READING ACROSS BOUNDARIES:
CULTURAL CONFLICTS AND REMEDIES

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Abstract:

Reading, according to Butterflies *et al.* (2020), is a cognitive process involving the decoding of written symbols to extract or construct meaning. However, from a pragmatist perspective, this notion is outdated and insufficient. Reading is no longer merely a passive act of decoding thoughts. Instead, it should be perceived as an active and dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. A student interpretation of a text is significantly influenced by their schemata, which includes cultural background knowledge, personal experiences, and prior understanding. This perspective does not discount the crucial role of linguistic knowledge in reading comprehension. Instead, it highlights the fact that cultural knowledge is equally essential for achieving a complete and genuine understanding of the text. Linguistic and cultural knowledge are interconnected and should not be viewed in isolation. When these elements are separated, the reader fails to grasp the full significance and richness of what they are reading, resulting in an incomplete and superficial interpretation. This paper argues that to fully comprehend a text, both linguistic and cultural contexts must be considered together, providing a holistic and meaningful reading experience for students.

Keywords: grounded theory, PRIS, scaffolding

1. Introduction

Teaching reading in the Sultanate of Oman presents a unique challenge, as students' comprehension is deeply influenced by their culture, religious beliefs and customs. This cultural lens can make understanding texts with a Western orientation particularly difficult. Instead of fostering active interaction, these texts often clash with students' firm mindsets, leading to a conflict of ideas rather than a productive exchange. As a result, teachers find themselves navigating a complex and sensitive environment. Bridging the gap between the text and the students' perspectives becomes essential.

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This paper introduces a progressive grounded theory to address the challenges of teaching reading in Oman. Based on extensive classroom observation and experience in Oman, the theory has universal applicability. It provides strategies for teachers facing cultural conflicts and for all educators who view reading as a dynamic and holistic process of growth and development.

Ultimately, this work aims to inspire curriculum planners and educators to rethink and refine their approaches to reading instruction. It emphasises the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive reading materials that resonate with students' backgrounds and experiences, making the learning process more engaging and relevant. For teachers, the paper advocates for instructional strategies that acknowledge and bridge cultural differences. These strategies include using comparative texts, culturally relevant materials, and interactive discussions that connect students' lived experiences with the reading material. By adopting these approaches, educators can transform reading into a meaningful and transformative process, promoting critical thinking, empathy, and a broader understanding of the world. The goal is to create an educational experience that fosters continuous growth, discovery, and personal development, ensuring that education fulfils its true purpose and potential.

2. What is a grounded theory?

As described by Borgatti (n.d), the principles of grounded theory emphasise the inductive development of theory directly from corpus data, ensuring a close fit with the observed phenomena. In the context of classroom observation, this approach can be incredibly valuable for educators and researchers aiming to understand the complex dynamics at play. By meticulously gathering and analysing observational data from the classroom, one can develop a grounded theory that accurately reflects the intricate interplay of factors influencing student behaviour, engagement, and learning outcomes. This process involves examining entire cases rather than isolated variables, acknowledging that elements such as teaching methods, classroom environment, student interactions, and individual student characteristics are deeply interconnected. By adopting this holistic and data-driven approach, educators can produce a theory that not only fits their specific classroom context but also offers nuanced insights that might be overlooked by more abstract, deductively derived theories. Ultimately, this can lead to more effective and tailored educational strategies, enhancing the overall learning experience.

2.1 What is the theory?
This paper is built upon a theory known as Progressive Reading Instructional Scaffold (PRIS). This theory is developed through a grounded approach, which means it is derived from direct classroom observations and experiments. It focuses on exploring how schema, or background knowledge, can effectively enhance participation levels among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. The theory involves various steps such as recognising, assessing, softening, scaffolding, and discussing to achieve this goal.

The recognising phase involves identifying the fundamental patterns or behaviours that confront cultural differences. Assessing allows the teacher to do environmental scanning of the culture prevalent in the class. Softening is a means by which the teacher, together with the students, scans the reading and substitutes culturally unacceptable words, phrases, sentences or even ideas to culturally acceptable ones. Scaffolding involves dismantling of old frameworks by making connections between the schema and the reading. Discussing wraps up the whole process.

To ascertain the effectiveness of the theory, it was tested on two groups: an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received instruction using the PRIS method, while the control group was taught using traditional teaching methods. The data collected from this experiment were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine if there were statistically significant differences in outcomes. The findings suggest that there was a clear variation in how actively involved the participants were between the experimental group, which used the PRIS method, and the control group, which followed conventional teaching methods.

2.2 What are the different phases?
Phase 1: Recognising

This involves identifying the core principles that underlie differences in communication styles, different attitudes towards conflicts, different approaches to completing tasks, different decision-making styles and different approaches to cognition.

Phase 2: Assessing

In Phase 2, the teacher needs to evaluate the prevailing cultural dynamics within the classroom setting. Given that the experiment took place in an Omani classroom, the assessment was based on specific cultural and religious beliefs, including Halal, Haram and Makruh.

2.3 What is Halal?

According to the American Halal Foundation (2024), Halal is an Arabic word meaning anything that is lawful, legal, permissible, allowable, permitted, allowed or acceptable in all aspects of daily life and betterment of social context for those who practice Islam.

2.4 What is Haram?

Non-halal, also traditionally known as 'Haram', means anything that is unlawful, unallowable, forbidden, or banned, and is regarded as Najis (unclean) in Islamic thinking. Haram is always associated with what is bad and harmful such as behaviour, speech, dress, conduct, manner and violations of Islamic dietary law (Omar *et al.*, 2012).

2.5 What is Makruh?

Kamali (2021) defines Makruh as an category that exists between the halal and haram and pertains to moral advice rather than a legal category. It is an act or object that must be avoided, but the perpetrator does not incur moral blame.

Phase 3: Scaffolding

Phase 3 focuses on deconstructing the students' existing framework or orientations. In this phase, the teacher must carefully guide this process. The following tips are recommended to achieve this:

- Avoid replacing prior knowledge entirely,
- Create connections between the student's culture and the curriculum,
- Help students navigate and adapt to the school culture,
- Support students in integrating and applying new knowledge.

Phase 4: Softening

The softening phase presents the real challenge. In this stage, the teacher asks students to review the reading text and identify words, ideas, and sentences that may be culturally unacceptable. Students are then instructed to replace these elements with culturally appropriate alternatives. This substitution process not only integrates reading with grammar but also enhances sentence construction and vocabulary development. However, caution must be exercised to ensure that the substitutions do not compromise the overall meaning of the text.

Phase 5: Discussing

The discussion phase facilitates the integration of the students' schema with the text. In this phase, it is important to emphasise the significance of diverse cultural perspectives and understand the backgrounds of the students. All comments should be valued, and it is crucial to monitor one's behaviour to ensure a respectful and inclusive environment.

2.6 The experimentation and interpretation

To determine the effectiveness of the theory in terms of participation levels among learners, it was tested on two separate groups: the experimental and the control. The experimental group was taught using the PRIS, while the control was taught using the conventional approach.

The teacher observed the level of participation among the learners for an entire semester. Marks were awarded to every learner. A rubric was used to assign these marks.

Marks were then interpreted using a statistical test called T-Test. SPSS, a computer program, facilitated a faster and easier interpretation. The level of significance was set at the .05 level. The computed value was .009 which is less than the set level of significance. In statistics, if a computed value is less than or equal to the level of significance set, the null hypothesis is rejected.

In this experiment, the null hypothesis is stated as, *"There is no significant difference in the level of participation of the two groups of respondents."*

Table 1: Statistical interpretation of data

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic
A (Exp)	31	7.29	0.237	1.321	1.746
B (Cntld)	32	6.00	0.336	1.901	3.613
Valid N (listwise)	31				

Table 2: T-Test

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	A	7.29	31	1.321	0.237
	B	6.06	31	1.896	0.341

Table 3: Paired Samples Test

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	A - B	1.226	2.459	0.442	0.324	2.128	2.775	30	0.009

Implies that there is a significant difference in the marks of the two groups of respondents/subjects.

Table 4: The rubric used to grade student participation

Category/ Mark	.5 - 1.5 Poor	2 - 2.5 Unsatisfactory	3 - 3.5 Good	4 - 4.5 Very Good	5 Excellent
	Never participates voluntarily and may be unwilling to participate even when called on. Does not ask questions. Rarely responds in English: responds in Arabic, or is non-responsive.	**Seldom** participates voluntarily. Rarely participates in class discussions and seldom speaks in English. May be reluctant to respond when called on. Usually gives minimal or one-word answers. Seldom or never asks questions.	**Occasionally** participates in areas of interest. Sometimes tries to speak English and occasionally contributes to class discussions. May occasionally ask questions when clarification is needed.	**Usually** participates actively. Usually tries to speak English and often contributes to class discussions. Sometimes asks questions when clarification is needed.	**Always** participates actively in all activities. Tries to speak English as much as possible. Volunteers for class activities and responds as completely as possible. Contributes to class discussions and asks questions when clarification is needed.

In addition to using the T-Test, interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data. During these interviews, students were asked to assess their level of participation in the discussion. This method provided deeper insights into their personal experiences and perceptions, complementing the quantitative data from the T-Test. The interviews allowed for a more nuanced understanding of each participant's engagement and contributions.

Students were asked to choose from the following options:

- **Excellent**: I actively contributed, listened attentively, and engaged with others' ideas consistently.
- **Good**: I participated regularly, listened to others, and provided some feedback and questions.
- **Fair**: I contributed occasionally and listened to the discussion but did not engage deeply with others' ideas.
- **Poor**: I rarely participated and did not engage much with others' ideas or provide feedback.
- **None**: I did not participate in the discussion at all.

Based on the interview outcomes, a comparison of the results between the experimental group and the control group was made. The experimental group included 31 participants, of whom 20 rated their experience as excellent, 10 as good, and only 1 as fair. Conversely, the control group consisted of 32 participants, where 10 rated their experience as excellent, another 10 as good, 7 as fair, and 5 as poor. The results from this experiment indicate a marked difference in satisfaction levels between the two groups, with the experimental group demonstrating significantly higher satisfaction.

3. Conclusion

Indeed, there are numerous strategies to make learning more engaging and appealing for students. One such approach is the Progressive Reading Instructional Scaffold (PRIS) theory. This theory has proven effective in encouraging learners to participate more actively in discussions by embedding lessons within the context of their communities and everyday experiences. By connecting academic content to familiar cultural and personal frameworks, PRIS not only enhances students' comprehension and retention but also fosters a deeper connection to the material. This approach demonstrates that when educational methods resonate with students' backgrounds and lived realities, their motivation and involvement in the learning process significantly increase. Consequently, PRIS serves as a valuable model for creating a more interactive and culturally responsive classroom environment, ultimately leading to more meaningful and impactful learning outcomes.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Marco Agustin Mamba holds a Master of Arts in Education, majoring in English from St. Paul University Philippines. With 27 years of teaching experience, he is currently the Course Leader for English for Early Childhood Education at Sultan Qaboos University's Center for Preparatory Studies. His career includes roles as Course Head, Assistant Course Coordinator, and Quality Assurance Coordinator across various institutions. He has been recognised for his outstanding teaching at Sultan Qaboos University in 2017 and has actively contributed to the academic community through seminars, curriculum development, and publications. Additionally, Marco has been involved in community activities such as IELTS reviewing and language enhancement facilitation, reflecting his commitment to education and professional development.

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