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Effects of Prereading Treatments on Low Level EFL Readers' Comprehension of Expository Texts*

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This study examined the effects of previewing and providing background knowledge on low level EFL readers' comprehension of expository texts and their responses to these treatments. 130 college freshmen were randomly placed into one of three treatment groups and read two expository texts reflecting unfamiliar cultural information. Prior to reading, one group was given previewing instruction, which included vocabulary preteaching and summaries, and a second group was provided with culture-specific background knowledge through watching videos and slides. The third group read each text without any prereading instruction. Immediately after reading a passage, subjects answered a 10-item multiple-choice test. Results showed significant positive effects of the previewing treatment and weak positive effects of the providing background knowledge treatment. Students' responses on the questionnaires revealed that the majority felt that the experimental treatments contributed to comprehension enhancement, made reading more enjoyable, and expedited their reading process. Students in the control group, however, indicated that they needed explicit prereading instruction in order to understand the texts. Pedagogical implications of the findings for EFL reading instruction are provided.

[EFL readers/prereading instruction/cultural background knowledge]

I. INTRODUCTION

L2 readers undergo great difficulty when interacting with English texts. These texts often employ unfamiliar vocabulary and may include unfamiliar concepts and culture-specific knowledge that could be an impediment to L2 reading comprehension. Besides

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elements that lead to comprehension difficulty in L1 reading, there could be other sources that are specific to L2 reading. L2 readers in general have less competent linguistic skills and more limited vocabulary than L1 readers. Furthermore, L2 readers are not accustomed to L2 sentence structures. Thus they are less likely to identify text organization in which information is presented. As viable solutions, L2 readers implement their L1 knowledge and L1 reading abilities when such abilities are relevant. It should be noted, however, that L2 readers should reach a threshold level of L2 language competence in order to generalize their L1 reading abilities into L2. The threshold level differs according to text difficulty. If proficient L2 learners are good L1 readers, their reading abilities are expected to be generalized across languages. When selecting reading materials, teachers should take L2 learners' language proficiency into account. L2 reading texts that are far beyond their language competence could give rise to frustration and despair which impede reading performance (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Taglieber, Johnson, & Yarbrough, 1988; Wallace, 2001).

Traditionally, L2 reading instruction focused on simply teaching new vocabulary to enhance the comprehension of texts. Such instruction, however, often fails to increase students' interest in the text or to provide culture-specific features presupposed in the text. Previous studies on L1 prereading activities revealed that activating readers' prior knowledge contributed to understanding the new text. Prereading activities make meaningful connections between the new content and prior knowledge, so reading becomes an easier and more enjoyable task. Likewise, when L2 readers confront highly unfamiliar content, especially materials dealing with many culturally loaded concepts, comprehension may be impaired because the readers do not have appropriate background knowledge. In order to minimize such reading problems (e.g., cultural conflicts and interference), classroom teachers should employ a variety of prereading activities which can activate appropriate background knowledge and facilitate L2 readers' comprehension. The effects of prereading activities on L2 readers' comprehension may vary according to their interests in the topics of the texts (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Chin, 2009; Kim, 2008; Taglieber et al., 1988).

Hence, the purposes of the present study are to examine the effects of previewing and providing background knowledge on low level college EFL students' comprehension of expository texts dealing with culture-specific information and explore their attitudes toward the prereading treatments.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Schema theory has emphasized the role of background knowledge in reading. A text itself does not convey meaning. Rather, a text simply gives readers directions to how they should construct meaning through using previously acquired knowledge which is called the reader's background knowledge. The previously acquired knowledge structures are called "schemata." Formal schemata refer to background knowledge of a text's formal, rhetorical organizational structures. Content schemata refer to background knowledge of a text's content area. According to schema theory, comprehending a text requires an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text. Efficient comprehension expects readers to relate the text material to their own knowledge. In other words, readers should activate schemata while reading and relate it to the knowledge to be learned in the text (Brown, 1994; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Hudson, 2007).

However, a mismatch between the background knowledge embedded in the text and the background knowledge possessed by the reader may lead to misinterpretation and distortion of the text meaning. The more the readers possess the background knowledge of the text's content area, the better they comprehend the text. From that schema-theoretic view, L2 readers may suffer from understanding a particular content schema if it's specific to the given culture and is not part of their own cultural background. Authorities in L2 suggest that prereading activities should be used as means that can bridge the gap between the text's content and the reader's schemata. Prereading activities can also give out specific information necessary for comprehension, trigger student interests, and raise student expectations about what is in the text and thus read more efficiently. It is of importance to note that the immediate goal of prereading activites is to build new background knowledge and to activate existing background knowledge. There could be various types of prereading activities which can function best when employed in combinations: viewing movies, slides, pictures, text previewing, or teacher-, text-, or student generated predictions about the text, and key-word/key-concept association activities (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Carrell, 1984; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Chen & Graves, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2001).

Johnson (1982) explored the effects on ESL reading comprehension of building background knowledge and found that ESL readers were better able to recall a text on a familiar topic than a similar text on an unfamiliar topic. Johnson's study revealed that familiarity with the culture-specific topic (Halloween), (i.e., knowledge gained from real experiences in the given culture), was conducive to reading comprehension of a text on that topic. Preteaching meanings of the target vocabulary, however, failed to make a significant effect on reading comprehension. Similarly, Floyd and Carrell (1987) examined the question of whether ESL students' reading could be improved by exposure to relevant content schemata prior to reading. Pre- and posttests were conducted with experimental

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and control groups of intermediate-level ESL subjects to evaluate their reading comprehension of the text. Half of each group was exposed to syntactically more complex versions of the reading passages than the other half. The experimental group was exposed to appropriate background information about a typical Fourth of July celebration between pre- and posttests. The results demonstrated that first-hand experiential knowledge significantly facilitated reading comprehension. Syntactic complexity did not disclose any significant effect on ESL reading comprehension.

Carrell (1987) analyzed the simultaneous effects of both culture-specific content schemata and formal schemata on ESL reading comprehension. Two cultural groups, Muslim and Catholic, of intermediate ESL students read, recalled, and responded to questions about two selected texts: one with culturally familiar content and the other with culturally unfamiliar content. Half of the readers in each group read the texts that had a familiar, well-organized rhetorical format, whereas the other half read the texts that had an unfamiliar, modified rhetorical format. The results showed that content schemata had more effect on reading comprehension than formal schemata. That is, if either form or content is unfamiliar, unfamiliar content caused the readers more difficulties than unfamiliar form. Carrell indicated that teachers should be able to help ESL students develop appropriate cultural content knowledge and teach them to use the top-level rhetorical organization of a text for successful comprehension. Carrell's study, however, was conducted with one proficiency level from limited populations. Replications targeting different proficiency levels, a greater variety of cultural groups, and different types of manipulation of content and form are necessary.

Hudson's (1982) study demonstrated an interaction between overall linguistic proficiency in ESL and content-induced schematic effects in ESL reading comprehension. The subjects were divided into three proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced). Before reading passages, the subjects were exposed to three types of prereading treatments for inducing content schemata: prereading activity, vocabulary activity, and read-reread activity. Hudson discovered that the vocabulary activity was the least effective among the three prereading treatments at all proficiency levels in terms of inducing appropriate schemata, and that externally induced schemata were more effective at lower levels of proficiency levels than at higher levels. Hudson concluded that the effects of prereading treatments could vary according to readers' proficiency levels.

Taglieber et al. (1988) studied the effects of three prereading activities (pictorial context, vocabulary preteaching, and prequestioning) and a control condition on EFL reading comprehension of Brazilian college students. The findings disclosed that students in any of the three prereading treatments performed significantly better than students in the control condition. Vocabulary preteaching, however, appeared to be significantly less effective than pictorial context and prequestioning. It was conjectured that although vocabulary

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knowledge was necessary for satisfactory comprehension, increased background knowledge through the other two prereading treatments had students be better able to make use of context to construct plausible meanings for the passages even when there were some unknown words. Another possible reason was in relation to the way the words were introduced. The words were presented in context by explaining their meanings in sentences, but there was no meaningful connection among the sentences. Besides, the words were not meant to be related to the content of the reading selections. As Carrell (1984) specified, simply presenting lists of words even in context does not assist readers in connecting the new concepts to prior knowledge and incorporating the new words into their own vocabularies.

Previewing is an overview presented to students before reading to show key features of a text. The questions or directions in previewing indicate text specific information that helps readers predict the content and start the cognitive process of relating new information to their own prior knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; McCormick, 1989; Mikulecky, 1990). Chen and Graves (1995) probed the effects of previewing and providing background knowledge on Taiwanese EFL students' comprehension of American short stories. In this study, background knowledge passages included explanations of the target vocabulary, but preview passages did not. The results revealed that previewing was as effective as previewing combined with providing background knowledge. In addition, previewing was significantly more effective than simply providing background knowledge or the control condition. Through previewing, EFL readers could infer the meanings of unknown vocabulary, arrange their ideas, easily keep track of the plot, and enhance their general comprehension. Regarding the EFL readers' attitudes to the treatments, most of them claimed that previewing was very helpful. They also mentioned that it was essential to review target vocabulary in the text. Chen and Graves suggested that since previewing itself was as effective as the combination of previewing and providing background information, previewing that comprises vocabulary instruction should be used as an effective pre-reading activity for culturally unfamiliar reading selections and less skilled readers in EFL classrooms.

In a similar vein, Chin (1999) implemented prereading activities (previewing and vocabulary preteaching) to Korean EFL students' reading comprehension. Results on multiple-choice tests manifested that the previewing and the combined treatments were significantly more effective than the control condition. Vocabulary preteaching, however, was significantly less effective than the combined treatment. For less skilled readers, the combined treatment was significantly more effective than the control condition and vocabulary preteaching. For more skilled readers, both previewing and the combined treatment were significantly more effective than the control condition. In short, this study demonstrated that less skilled readers were in need of prereading assistance that included

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both previewing and vocabulary instruction, which corroborates Chen and Graves' (1995) claim. Chin recommended that EFL teachers should take students' reading proficiency levels into account in planning prereading activities.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

The present study involved 157 college EFL students who were enrolled in one of three sections of a required English course at a university in Gyeongsang province. The majority of the participants were freshmen; the males outnumbered the females. They were non-English majors and aged 19-27 years. In order to examine the students' English reading ability, a pretest was administered during the first week of the spring semester of 2010. They took a 50 item multiple-choice standardized English test that covered vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. The test was a shortened version of the TOEIC practice test from *Longman Preparation Series for the New Test: More Practice Tests* (Lougheed, 2007). Since this study aimed to investigate the effects of prereading activities on low level EFL readers' comprehension, the final data pool consisted of 130 students who had scored in the low range (12-32) of correct items. The students were randomly placed into three groups. The analysis of variance in the pretest showed that there was no significant difference among the three groups' scores, F (2, 127) = 0.38, p = 0.68. Therefore, each group was randomly assigned to a different type of prereading condition.

2. Reading Selections

The participants were given two expository texts to read: "International Students" (467 words) and "Global Diet Choices" (870 words) from *Interactions 1 Reading* by Kirn and Hartmann (2007). These two selections were chosen to be challenging but interesting to most of the students. The lengths were reasonable, and the designed level was high beginning to low intermediate. Both selections presupposed unfamiliar cultural background information that most of the students lacked. Specifically, "International Students" dealt with international students in higher education around the world so that students were supposed to figure out why many students choose to study in other countries and why overseas universities want international students. "Global Diet Choices" dealt with how and why people choose to eat what they do and how diets around the world are becoming more and more similar.

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3. Instrumentation

1) Multiple-Choice Test

For each of the two reading passages, ten questions were prepared as a posttest. These were four-option, multiple-choice items from the source textbook. All ten questions addressed both text-explicit and text-implicit (inferential) information in order to assess students' understanding of culture-specific information and main ideas in the reading passages.

2) Attitude Questionnaires

After students completed the second reading passage (i.e., "Global Diet Choices") and its posttest, they were directed to respond to an attitude questionnaire in Korean. There were three versions of the attitude questionnaire, one for the previewing treatment, one for the background knowledge treatment, and one for the control treatment. Each version comprised of two parts. The first part was developed to examine the participants' overall opinions about the prereading condition that they received with regard to specific aspects (e.g., vocabulary preteaching or watching video clips). This part consisted of 5-10 structured response questions where students checked on a five-point scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. The second part, an open-ended question, was to allow them to indicate any difficulties they confronted during the instruction or make suggestions about the given prereading treatment. Students took about 10 minutes to complete the survey (Chen & Graves, 1995).

4. Procedures

In the present study, treatments consisted of two different prereading activities: (a) previewing and (b) providing background knowledge. There was also a control condition in which there was no prereading activity. Participants were assigned to one of the experimental groups or the control group. Treatments and immediate posttests (i.e., multiple-choice tests) spanned two nonconsecutive weeks of the spring semester of 2010. In the fourth week, the first reading passage and its posttest were implemented. The second reading passage, its posttest, and the attitude questionnaire were implemented in the seventh week. Each of the prereading activities took about 30 to 40 minutes and was carried out immediately before the reading task. Time limits for reading the passages ranged from 10 to 20 minutes. Students were allowed 10 minutes to complete each posttest. In the control group, no specific prereading instruction was performed. Students were

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simply asked to start the reading task silently and take the posttest immediately during a limited time period.

In the previewing group, students were given a handout of the previews from the source textbook. For each preview, five to seven questions were written. The experimenter explained that the preview would help them understand the passage that they would be reading later in the session. The experimenter asked each question listed in the *previewing the topic* and *predicting* sections of the handout, elicited responses and discussion, and provided clarifications. A short summary of the passage which stated the main ideas and the important details was also included on the preview. The summaries ranged from four to five sentences. Finally, the meanings of key words from each reading passage were explained on a separate handout. Two native English instructors selected the words based on their importance to comprehend the passage and the likelihood that they would not be familiar to the students (McCormick, 1989; Taglieber et al., 1988). These words were introduced in meaningful sentences along with English definitions. Students were asked to explain the meanings of the words in their own words. When they were in trouble, the experimenter helped them out. Some of the sentences were elaborated versions of sample sentences from monolingual dictionaries: *The Newbury House Dictionary of American English* (2000) and *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995). Following is an example:

> Nutrient: *n. adj.* any of the substances contained in food that are essential to life, such as protein, vitamins, and minerals.
> e.g.) Fruit and vegetables are high in <n.> *nutrients*.
> e.g.) The <adj.> *nutrient* value of candy is generally low.

In the background knowledge group, the experimenter showed students short English video clips posted on You Tube. Those video clips were selected by the two native English instructors due to the fact that they comprised of relatively familiar vocabulary and were relevant to the reading passages. For the sake of comprehension enhancement, each video clip was shown to the students twice. For "International Students," they watched a 6:36 minute video about life as an international student at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona, U.S.A. For "Global Diet Choices," they watched two videos: How to make Thanksgiving *burritos* (2:52 minutes) and How to make spiced lamb *kebabs* (3:16 minutes). Also, the experimenter showed them three slides of pictures related to the content of the reading passage: Middle Eastern *falafel*, Mexican *tacos*, and Chinese *egg rolls*. It should be noted that captions were not available on the screen. Instead, transcripts were prepared as handouts in order to help students understand better. After watching the video clips and/or the slides, the experimenter conducted class discussion to help students share

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and/or build cultural background knowledge, and also provided additional culture-specific information that was essential to better understand the reading passages. Vocabulary instruction, however, was not included in order to make a comparison between the two treatments.

5. Data Analysis

In the present study, answers to the two multiple-choice tests were scored as correct or incorrect. 10 points were given to a correct answer for each item. Participants earned total scores ranging from 20 to 100 points on each posttest. The scores on the multiple choice tests were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a Tukey's HSD test for making post hoc comparisons. Further investigation used a two-way ANOVA to examine if there was an interaction effect between treatment and passage (treatment x passage). *T*-tests were also run in order to decide the statistical significance of comprehension between the two passages (i.e., "International Students" and "Global Diet Choices"). Moreover, students' responses to the structured attitude items on the questionnaire were tallied and reported as percentages. Their responses to the open-ended attitude question were analyzed based on a content analysis, and categories were generated to describe their opinions about particular facets/phases of the treatments, suggestions, and the needs and obstacles they encountered during the reading task (Chen & Graves, 1995; Chin, 1999).

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Prereading Treatment Effects on Low Level EFL Readers' Comprehension

The results of the study showed that overall, students scored higher on "International Students" (M = 67.52) than on "Global Diet Choices" (M = 65.77), although the difference was not significant (t = 0.76, p = 0.45). As shown in Table 1, the two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the main effect of treatment was significant, but the main effect of passage and the interaction effect between treatment and passage (treatment x passage) were not significant. Subsequently, the analysis of variance on the multiple-choice test scores for "International Students" is shown in Table 2. As can be seen, there was a significant treatment effect, F (2, 127) = 5.15, p < .01. Further investigation of the treatment effects on the multiple choice test scores, using Tukey's HSD test (See Table 3), revealed that there was a significant difference only between the previewing group (M =

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72.73) and the control group (*M* = 61.86). The previewing group (*M* = 72.73) also outperformed the background knowledge group (*M* = 67.98), although not significantly so. Likewise, the background knowledge group (*M* = 67.98) scored higher (although not to a significant degree) than the control group (*M* = 61.86).

TABLE 1

Two-Way ANOVA on the Multiple-Choice Test Scores

Source	DF	SS	MS	F
Model	5	5451.75	1090.35	3.32*
Treatment	2	5189.95	2594.97	7.90*
Passage	1	199.94	199.94	0.61
Treat x Passage	2	61.86	30.93	0.09
Error	254	83392.39	328.32	

*p < .01

TABLE 2

Analysis of Variance on the Multiple-Choice Test Scores for "International Students"

Source	DF	SS	MS	F
Bet. Groups	2	2579.14	1289.57	5.15*
Within Groups	127	31830.87	250.64	

p < .01

TABLE 3

Tukey's HSD Test for "International Students"

	Different from		
Treatments	M1	M2	M3
M1 = 67.98		-4.75	6.12
M2 = 72.73			10.87*
M3 = 61.86			

p < .05

Note: M1 = background knowledge; M2 = previewing; M3 = control

The analysis of variance on the multiple-choice test scores for "Global Diet Choices" is shown in Table 4. Likewise, there was a significant treatment effect, *F* (2, 127) = 3.29, *p* < .05. Tukey's HSD test (see Table 5) showed that a significant difference was established between the previewing group (*M* = 70.18) and the control group (*M* = 59.53). The previewing group (*M* = 70.18) also outperformed the background knowledge group (*M* = 67.60), although the difference was not significant. Moreover, the background knowledge group (*M* = 67.60) was slightly better (although not significantly so) than the control group

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(*M* = 59.53). Thus we can figure that for low level EFL readers, the previewing treatment was significantly more effective than the control condition in enhancing their reading comprehension. This study, however, yielded very weak support for providing background knowledge treatment, a result consistent with the earlier finding of Chen and Graves (1995).

TABLE 4

Analysis of Variance on the Multiple-Choice Test Scores for "Global Diet Choices"

Source	DF	SS	MS	F
Bet. Groups	2	2672.67	1336.33	3.29*
Within Groups	127	51561.52	405.99	

p < .05

TABLE 5

Tukey's HSD Test for "Global Diet Choices"

	Different from		
Treatments	M1	M2	M3
M1 = 67.60		-2.58	8.07
M2 = 70.18			10.65*
M3 = 59.53			

p < .05

Note: M1 = background knowledge; M2 = previewing; M3 = control

2. Low Level EFL Readers' Attitudes toward the Prereading Treatments

The inspection of students' responses to the structured attitude items on the questionnaire revealed that a large number of students in the previewing, background knowledge, and control groups (62.5%, 80.4%, and 60% respectively) found "Global Diet Choices" more interesting than "International Students." As noted above, however, that the mean score of "International Students" was higher than the one of "Global Diet Choices." A possible reason for this outcome might be that the length of "International Students" (467 words) was a lot shorter than the one of "Global Diet Choices" (870 words). It is conjectured that for low level EFL readers, the length of the reading passages might be a more influential factor than interest in making reading easy. Below, the responses of each of these groups are described in detail.

In the previewing group, 61.2% of the students indicated that the summaries included in the previews helped them better understand the main ideas of each reading passage, 77.6% indicated that responding to the questions listed on *previewing the topic* and *predicting*

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allowed them to figure out what to focus on while interacting with each passage, 75.5% indicated that preteaching unknown vocabulary contributed to enhancing reading comprehension, 68.8% indicated that the previewing activity aroused their interest in the topics, and 43% indicated that the previewing activity helped them speed up their reading process.

With regard to the responses of the open-ended question, "Please describe your opinions about the previewing treatment that you received," the most frequent topics were previewing questions and vocabulary preteaching. 56% of the students indicated that while responding to the questions on the previews, they could easily predict what the reading passages would be about, 45% reported that previewing helped them differentiate between the main ideas and the supporting details. It is noteworthy that 35% mentioned that while participating in the previewing activity with a whole class, they could reduce the anxiety about reading English passages and the posttests, and get a sense of collaboration. 31% of the students, however, claimed that previewing instruction would be more effective and enjoyable if it could include visual aids such as video clips, slides of colorful pictures, or films rather than simply rely on the written previews. Regarding vocabulary preteaching, 25% of the students mentioned that due to lack of experience, it was quite challenging to unlock the meanings of unknown words in sentences, although English definitions were provided. A few of them were concerned that some of the English definitions were difficult to interpret on their own since they were used to being taught with Korean definitions. Nevertheless, 32% claimed that explanations of the meanings of unknown words in meaningful contexts were more likely to remain in their memories, in comparison to typical vocabulary lists which simply provide Korean definitions without contexts.

In the background knowledge group, 38% of the students indicated that unknown vocabulary was an obstacle to reading comprehension, while 32% remained undecided. 52.2% indicated that they needed vocabulary instruction before they read the passages. With regard to providing background knowledge through watching video clips and slides, 76% indicated that it was conducive to understanding culture-specific information embedded in the texts, 49% indicated that it helped them speed up their reading process, 48.9% indicated that it helped them predict the possible meanings of unknown vocabulary, 55.3% indicated that it facilitated reading comprehension, 66.7% indicated that it aroused their interest in the topics. In addition, 77.8% indicated that the transcripts were useful to understand the video clips, 59.8% indicated that the difficulty level of the video clips was appropriate, and 57.4% indicated that captions had to be provided on the video clips, while 25.5% remained undecided.

With regard to the responses of the open-ended question, "Please describe your opinions about the background knowledge treatment that you received," the most frequent topics were transcripts, captions, and unknown vocabulary. 75% of the students indicated that

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watching video clips and slides made reading more enjoyable, 32% mentioned that watching video clips and slides helped them figure out what to focus on and increase general understanding. Another 35%, however, were concerned that due to their poor listening ability and limited vocabularies, they had difficulty understanding the video clips. Thus they desperately relied on the transcripts. They stated that it would have been more helpful if the instructor thoroughly translated the transcripts because there were some sentences or colloquial expressions that they could not make sense of. Regarding when to give out the transcripts, students' opinions appeared to be dichotomized. Half of them preferred to go over them before watching video clips while another half preferred afterwards. 65% emphasized that it was essential to allow them to watch video clips repeatedly; one time would be never enough.

Strikingly, 47% stated that the video clips failed to meet their expectations. They anticipated that the video clips would overlap considerably with the reading passages in terms of the content, but they simply gave clues or relevant culture-specific information. It is of importance to note that 42% indicated that captions would be more efficient devices than transcripts for the sake of convenience. They felt that the narrators on the video clips spoke too fast to follow. When they happened to miss words or sentences while watching the video clips, they were often frustrated in finding the exact lines on the transcripts because there were so many. In addition to building cultural background knowledge through video clips and/or slides, 59% claimed that explicit vocabulary instruction (i.e., explanations of key words) should be presented to promote adequate comprehension. Another 35% indicated that providing background knowledge through video clips and/or slides was not enough to resolve unknown vocabulary hindrances. Finally, 45% students indicated that class discussion that they had after watching the video clips and/or the slides was very meaningful because it reinforced cultural background knowledge, organized their thoughts, and made them feel confident while interacting with the reading passages.

In the control group, 52.5% of the students indicated that unknown vocabulary was an obstacle to reading comprehension, which was a lot higher percentage than the background knowledge group (38%). Likewise, 65% indicated that they needed vocabulary instruction before they read the passages, which was also higher percentage than the background knowledge group (52.2%). 43% indicated that lack of culture-specific information presupposed in the reading passages was an obstacle to reading comprehension, 47% indicated that they needed to be provided with relevant culture-specific information before they read the passages, and 49% indicated that they lost interest when reading these culturally unfamiliar passages.

With regard to the responses of the open-ended question, "Please describe any problems that you confronted while reading the passages. Feel free to make suggestions," the most frequent topics were unknown vocabulary and lack of culture-specific information. 65% of

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the students stated that when they identified unknown vocabulary, they had difficulty making provisional word meanings useful for comprehension. Thus, it would be crucial that prior to reading, the instructor should explain the meanings of difficult words in the passages. 55% stated that being aware of culture-specific information relevant to the passages would make reading more enjoyable and facilitate their understanding the passages. Similarly, 68% stated that the instructor should conduct class discussion to allow them to share and/or build cultural background information embedded in the given texts. 45% stated that having too many unknown vocabularies prohibited them from following the flow of the content in the reading passages. 39% stated that while reading the passages, they realized that they had very limited vocabularies and that increased their anxiety level. 37% stated that in addition to explaining the meanings of difficult words, the instructor should help them with complicated sentence structures which were anther obstacles to reading comprehension. 57% stated that the instructor should give summaries or guidelines to help them figure out what to focus on as they make their way through text.

V. CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate how previewing, providing background knowledge, and giving no prereading treatment would influence low level EFL readers' comprehension of expository texts which presupposed culture-specific information. Previewing comprised of questioning, vocabulary preteaching, and summaries, while providing background knowledge utilized video clips and slides. The results strongly supported the previewing treatment, but revealed very limited effect for the providing background knowledge treatment. The analysis of the test scores among the three groups showed that those who received explicit prereading treatments and then read the expository texts indeed outperformed students in the control group. Students in the previewing group comprehended slightly better than students in the background knowledge group (although not significantly so). The conclusion drawn from this finding is that unknown vocabulary was a more detrimental factor than lack of culture-specific information in impairing comprehension. It is conjectured that if the providing background knowledge treatment included explanations of key words, the effect might have been as powerful as the previewing treatment.

The students' responses on the attitude questionnaires disclosed that students enjoyed reading "Global Diet Choices" more than "International Students," but they comprehended "International Students" better than "Global Diet Choices." The most likely explanation for this result is that text length affected comprehension more than text topic. The majority of the students in the experimental treatments felt that the explicit instruction they had

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substantially contributed to comprehension enhancement, aroused their interest in the topics, made reading more enjoyable, and speeded up their reading process, a finding which echoes that of previous studies of L2 prereading activities (e.g., Chen & Graves, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Markedly, students in the background knowledge treatment stated that in addition to providing background knowledge, they still needed vocabulary instruction, and a third of them demanded captions because they could not benefit much from watching video clips due to their weak listening ability. On the other hand, students in the control group pointed out unknown vocabulary and lack of culture-specific information as major barriers to comprehension, and suggested that in order to help them better understand and enjoy the texts, prereading instruction which was designed to deal with explanations of difficult words, sentence structures, and culture-specific information should be provided.

All in all, the value of this study may be acknowledged as informing EFL classroom teachers of effectiveness of prereading activities on expository texts and students' attitudes toward them. Nevertheless, limitations should be recognized for future explorations. First, the majority of the participants comprised of low level readers which limited the applicability of the findings to EFL classrooms. It would be worthwhile to replicate this study with participants of mixed levels (e.g., proficient and less-proficient). Treatment effects might vary to a significant degree according to students' proficiency levels. Second, this research design was less complete because it targeted only on expository texts. Thus research with different types of texts should be pursued. For instance, text-specific features among content materials might be important factors that determine effectiveness of prereading activities on comprehension. Third, students' attitudes toward prereading treatments were investigated based on questionnaires. An additional extension of this research might interview students to collect more in-depth information about their concerns, needs, and suggestions. Fourth, four option, multiple-choice items were the only comprehension measure to assess students' understanding of the reading passages. Future research may administer additional assessment tasks (e.g., short-answer questions and recalls) in order to examine varying dimensions of comprehension. The findings of such studies might allow EFL classroom teachers to understand EFL readers in a broader scope and be better able to plan a reading curriculum.

VI. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study present the following pedagogical implications for EFL classroom teachers. Prereading activities can be employed as one viable option in increasing students' comprehension and enjoyment of unfamiliar texts, especially texts

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dealing with culturally unfamiliar information. In order to maximize the effects of prereading instruction, teachers need to be flexible enough to create lesson plans based on selected texts, students' proficiency levels and/or reading goals at hand, rather than rely on one single method. Previewing that includes vocabulary instruction should be implemented in a class for low level readers. A summary of the passage may be another useful aid that helps them focus on central ideas rather than on minor details during reading task. Explaining the meanings of key words in sentences may have a bigger impact on developing readers' appropriate background knowledge for a text rather than explaining them in isolation. It would be desirable if the sentences are meaningfully related. Also, synonyms for each word may be elicited to give clues to guess its meanings. Dealing with words that have similar or closely associated meanings at the same time may lead to confusion. In determining the number of words to teach in one lesson, therefore, teachers should make sure to consider the type and the length of words. For example, technical terminology and culture-specific words may be presented in smaller numbers than words that are commonly used in daily life (Laufer, 1990; Taglieber et al., 1988).

Watching video clips could be another motivational device that assists students with providing background knowledge before they read unfamiliar cross-cultural passages. In selecting video materials, teachers should make sure that the content is relevant to the passages and the difficulty level is appropriate for students' listening ability. In order to check students' understanding, clarify confusions, and give additional information, teachers might have to conduct class discussion as a follow-up. Captions or transcripts must be available to compensate for those who have poor listening ability. For low level EFL readers, however, simply building background knowledge may not be a promising method to override vocabulary problems. Thus, teachers still need to spend class time going over unknown vocabulary (Chen & Graves, 1995).

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