The visible and invisible aspects are very much debated in terms of social interaction, unity and cooperation in social settings and business and management scenarios but rarely do we inculcate the habits of nativize or culturize texts for classroom success. In an ESL classroom, educators or teachers need to recognise types of cultural information, which is suitable for the language learners. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) differentiate three (3) categories of cultural information, which are appropriate in language textbooks and reading materials:

1. The target culture materials: refer to materials based on the culture of nations that accepts English as the first language, which are the inner-circle countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, The United Kingdom, and The United States. The purpose of the target culture materials is typically to introduce ESL and EFL learners to the cultural settings of the target language.
2. The Source culture materials: refer to materials based on language learners' own culture and environment. The purpose of the source culture materials is to train learners to communicate about their own culture to outsiders and at the same time, make them be more aware and appreciate their own cultural identity.
3. The International target culture materials: refer to English materials based on a variety of culture around the world, mainly the outer-circle countries such as India, Malaysia and Philippines where English functions as a second language and the expanding circle countries such as Brazil, China and Indonesia where functions as the international language. The purpose of the international culture materials is to increase learners' intercultural awareness and to make learners aware through numerous socio-cultural contexts.

Ahmed (2017) stated that by providing appropriate materials culturally, topically, and suitable teaching strategies, learners will be able to relate with the culturally familiar materials automatically and benefit from it as stated below:

1. Learners can express themselves at ease.
2. Learners can develop new vocabulary through further explanation or description.
3. The teacher may not have to provide additional information for the appropriateness of the materials.
4. Learners feel stimulated to relate their personal experience with the materials.
5. Learners can also improve their language skills through the consciousness-raising process.

In relation, Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990, p.3) defined four (4) separate sense or dimension of culture to guide through the issue of culture and L2 language learning. The senses of culture are not to be felt but to be dwelt upon prominently, especially in the ESL or EFL settings.

Table 1: Senses of culture adapted from Adaskou et al., (1990)

The Senses	Definition
1. The aesthetic sense	Language is related to mass media, the cinema, music, and literature.
2. The sociological sense	Language related to the organisation and nature of family, of home life, of interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs and institution.
3. The semantic sense	The culture's conceptual system embodied in the language.
4. The pragmatic sense	The background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills that, in addition to mastery of the language code, make possible successful communication.

Based on the sociological, semantic and pragmatic sense defined by Adaskou et al., (1990), Alptekin (2006) proposed a practice called nativization. He described nativization as "a sociological, semantic, and pragmatic adaptation of the textual and contextual cues of the original story into the language learner's own culture while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact" (p.499). Razi (2011) also regarded nativization as the process of identifying foreign cultural elements in any reading text and then modifying them to the learners' native cultural elements. This approach is to help learners to get a better comprehension of the text. Erten highlighted that the nativization process is limited to cultural elements, and there will be no differences in terms of structure and content between the original text and the nativized version. The process of the nativization is as the samples below.

Sample of an Original Text

Republic Day

Republic Day is a public holiday in Turkey. Republic Day is the declaration of Republic and celebrated every year on the 29th of October. It is commonly associated with fireworks, parades, speeches and ceremonies. Patriotic events are organised throughout Turkey with a large participation of citizens, especially in the stadiums. Especially Ankara, the capital of Turkey, is the heart of nationwide celebrations. People display the Turkish flag outside their homes or buildings. Politicians appear at public events to show their support for the history and people of their country. People in Turkey express and give thanks for the freedom and liberties fought by their ancestors. Public administration buildings, schools, post offices and any small businesses are usually closed. Very few people have to work on that day. Last year, the 88th anniversary of the declaration of Republic was celebrated enthusiastically throughout the country. Republic Day occupies a big part of the political history of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk regards this day as the most important event in the history of the Turkish Republic.

Sample of a Nativized Text

Independence Day

Independence Day is a public holiday in Malaysia. Independence Day is the declaration of independence and celebrated every year on the 31st of August. It is commonly associated with fireworks, parades, speeches and ceremonies. Patriotic events are organised throughout Malaysia, with a large participation of citizens, especially at the city squares. Especially Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, is the heart of nationwide celebrations. People display the Malaysian flag or the Jalur Gemilang outside their homes or buildings. The King, prime minister and ministers, appear at public events to show their support for the history and people of their country. People in Malaysia express and give thanks for the freedom and liberties fought by their ancestors. Public administration buildings, schools, post offices and many small businesses are usually closed. Very few people will work on that day. Last year, the 61st anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was celebrated enthusiastically throughout the country. Independence Day occupies a big part of the political history of Malaysia. Tun Dr Mahathir regards this day as the most important event in the history of Malaysia.

Table 2: Sample of textual and contextual cues in the original and nativized version

Original Version	Nativized Version
Republic Day	Independence Day
Turkey	Malaysia
Ankara	Kuala Lumpur
29 th of October	31 st of August
Turkish flag	Malaysian flag or the Jalur Gemilang
Mustafa Kemal Atatürk	Tun Dr Mahathir
88 th anniversary	61 st anniversary
Especially in the stadiums	Especially at the city squares
Politicians	The King, prime minister, and ministers

This article adapted the original text from Demir (2012), and the nativized version is the modified or nativized text. Based on the sample texts, during the nativization process, the names of the cities, countries, events and dates in the original version was modified into the Malaysian context, to create a window to activate the cultural schemata of the learners' about the historical day of Malaysia's history. This process of manipulation and modification is known as 'Malaysianization'. All the cultural cues in the original text are deliberately nativized to provide a chance for the learners to read and visualise the historical day that they probably had as the first-hand experience being their prior knowledge, or base on other sources such as television, newspaper, and social media platform.

Readability Test

These are the readability scores of the original text the *Republic Day* and *Independence Day*.

For the original text, Flesch Reading Ease score was 37 which is difficult to read; Gunning Fog Formula gave a score of 13.7 which is rated hard to read; Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level was 11.4 which translates to 11th grade level; The Coleman-Liau Index was 13 which is a college grade level; The SMOG Index was 10.4 equivalent to 10th grade; Automated Readability Index was 10.2 which is for 9th to 10th graders (14-15 years old); Linsear Write Formula scored 8.8 which is equivalent to 9th grade. The overall readability consensus based on seven readability formulas scored this text as grade 11, rated as challenging to read and suitable for readers' aged 15 to 17 or 10th to 11th graders.

As for the nativized version of the text, the Flesch Reading Ease score was 34.8 which is challenging to read; Gunning Fog Formula gave a score of 13.4 which is rated hard to read; Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level was 11.8 which translates to 12th grade level; The Coleman-Liau Index was 14 which is a college grade level; The SMOG Index was 11 equivalent to 11th grade; Automated Readability Index was 11 which is for 10th to 11th graders (15-17 years old); Linsear Write Formula scored 9.4 which is equivalent to 9th grade. The overall readability consensus based on seven readability formulas scored this text as grade 11, rated as challenging to read and suitable for readers' aged 15 to 17 or 10th to 11th graders.

Based on the scores above, the outcome of the readability consensus based on the seven (7) readability formulas indicated that the process of nativization had nearly no consequence on the readability of the text and did not affect the structure of the original text but yet caters the learner's cultural background.

FINDINGS OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

In schema-theoretical studies, one of the most exciting findings in L2 reading is the significant role of cultural background knowledge or cultural schemata in reading comprehension. A previous study by, Johnson (1982) did an investigation of the effects of cultural awareness on reading comprehension by selecting seventy-two (72) ESL learners and gave them a reading text on Halloween. Johnson separated the text into two (2) sections comprising the common practice of holiday and comprehensive information about Halloween, which was anticipated to be unfamiliar to the participants. Written recall and true or false questions were used for data collection. The findings showed that participants were able to recall more information from the holiday section as it was familiar for them compared to the information recalled from the Halloween section. Johnson then concluded that cultural familiarity does play an active role in reading comprehension, especially among ESL learners.

More recently, Shirzadi (2015) carried out a similar study to investigate the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension and the differences in terms of gender. Participants for this study were among fifty (50) male and female Iranian EFL learners aged twenty (20) to thirty (30) from an institute in Iran. Shirzadi used two (2) culturally familiar and two (2) foreign texts as the instrument. The participants then answered four (4) multiple-choice reading comprehension questions for each text to evaluate literal and inferential level reading comprehension. The study concluded that cultural background plays a significant role in reading comprehension. Nonetheless, there were no differences found between genders in this study.

In addition to this, Dehghan and Sadighi (2011) studied the impact of cultural schema on the comprehension of texts with local and global questions using sixty-six (66) female pre-university learners aged seventeen (17) to eighteen (18). For this study, the researchers used five (5) culturally familiar topics and five (5) culturally unfamiliar topics, which accumulated to ten (10) reading texts. Each text was evaluated using three (3) bottoms up processing (literal level comprehension) item, and three (3) tops down (inferential level comprehension) in the form of multiple-choice items. They reported that the participants comprehend local items better than global texts, and their overall performance was affected by the cultural familiarity of the learners. Based on the result, Dehghan and Sadighi stated that participants produce better comprehension using the local texts compared to the culturally unfamiliar topic. They explained that the familiar linguistic context presented in the local text made it easy for the participants to process the text. Comparatively, the requirement of vast vocabulary knowledge to process the global texts reflected on the result of this study. This study also concluded that language teachers are neglecting to teach learners on how to read in terms of processing the text at higher-level comprehension and lack of contact with the global topic as the factor that affected learners that read the global texts. In addressing this concern, nativization is a sensible preparation before introducing the culturally unfamiliar or global reading items as Alptekin (2006) claims "nativization preserves standard comprehension mechanisms such as textual forms of redundancy and the literal-level processing of the original texts and the nativized versions are strictly identical" (p. 497).

Grounded by the nativization practice proposed by Alptekin, Jalilifar and Assi (2008) nativized three (3) American short stories to look into the impact on reading comprehension. They nativized the stories to their own Persian culture and selected twenty-nine (29) male and thirty-one (31) learner as their participants. The participants then were tested with multiple-choice questions. The first short story had one thousand and one hundred (1100) words with six (6) literal and six (6) inferential level questions. The second story had one thousand five and hundred (1500) words with eight (8) literal levels and six (6) inferential level question. The third story had one thousand and eight hundred (1800) words, nine (9) literal level, and six (6) inferential questions. The findings of this study clearly showed that cultural nativization improved both literal level and inferential comprehension and although the learners were reading longer texts in the form of short stories, their engagement and interaction with the nativized text sustained.

Demir (2012) focused on the effect of text nativization on reading comprehension and vocabulary inferences. For this, Demir selected one hundred and twenty (120) learners from a primary school in Turkey and divided them into experimental and control groups. He then prepared two (2) sets of reading text, original text and nativized version of it together with the reading comprehension and vocabulary questions in the form of multiple-choice questions. Demir reported that participants that read the nativized text acquire higher score in both reading comprehension and vocabulary test compared to participants who read the original version.

Tavakoli, Shirinbakhsh, and Rezazadeh (2012) conducted a similar study and added a different variable, which is the learners' attitude when reading a nativized text. The researcher selected sixty (60) Iranian intermediate level EFL learners from an English language institute for this study. A reading comprehension test, questionnaire and interview questions were used as the instruments to collect the data besides than the original and nativized text. From the result, this study concluded that there was a significant effect of cultural familiarity and nativization on the literal and inferential level comprehension. However, the participants disagreed of the idea of text nativization of original English short stories, as they prefer reading the original English stories.

Based on these findings, cultural familiarity and text nativization significantly enhance ESL and EFL learners' reading comprehension, namely literal level and inferential level reading comprehension. Secondly, the nativized text also improves learners' ability to infer vocabulary and get a better comprehension of the text compensating the lack of vocabulary knowledge compared to the first language (L1) learners. Thirdly, the practice of nativization is also suitable for both short passages and longer short stories.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the senses of culture defined by Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) is instrumental in L2 language learning, specifically in ESL and EFL material development. Alptekin (2006) incorporated these senses of culture to establish a framework to enable modification of a text without damaging the language and the content of the text which is an alternative way for ESL and EFL teachers to amend a text to facilitate the learners' reading comprehension besides than the conventional way of input or text modification. In addition to this, previous studies indicated that cultural familiarity and nativized text significantly enhance ESL and EFL learners' reading comprehension both at surface-level and higher-level reading comprehension. Alptekin and Ercetin (2011) describe surface-level comprehension as the initial phase a learner needs to undergo as the learner participates in the linguistic process of surface-level textual features. This literal-level process will assist the learner in developing microstructure of a text and relating propositions to develop a close relationship with the text to form a coherent semantic understanding.

Nevertheless, Landi, Oakhill and Perfetti (2007) stated that literal comprehension assists learners to attain inferential comprehension, which requires learners to understand the context of a written text deeply. Thus, overlooking the role of literal, surface-level comprehension is improper, and it is even challenging to detach literal comprehension and inferential understanding. Alptekin (2006) claimed that making interpretations beyond the surface-level of a text rely on schemata and it is impossible to get a complete understanding or higher-level of reading comprehension without giving importance to the role of schemata specifically cultural schemata in reading comprehension. Moreover, cultural familiarity and nativization also have a positive effect on other reading comprehension component, primarily in inferring vocabulary. A similar finding is also shared by Pulido (2004) that cultural schemata are useful in facilitating lexical inferencing during the reading process and enhance the learners' reading comprehension. Stanovich (2000) explained that the use of contextual clues to get a better comprehension of the text or to guess the meaning of the word is an example of a compensatory strategy applied by learners or readers when their usually used abilities malfunction or not sufficiently developed.

Yousef, Karimi, and Janfeshan (2014) highlighted several advantages of cultural familiarity and cultural schemata on reading comprehension. First, cultural schemata are essential in relating the contextual clues with the EFL and ESL learners' reading comprehension. Second, world knowledge, and how it is efficiently activated plays a significant role in comprehending a text since learners cannot merely depend on linguistic knowledge. Third, EFL and ESL learners' cultural schemata turn out to be valuable when they encounter culturally relevant information in their reading text. Fourth, directing and activating learners' cross-cultural background knowledge is a dominant instructional strategy to EFL and ESL reading comprehension. Fifth, cultural familiarity has to be a criterion in text selections and evaluating reading comprehension. Lastly, schemata determine the ease or the difficulty of understanding the text. If a learner does not have sufficient knowledge on the subject matter of the text, he or she will face difficulties to understand the text no matter how good they know the language.

Demir (2012) and Rokhsari (2012) suggested that textbook writers, material developers and teachers should look into the advantages of the local culture to facilitate L2 language learning, especially in improving reading comprehension. Rokhsari stated textbook writer must consider including local culture knowledge and not provide learners with texts that demand complete information of target culture. Besides that, Demir pointed out that EFL and ESL teachers to modify reading texts to make it suitable according to the learners' age and level of reading literacy can use the nativization practice. Rokhsari also argued the common belief among teachers that pre-reading activities will compensate cultural unfamiliarity in reading comprehension and recommended text nativization as a possible way to teach local culture and enhance ESL and EFL learners' reading comprehension. Erten and Razi (as cited in Erten, 2018, p.3) that "cultural familiarity of reading texts in reading comprehension is likely to exert a positive impact on reading comprehension, and this impact remains intact even when some reading activities are used to compensate for the lack of necessary prior cultural information.

Despite, the positive result of cultural familiarity and text nativization in ESL and EFL reading comprehension, the results of the studies differ depending on the learners' reading literacy, age, sociocultural context and English language teaching practices. Therefore, there is a necessity to conduct an in-depth study on cultural familiarity and text nativization procedure, before generalising the influence on Malaysian intermediate, low-intermediate ESL learners' reading comprehension.

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