

The Effects of Cultural Familiarity on Reading Comprehension and Attitudes Towards Reading English Short Stories Written by a Native Speaker and a Thai Author

อิทธิพลของความคุ้นเคยทางวัฒนธรรมต่อความเข้าใจ
ในการอ่านและทัศนคติต่อเรื่องสั้นภาษาอังกฤษ
ที่เขียนโดยนักเขียนเจ้าของภาษาและนักเขียนไทย

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Abstract

Literature is an integral part of language learning. Literary works written by native speakers are the predominant reading materials for English-major students in Thai universities while Thai literature written in English is often overlooked. Based on the hypothesis that reading comprehension of literary

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works requires cultural familiarity, this article reports on a quasi-experimental study assessing the impact of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension. In addition, this study also aimed to explore Thai English-major students' attitudes towards reading English short stories. Participants of this study were thirty-five English-major students taking English literature courses at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University. The instruments were (1) two short stories with a comparable theme, linguistic complexity and length but in different cultural contexts – one in an American and the other in a Thai context, (2) a reading comprehension test from the two texts, and (3) a questionnaire on the participants' attitudes towards reading the two texts. The findings showed that the culturally familiar text resulted in significantly better literal, inferential and overall comprehension. In addition, participants found that the Thai short story surpassed the American short story in the aspects of authenticity, ease of understanding and interest. Implications for selection of reading materials are discussed.

Keywords: cultural familiarity, cultural schema, reading comprehension, English literature, local literature in English

บทคัดย่อ

วรรณกรรมถือเป็นส่วนหนึ่งที่สำคัญของการเรียนภาษา งานวรรณกรรมที่เขียนโดยเจ้าของภาษาเป็นสื่อการอ่านหลักของนักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษในมหาวิทยาลัยไทย ในขณะที่ไม่มีการนำวรรณกรรมฉบับภาษาอังกฤษที่เขียนโดยนักเขียนไทยมาใช้ งานวิจัยกึ่งทดลองชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาอิทธิพลของความคุ้นเคยทางวัฒนธรรมต่อความเข้าใจในการอ่าน และศึกษาทัศนคติในด้านต่าง ๆ ของนักศึกษาไทยวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษต่อการอ่านเรื่องสั้นภาษาอังกฤษที่เขียนโดย

เจ้าของภาษาและโดยนักเขียนไทย จากสมมติฐานที่ว่า การอ่านทำความเข้าใจงานวรรณกรรมต้องอาศัยความคุ้นเคยทางวัฒนธรรม กลุ่มตัวอย่างในการศึกษาครั้งนี้คือ นักศึกษาวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่ 3 ที่เรียนนิพนธ์วรรณคดีอังกฤษ ณ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ จำนวน 35 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้คือ (1) เรื่องสั้นอเมริกันและเรื่องสั้นไทยที่เขียนเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ ทั้งสองเรื่องมีอรรถาธิบายเดียวกัน ระดับความยากง่ายทางภาษาเท่ากัน และความยาวใกล้เคียงกัน แต่มีบริบททางวัฒนธรรมต่างกัน (2) แบบทดสอบการอ่านทำความเข้าใจจากเรื่องสั้นทั้งสอง และ (3) แบบสอบถามทัศนคติของกลุ่มตัวอย่างต่อเรื่องสั้นทั้งสอง ผลการวิจัยพบว่า กลุ่มตัวอย่างเข้าใจเรื่องสั้นไทยที่เขียนเป็นภาษาอังกฤษได้ดีกว่าเรื่องสั้นอเมริกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญ และมีทัศนคติที่ดีกว่าต่อการอ่านเรื่องสั้นภาษาอังกฤษที่เขียนโดยนักเขียนไทย ในด้านความจริงแท้ ความง่ายต่อการเข้าใจ และความน่าสนใจ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ได้นำเสนอแนวทางในการเลือกงานวรรณกรรมสำหรับชั้นเรียนวรรณคดีอังกฤษในระดับมหาวิทยาลัยของประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ: ความคุ้นเคยทางวัฒนธรรม โครงสร้างความรู้ทางวัฒนธรรม การอ่านทำความเข้าใจ วรรณคดีอังกฤษ วรรณคดีท้องถิ่นที่เขียนเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ

Introduction

Reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. A reader extracts the essence of a text and constructs meaning by themselves because a text only provides direction. Reading comprehension involves three elements: the reader who comprehends, the text being comprehended and the activity in which comprehension is a part. This phenomenon occurs within a sociocultural context (Snow, 2002).

Reading comprehension is further divided into text-based and knowledge-based processing. Readers employ lexical and

syntactic knowledge to understand texts at a literal level. At this level, the processing is bounded with the text, hence driven by data. Literal comprehension is dependent on linguistic competence. At a higher cognitive level, readers draw inference to understand what the text is about, relying on their knowledge beyond the text. This process includes synthesizing, summarizing, generalizing, predicting; thus, it is driven by knowledge (Alptekin, 2006; Pearson & Johnson, 1978).

Comprehension of literary texts in particular does not only involve attention to literal aspects but also interpretation which builds on an understanding of plots, characters, and other elements of the literal story for greater meanings beyond the story (McCarthy & Goldman, 2015; Weaver, 1994). Therefore, extensive experiences and deep cultural knowledge are required for the reader to understand literary texts at the inferential level.

Objectives

This study aimed to compare students' reading comprehension of English short stories written by a native speaker and a local author and investigate their attitudes towards reading culturally familiar and unfamiliar short stories.

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the participants understand a culturally unfamiliar literary text and a culturally familiar literary text at literal, inferential and overall levels?
2. What are the participants' attitudes towards reading a culturally unfamiliar literary text and a culturally familiar literary text?

Literature Review

1. Cultural Familiarity

Background knowledge or schema helps the interaction between a text and a reader in the process of reading comprehension (Snow, 2002). Schema refers to an active organization or mental representation of past experiences or some part of general knowledge (Bartlett & Burt, 1933; Matsumoto, 2009), structural units, framework or abstracted pattern into or onto which information can fit and can be organized (Elizabeth, 1980; Phillips, 1969). Schemata or background knowledge can be generally categorized into two types: formal schema and content schema. A formal schema is background knowledge relative to the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of texts, while a content schema is background knowledge a reader brings to a text; it is relative to the content domain of the text (Carrell, 1987).

A content schema also includes cultural schemata which are specific to a particular cultural context (Ketchum, 2006). Cultural schemata are shared by population of a specific cultural group (Elizabeth, 1980). It involves cultural familiarity, helping readers reconstruct the story line of personally and culturally relevant texts and making interpretation with lessened workload. With cultural familiarity, readers are involved with authentic experience in one's own sociocultural context with which they can identify themselves and find some common ground (Erten & Razi, 2009). In fact, cultural schemata and cultural familiarity are highly interrelated. Cultural familiarity is the interaction of culture in a text and readers' background knowledge which makes the texts easier to read and understand (Carrell, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Steffensen et al., 1979). In

reading comprehension, culture plays a crucial role in arousing expectation and prediction about a story, making the text familiar to readers (Tavakoli et al., 2013). Texts with familiar settings are appropriate because they are relevant to the students' world and are, thus, easier to read (Paulston & Bruder, 1976, as cited in Carrell, 1983).

2. Cultural Familiarity and Perception of Literary Texts

Cultural schema in relation to perception of literary texts was studied by many scholars. The term 'perception' is an umbrella term subsuming evaluation, appreciation (Larsen & Laszlo, 1990), affect (Zajonc, 1980, 1984), emotion (Lazarus, 1982), value/significance, enjoyment, liking (Clarke & Fiske, 2014), imagination and imagery (Larsen & Laszlo, 1990; Reynolds et al., 1982), interest and motivation (Abu-Rabia, 1999).

Cultural background or familiarity exerts some influence on not only reading comprehension but also evaluation of the literary texts as such texts require readers' imagination. Readers' cultural background in general and personal experiences in particular come into contact with the reading process and play a role in appreciation of literary texts. Appreciation of literature is assumed to depend on readers' personal experiences accumulated within a cultural context. Individuals' personal experiences under certain cultural circumstances provoke reminding of relevant past events and arouse imagery during the reading process (Larsen & Laszlo, 1990). Therefore, readers from different backgrounds would not have the same amount of experience with the setting, the same level of identification with characters, the same judgment of value, the same imagination of actions and scenes, the same emotional reactions and the same predictions of the story line (Reynolds et al., 1982).

3. Related Studies

Among the pioneers who investigated schemata, Bartlett and Burt (1933) explained ‘schema’ as a familiar form of association consisting of image, which is implicit, and words, which are explicit. Words are visual representations of images; they serve as a device for recall, depending on social condition, interest and attitude. In the researchers’ experiment of remembering, reproduction and distortion were used to examine successive modification from one person to another person in reconstruction of stimuli. This method of reproduction and distortion was operationalized in successive studies.

The earlier researchers who studied cultural schemata and reading comprehension assigned two groups of participants from different cultural backgrounds to read culturally different texts, some of which were syntactically adapted for ease of reading. These researchers included Steffensen et al. (1979), Johnson (1981) and Carrell (1987).

Steffensen et al. (1979) studied the effects of cultural schemata on reading comprehension through recall and reconstruction of two culturally different texts. Both texts were held linguistically constant through readability measurement while the text contents were different in terms of culture. Both American and Indian participants were assigned to read texts about American and Indian weddings. The participants’ comprehension of the texts was compared through recall. The methods used in measuring level of comprehension included reading time, amount of recall of overall text elements, amount of recall of important and unimportant elements, and appropriate and inappropriate modification of the passage. It was found that, with the culturally familiar text, participants spent less time reading, recalled

more information and elaborated cultural elements more appropriately than with the culturally unfamiliar text.

In another study, Johnson (1981) examined the influence of both cultural schema and formal schemata on Iranian and American students' reading comprehension of American and Iranian folklores. Linguistically, each text was of two varieties: original and simplified. The finding was that cultural elements affected reading comprehension more greatly than linguistic difficulty. The participants relied more on cultural schema both in original and simplified texts.

Carrell (1987) investigated the effects of both content and formal schema on Muslim and Catholic ESL students' reading comprehension. Both groups read "Ali Affani", an Islamic text, and "Saint Catherine", a Catholic text. Half of each group read the original, well-structured version, and the other half read a rhetorically-altered version. The finding was consistent with Johnson's (1981) study; cultural schemata had greater effect on the comprehension than did formal schemata.

Subsequent researchers, namely Chihara et al. (1989) assigned two groups of participants from the same cultural background to read the same text, which was divided into two versions, namely unadapted version and culturally adapted version.

Chihara et al. (1989) hypothesized that simple things like nouns referring to persons and places carried subtle semantic and pragmatic information and that discrete or non-contextual elements of the text influenced reading comprehension. The text was adapted at lexical level only. Western names of persons and places which were assumed to be culturally unfamiliar to the Japanese participants were changed into Japanese while the content and syntactic complexity were held intact. One group of participants read the original text; the other

read the culturally adapted one. The results of the study revealed that the participants who took the test based on the culturally familiar text performed significantly better than those who read the culturally unfamiliar text.

Researchers from the Muslim world who opposed using western culture-based texts adapted western literary texts at deeper levels. Alptekin (2006) adapted a short story of a target-language culture to that of local culture at sociological, semantic and pragmatic levels, and investigated reading comprehension at both literal and inferential levels, believing that schema was used particularly in the latter. The adaptation of cultural elements of a text was called ‘cultural nativization’ by Alptekin. Linguistic and rhetorical patterns of two culturally different texts were held essentially intact. Turkish subjects were divided into two groups; one group read an original short story, while the other read a culturally adapted text. It was found that cultural nativization affected inferential comprehension items more significantly than literal comprehension. Turkish participants who read a culturally nativized text performed significantly better in inferential comprehension items than those who read an original text of American culture; however, there was no significant difference in scores obtained from literal comprehension items among the two groups of participants.

Erten and Razi (2009) investigated whether cultural nativization facilitated comprehension and whether reading activities compensated for cultural unfamiliarity of short stories. The reading activities included brainstorming, pre-questioning, scanning, skimming, clarifying, reciprocal teaching, inferring, thinking aloud and asking and answering questions. It was found that culturally adapted stories yielded better comprehension while reading activities did not. The researchers concluded that cultural adaptation of the text had a greater effect on reading comprehension. With substantial cultural schemata, the participants could comprehend culturally loaded texts autonomously.

Tavakoli et al. (2012) examined the effect of cultural nativization on Iranian students' reading comprehension and explored their attitudes toward cultural nativization. An unadapted text was given to the control group and a nativized text was given to the experimental group. Both groups completed an attitude questionnaire on cultural nativization after the reading test. The control group performed significantly better in reading comprehension. Interestingly, the subjects in both groups showed dissatisfaction with cultural nativization due to its inauthenticity. Most participants opposed culturally adapted texts and supported the original text as the latter was more tangible and unambiguous. The researchers recommended that further research use local literary texts to serve the teaching of English as an International Language.

Other studies that examined readers' perception of literary texts in relation to readers' cultural background include those of Larsen and Laszlo (1990) as well as Madeeyoh and Charumanee (2013).

Larsen and Laszlo (1990) compared perception of participants from different cultural background on reading a short story. Danish and Hungarian participants were assigned to read a Hungarian short story and expressed their appreciation. The Hungarian participants found the story more enjoyable, imagery-provoking, far easier to understand and much more relevant to the issues they encountered in their daily life than did the Danish participants who understood the story at a more superficial level. It was concluded that the culturally proximate participants showed greater appreciation for the text than did the culturally distant participants.

Madeeyoh and Charumanee (2013) investigated readers' attitudes towards reading one English textbook based on general contents and another based on Islamic culture. The participants in the control group read an English textbook whose content was new to them while the participants in the experimental group read an English textbook based on Islamic culture which was familiar to them. Although there was no statistical difference in the participants' satisfaction with both texts, the participants in the control group were slightly more satisfied with the general-content textbook than the participants in the experimental group who read the Islamic culture-based English textbook. This was because the Islamic culture-based English textbook contained the content already known to them, hence considered dissatisfying.

It is evident that all the studies reviewed above share the same finding, i.e. readers' cultural familiarity with the texts enhances their reading comprehension. However, the findings of students' attitudes towards culturally familiar texts seems inconclusive. The present study aimed to provide more insight to the impact of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension and its relation to readers' perception.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

The participants were third-year English major students of Prince of Songkla University who took a course named *Introduction to English Literature*. The students were exposed to poetry, short stories, novels and dramas; hence, they were familiar with reading literary texts extensively. Thirty-five students were selected as participants based on a volunteer sampling method. Twenty-nine of them had no experience living in English native-speaking countries while six had an average of one-month experience in such countries.

2. Research Instruments

2.1 Short Stories

A Thai short story entitled *A Monastery Boy* was chosen from *It is the people of Thailand and other countries* collection originally written in English by Pira Sudham (2014), a Thai author who mastered the English language and whose work is internationally acclaimed. He portrays the harshness of peasant life in Thailand.

An American short story entitled *A Bunch of Blueness* was chosen from *On a Darkling Plain* collection written by Betty Jean Tucker (2014). Its theme is similar to that of *A Monastery Boy*. The story is set during the Great Depression.

There are several commonalities in both short stories. The main theme is poverty and several common aspects include abandonment, trouble, hope, escape, loss, impression, religious concepts, agriculture, doubt, gain and clash of ideas between old and young age.

It was found that both American and Thai short stories belonged to the same grade level (Gunning Fox Index of 9.4 and 9.4), readability score (Flesch Reading Ease of 73 and 74.6) and linguistic complexity (4,191 and 4,342 words, 255 and 272 sentences, average of 4.2 and 4.3 characters per word, and average of 16.4 and 16 words per sentence).

2.2 Reading Comprehension Tests

Two tests with open-ended questions requiring short answers were used to assess students' reading comprehension of the two short stories. Each test included ten literal questions and ten inferential questions. Literal comprehension questions were explicit questions of

which answers could be derived from the text literally. Inferential questions require text knowledge and background knowledge for readers to draw connective and elaborative inferences.

The short-answer questions were scored based on the key ideas presented in each answer. Following Chan (2009), the rubric was divided into five levels based on percentage of complete and clear answer, viz. 1, 0.75, 0.5, 0.25 and 0.

2.3 Attitude Questionnaire

An open-ended attitude questionnaire was employed to explore participants' attitudes towards reading English short stories written by a native speaker and a Thai author based on criteria for selecting literary texts for English class, namely *authenticity, ease of comprehension, emotional reaction, enjoyment, identification with characters, imagery/vividness, interest, personal involvement, motivation, preference, relevance* and *value* proposed by Belcher and Hirvela (2000), Bobkina (2014), Erkaya (2005), Ghosn (2002), Hismanoglu (2005), Mart (2018), Paran (2008) and Shrestha (2008).

3. Data Collection

The study was conducted in the first semester of academic year 2018. The data were collected in the following steps.

3.1) All participants were assigned to read both English short stories written by a native speaker and a Thai author within a week.

3.2) The participants were instructed to spend one hour on each comprehension test and fifteen minutes on the questionnaire. They were allowed to answer the questions and complete the questionnaire in either English or their first language, namely Thai. All participants completed the comprehension tests. However,

only seventeen out of the thirty-five participants completed the questionnaire.

4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics of the two reading comprehension tests were generated using SPSS. Means, standard deviation and significant difference were reported accordingly. The data obtained from the reading comprehension tests for the American short story were compared with those for Thai short story using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The questionnaire responses were qualitatively analyzed by categorizing or coding the data and summarizing the key themes.

Findings and Discussion

This section contains the results of the study, arranged based on the 2 research questions.

Research Question 1: To What Extent Do the Participants Understand a Culturally Unfamiliar Literary Text and a Culturally Familiar Literary Text at Literal, Inferential and Overall Levels?

Wilcoxon sign rank tests were separately conducted on literal and inferential questions (10 items each), to find out whether there was a significant difference between reading comprehension of a culturally unfamiliar text, i.e. the American short story and a culturally familiar text, i.e. the Thai short story in English at literal, inferential and overall levels.

Table 1.

Participants' Performance on the Two Short Stories (N=35)

Comprehension level	American short story		Thai short story		Difference	Effect size
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD		
Literal comprehension (10 scores)	4.82	1.22	5.46	1.29	0.64*	-0.51*
Inferential comprehension (10 scores)	2.91	1.24	3.99	2.05	1.08**	-0.657
Overall comprehension (20 scores)	7.73	1.90	9.45	2.52	1.72**	-0.778

** significant at 0.01

* significant at 0.05

The result of the Wilcoxon sign rank tests shown in Table 1 reveals that the differences in the participants' scores obtained from the two tests are statistically significant ($p < 0.1$). The participants obtained a significantly higher mean score from the Thai short story ($\bar{x} = 9.45$, $SD = 2.52$) compared to that from the American short story ($\bar{x} = 7.73$, $SD = 1.90$).

Detailed analysis shows interesting differences. The table shows that the participants performed significantly better in both literal comprehension ($\bar{x} = 5.46 > 4.82$) and inferential comprehension ($3.99 > 2.91$) of the Thai short story over the American short story. The findings suggested that the participants understood the literal and inferential messages of

the Thai short story better than those of the American short story. As a result, it can be said that cultural familiarity facilitated the participants' reading comprehension.

In terms of literal comprehension, being familiar with cultural aspects portrayed in a text, the participants could comprehend contents from the Thai short story more accurately and clearly, and gained significantly higher scores from the Thai short story.

For inferential comprehension, the connection between culturally relevant texts and the participants' own backgrounds created opportunities for making better inferences; the significance and meaningful purpose of the Thai short story was clearly understood. Therefore, using local texts written in English could connect with the real world learners live in.

As a literary text depicts a series of events and arouses readers to predict what will happen next, readers with no or little experience of a country may not be able to picture scenes in a story set in that country clearly. In this study, with the help of context familiarity and sufficient prior knowledge of Thai culture, participants might have been able to predict comprehension clues available from stories previously unknown to them. Cultural familiarity seemed to play a significant role in prediction about a story.

In addition, with literary texts usually containing unknown words, readers with limited vocabulary size may struggle with guessing those words. However, with the help of the context familiarity, readers should be able to guess unknown words more easily. That might be why the participants obtained significantly higher scores from the Thai short story. This might be because its content is based on the participants' own culture

while the American short story is about a less familiar culture. Readers' background knowledge appeared to play an important role in reading comprehension. Participants who are equipped with relevant background knowledge should be able to predict the meanings of the unknown words that they encounter.

As far as socio-cultural matters are concerned, due to the participants' existing knowledge about Bangkok and the Northeast of Thailand, where the Thai short story is set, the participants might have been able to imagine scenes in the story more clearly. In contrast, with the lack of sufficient schema of American culture and landscape, especially that of southern parts of the USA, where American short story is set, the participants might have struggled to picture scenes in their mind. In sum, the familiarity of cultural and geographical circumstances might have helped the participants imagine and understand the story more clearly.

Similar results were also reported by Jalilifar and Assi (2008) and Tavakoli et al. (2012). Readers' cultural familiarity with a text enhanced their reading comprehension at both literal and inferential levels.

Research Question 2: What Are the Participants' Attitudes Towards Reading a Culturally Unfamiliar Literary Text and a Culturally Familiar Literary Text?

The attitude questionnaire was employed to elicit the participants' attitudes towards reading the two short stories. Seventeen out of the thirty-five participants completed the questionnaire. They touched upon the areas of *authenticity*, *ease of understanding* and *interest* primarily.

Regarding *authenticity*, although literature is authentic in nature, only two of the thirty-five participants who commented on this aspect reported that the Thai short story, the context of which was common in their life, was more real than the American short story. The Thai short story had the atmosphere that the participants could feel, and it sounded real to them. However, they were not certain that their imagination of American story was correct. As Nostrand (1989) states, a text is authentic when its context evokes the mind of a person living in the culture.

In terms of *ease of understanding*, seven of the total participants who voiced their opinion on this aspect found that the Thai short story was more accessible and easier for them to understand. They could read more smoothly and could maintain attention while reading. One of the seven participants expressed that she could guess unknown words from the context of the Thai short story and her own experiences. It might be possible to conclude that the more the readers know about the cultural context, the more easily and clearly they get the information from the text.

In contrast, five of the thirty-five participants who revealed their attitudes towards reading the American short story reported that it took longer to comprehend the American story due to a lack of sufficient background knowledge about geography, society, religion and culture of America. Two of them reported that they were confused and demotivated by the American short story. They found it difficult to understand cultural aspects depicted in the American story, especially the religious concept. This is in tandem with other studies which showed that students often had difficulty interpreting events

from perspectives not naturally their own (Pichert, 1979; Shantz, 1975 as cited in Reynolds et al., 1982) and different from their cultural-religious group membership (Carrell, 1987).

However, two participants said that although the American short story was more difficult to understand, there was a reason to read it as it opened up possibilities to learn new things. This finding echoes that of Rodliyah's (2014) study in which the participants reported that it was worthwhile to learn culture of English native speakers, most of which were new to learners as it helped widen their knowledge and horizons.

In terms of *interest*, there seems to be a relation between text-reader connection and interest. One participant out of seventeen who responded to this aspect expressed that the Thai short story was interesting since there was a connection between the text's context and the reader's context. Another participant reported that she was more engaged with the Thai story and felt like she was a part of the story. As Allen (1975) stated, an interaction with literary texts is influenced by readers' familiarity with cultural assumptions that the text is based on.

With all the above-mentioned reasons, it is suggested that Thai teachers should also integrate English literature written by Thai authors into the existing literature classes because native-English literature broadens horizon and gives learners opportunity to learn the origin of the target language while Thai literature in English facilitates learner's reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension as well as to

investigate Thai English-major students' attitudes towards reading English short stories written by a native speaker and a Thai author. The results clearly show that the participants performed better on the Thai short story written in English which was culturally familiar to them. They could recall the explicit information and infer implicit information from the Thai short story significantly more accurately than from the American short story. Moreover, this study also found that a culturally familiar content in the Thai short story provoked positive attitudes among readers who were familiar with the cultural context of the text. Also, the Thai short story in English used in this study was unadapted, thus authentic and suitable to be used in English classes. In addition, the present study found that local literature in English met many criteria for selecting good reading material for English literature classes, i.e. *authenticity, ease of understanding and interest*.

The present study has important implications for research on cultural familiarity and reading comprehension of literary texts. It has been one of the few attempts to investigate the impact of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension using a local literary text originally written in English.

Given the robust research evidence, some pedagogical implications can be drawn. Local fictions in English should be embedded into English literature class for students at the introductory stage of literature class. The exposure to local literature in English can help them learn English literature through their own culture and develop reading competence with relative ease. This is in tandem with Mahoney's (1991) belief that students' world knowledge they bring into contact with

local literature would result in greater comprehension which would also prompt greater interest and enjoyment.

It seems clear that internationally recognized literary works of local authors with a good command of English may serve as a canon of local English literature for teaching and learning.

Future research is recommended in different cultural contexts. Different themes of short stories might be investigated. The use of more than one local text in English and one native English text would help examine the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension more effectively. The attitude questionnaire might also survey other criteria for selecting literary texts for English classes.

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