The effect of Iranian EFL learners' cultural knowledge on their performance on cloze tests

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This study explores the effect of schemata activated by culturally familiar texts on test takers' performance on cloze tests. It also investigates whether there is any difference in the performance of males and females on culturally familiar cloze tests. Eighty Iranian Pre-University students (male= 40 and female= 40) with the same level of English reading ability were selected. Three culturally familiar cloze tests and three culturally neutral ones were given to the participants in one session. Since the ultimate aim of this study was to help the Iranian students to have a better performance on Iranian National University Entrance Examination (INUEE), all the cloze tests contained the same characteristics as the cloze tests of the INUEE. While the results demonstrated that males and females did not perform significantly different on culturally familiar cloze tests, it was found that the performance of the participants on culturally familiar cloze tests was significantly better than their performance on culturally neutral cloze tests. The study, therefore, suggests that culturally familiar texts may help test takers show their true comprehension ability and in turn perform better on cloze tests. It also supports Oller's (1995) explanation that a properly made cloze test can tap higher-order processing abilities that can, in turn, form appropriate schemata if necessary.

1. Introduction

Cloze tests were popular in the 1970s and 1980s. They still receive considerable attention by many exam boards throughout the world and hence are employed as various sub-tests (i.e., summary cloze, language use, etc.) in universal test batteries such as IELTS and FCE. The popularity of cloze tests has nevertheless faced some controversy in the literature on their validity and reliability. Many researchers (e.g. Carroll, 1980; Barley, 1983; Farhady, 1983; Klein-Braley & Raatz, 1984; Brown, 1993) question the validity and the reliability of such tests whereas many others (e.g. Oller, 1979; Hinofotis, 1980; Bachman, 1982; Laessch & Kleek, 1987; Jonz, 1990) praise cloze tests for their very same aspects.

A cloze test asks the testees to fill in the words that have been deleted from a reading selection (Oller, 1979). Cloze tests have been part of various types of tests (e.g., achievement, prognostic, placement, etc.) in the last couple of decades (Heaton 1990). In Iran, such tests have been used by important exams boards of nation-wide high school tests as well as the Iranian National University Entrance Exam (INUEE). Thus cloze tests are quite vital in the educational life of Iranian test takers.

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The INUEE (*Konkoor* in Iranian's terminology) is a general exam held once a year for all high school graduates in the fields of Mathematics, Science, Humanities, and Arts. The test consists of two main parts. One part includes specialized questions for each field of study and the other includes common questions for all fields of study.

One sub-test on the common part of the INUEE comprises questions on general English ability of the test takers. This includes 25 questions (5 grammar questions, 10 vocabulary questions, 5 reading comprehension questions, and a cloze test with five blanks). All the questions are in multiple-choice format. As EFL teachers having many years of experience in teaching English in Iran's High schools, Pre-University centers, and the INUEE preparatory courses, we felt the texts in the INUEE cloze tests which are on culturally neutral issues or on western culture would function unfavorably in measuring the general English ability of the Iranian test takers. And that this would happen not because of the students' lack of knowledge, but due to their unfamiliarity with the cultural aspects of the texts. We therefore decided to study how culturally familiar texts would function in the context of our students. The present study aims to investigate if culturally familiar texts would help measuring Iranians' general English ability more effectively. In other words, the study attempts to find out if students' 'schemata' would promote their performance on the cloze tests in the INUEE.

Alderson (2000:33) maintains "Schemata are seen as interlocking mental structures representing readers' knowledge". This may be interpreted as comprehension happens as a result of activating readers' prior knowledge. This recalls 'Schema Theory' – when one reads a text, he/she integrates new information into his/her previous schemata.

There are three types of schemata: (i) formal schemata comprises the knowledge of language and linguistic conventions: knowledge of the organizations and genres (Carrell 1983a), (ii) abstract schemata, commonly referred to as 'story schemata', enables readers to 'recreate' the writer's message by predicting the way in which the text proceed (Mandler 1984), and (iii) content schemata is composed of, (a) subject-matter knowledge which is the knowledge about the content of the text, and (b) background knowledge or knowledge of the world (Alderson 2000).

One specific subclass of knowledge of the world (i.e., content schemata) is "cultural knowledge". As Alderson (2000) states the knowledge of the world is idiosyncratic. It refers to every specific person's world. Our world is different from our friends' because every person has unique personal

history, feelings, ideas, interests, and experiences not necessarily experienced or possessed by others. However, we may share aspects of our experiences, knowledge of the world, etc. with other people in our community and/or nation. For instance, every Iranian may have unique and personal experiences in relation to Nowrouz (the important ancient holiday with special traditions at the beginning of a new Solar year). Nevertheless, all Iranians know what Nowrouz is, what people do during Nowrouz, and what traditions and concepts are related to it. In fact, their common knowledge about Nowrouz comprises their cultural knowledge or content schemata. Thus, every group of people may have a shared set of beliefs, history, experiences, religion, notions, customs, or generally speaking, culture.

The fact that people in various parts of the world enjoy different cultures and how that might affect their test performance has been the topic of research for many language testing practitioners in the last few decades. Huge number of studies have been conducted to find out if background and cultural knowledge affect one's performance when completing tests of different language skills (e.g., Bartlett, 1932; Carrell, 1981; Johnson, 1981 and 1982; Carrell, 1983a; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Carrell, 1987; Chihara *et al.*, 1989; Shimoda, 1989; Barolome, Vasquez, & Lucas, 1990; Bernhardt, 1991; Kang, 1992; Sasaki, 1993 and 2000; Oller, 1995; Carrell & Wise, 1998; Cem Alptekin , 2006; Hong-yun & Ping, 2007; Brantmeier, 2008). However, quite a small number of the above studies have selected the effect of learners' cultural knowledge on their performance on cloze tests as their topics. Some such studies are reported below.

In one study (Chihara *et al.*, 1989), two English cloze tests were given to 159 Japanese college students: one original version including English names of persons or places, and one modified version whose English names (e.g. Joe, Athen, Klein's) were changed to culturally familiar names for Japanese participants (e.g. Hiroshi, Osaka, Daiei). The result showed that the participants performed significantly better on the modified cloze test.

In another study, Al-Fally (1994) asked a group of 74 Saudi Arabian EFL students to participate in a nine-week project on the effect of cultural knowledge on test performance. The results indicated that the performance of students who completed the culturally familiar version of the cloze tests was better not only on the cloze tests but also on the other general English proficiency test which enjoyed cultural points the students were familiar with.

Further, Sasaki (2000) used verbal reports to investigate how content

schemata activated by culturally familiar words influenced students' performance on cloze tests. The study concluded that a cloze test with culturally familiar content could tap higher-order processing abilities due to activating appropriate schemata.

Although topics related to culture and performance on cloze tests have shown some attraction to the researchers overseas, in Iran no study has been reported so far on the effect of culturally familiar cloze tests on EFL learners' performance. This study therefore attempts to investigate such a topic in Iranian context. And while doing this, it will keep an eye on the role of gender in completing culturally familiar cloze tests. The following questions will therefore be addressed here:

1. Do Iranian EFL test takers perform significantly better on cloze tests which deploy culturally familiar texts?

2. Do culturally familiar cloze tests function similarly for both male and female Iranian test takers?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 80 pre-university (the year leading to university entrance exam such as the INUEE) students. They were randomly selected from two educational centers in Lorestan province, Iran. The participants were of two fields of study: Math and Science. Forty of the participants were females and 40 others were males. They aged between 17 and 19 and were all native speakers of Persian. They had studied English for six years prior to the present study.

2.2. Instruments

Two instruments were employed in this research: (i) the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), and (ii) a newly developed test which included three culturally familiar and three culturally neutral cloze tests.

2.2.1 . The OPT

The Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 1985) was used to homogenize the participants of this study. The OPT has been designed to measure test takers' knowledge of grammatical forms of English and the meaning encoded in them. Although OPT is basically a grammar test, it was selected as a homogenizing criterion for the present study. This was due to

the fact that previous research (e.g., Alderson 1991) indicates reading and grammar have high correlation and hence one could represent the other to a high degree.

Based on the results on OPT, the most homogeneous participants were selected for the study: the 80 final participants were those whose scores were within one standard deviation above and below the mean.

2.2.2. The cloze test

The cloze test (Appendix A) developed for this study included three sections. One section comprised three culturally familiar texts describing (i) one of the most famous Iranian prime ministers, Amir Kabir, (ii) one of the famous historical monuments in Isfahan, Naghshe-Jahan Square, and (iii) the traditions of Nowruz, the Iranian new year holiday.

The second section of the cloze test included three culturally neutral texts on (i) the power of water, (ii) the reasons why women outlive men, and (iii) the side effects of medicines. And the third section included three questions asking the participants if they were familiar with the content of the three texts used in the culturally familiar section of the test. The questions were in Persian and the participants also were asked to answer them in Persian so that they can understand the questions of this section better and answer them easily. The reason for including these questions was to reassure the researchers the test takers' familiarity with the texts and the results indicated that all the participants were familiar with the familiar cloze tests.

The final order of these sections was based on the results gained in the pilot study which was done before the main study. In the pilot study, the final test started with three culturally familiar cloze tests and then three culturally neutral ones. Based on this order, some students reported that they had been tired or had no time to attempt the last items which were related to the culturally neutral cloze tests. To have reliable results, therefore, the final test of the main study had two versions; version 1 started with three culturally familiar cloze tests and ended with culturally neutral ones and version 2 used an opposite order. The number of items in these two versions was the same; 40 tests for version 1 and 40 test item for version 2. In addition, 20 male students were given version 1 and another 20 male students received version 2. The procedure was followed for female students.

Further, as the main purpose of this research was to see if the performance of Iranian test takers could be promoted when completing the cloze tests

which would appear in the INUEE, the researchers attempted to have their instrument resemble the INUEE cloze section as closely as possible. Thus the selection of the texts to be used in the cloze tests underwent a specific procedure. The next section is a report on the way the texts were selected for the two parts of the cloze test used in this study.

2.2.2.1. Selection of the texts for the cloze test

The length, the difficulty level, and the number of unknown words in the INUEE cloze tests were the three test specifications which needed to be determined. Seven expert judges (teachers with six years or more of experience in teaching English to Pre-university students) were invited to help the researchers in this phase of the study.

To determine the above characteristics in the INUEE texts used for constructing the cloze tests, the tests developed for the two fields of study – Math and Science – were randomly selected for analysis. In so doing, all the cloze tests developed for these two fields between the years 2005 and 2009 (the year leading to the present study) were analyzed. This ended in 10 cloze tests: 5 for Math and 5 for Science students to be analyzed (Appendix B). Table 1 below presents the information on the above features of the texts selected for the cloze part of the INUEE.

	Number of words	Unfamiliar words	Readability
Ten texts	974	44	171.23
Mean	97.4	4.4	17.12
Percentage		4.52%	

Table 1. The features of the selected texts of INUEE

As indicated by the above Table, the average number of words in the INUEE texts was 97 and each text included 4.5 new words on average. The average readability for the texts in INUEE was computed as 17.12. To estimate the readability of the texts, the 'Fog Index' of readability (Gunning, 1968) was employed. Such text characteristics were assumed to be met when selecting the texts for the instrument of the present study. (Note: The correct responses for the INUEE cloze tests were extracted from the 'INUEE back issues' released after each exam by the National Organization for Educational Testing, the only official examination board responsible for developing, administering, and correcting the INUEE.)

2.2.2.2. Selection of the culturally familiar texts

To select the texts on Iranian culture, the researchers had to use the Internet resources. The reason for this was the lack of texts written by native speakers of English about Iran. A few texts were however found but they were mostly of higher level of readability compared with that of the texts in the INUEE and were therefore decided as not appropriate for the present study.

Finally, the UNESCO web-site and Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia were selected as the appropriate sources. Almost 200 texts were collected in this way. The texts were later analyzed by the researchers for their features not to be far away from those of the texts in the INUEE. This resulted in 13 texts with almost the same level of difficulty, length, and number of unknown words. The texts were then checked by our expert judges for their originality (developed by native speakers). Three texts out of 13 were finally selected to be used in the culturally familiar section of this study's cloze test. The expert judges also reported that the final texts were not gender-oriented. Table 2 represents the features of the selected culturally familiar texts.

Main Idea	Length(words)	Readability	Unknown words
Imam Square	112	17.42	3
Amir Kabir	77	19.03	4
Nowrouz	111	20.30	7
Total	300	56.75	14
Mean	100	18.91	4.66
Percentage			4.66%

Table 2. The features of the selected culturally familiar texts

As the above Table indicates, the average length of the texts as well as their level of difficulty - determined by employing 'Fog Index' of readability (Gunning, 1968) - were close to those of the INUEE texts. Also the percentage of unknown words, as decided by expert judges (i.e., teachers of the same level at which the participants of this investigation were studying) was exactly the same as that of the texts used in INUEE.

2.2.2.3. Selection of the culturally neutral texts

The selection of culturally neutral texts appeared as difficult as that of the culturally familiar ones. It was not an easy task to find a text which could be ranked as completely culture free. We had two criteria for our selection: (i) Experts' judgment, and (ii) the specifications of the INUEE texts. We

decided therefore to follow a rigorous procedure for our selection so we could make sure the texts we chose for the culturally neutral section of the cloze test were not specifically related to a particular culture. Thus, we reviewed several English books, and journals and selected a variety of texts categorized by our expert judges as irrelevant to any particular culture. Three texts were selected out of that bunch to be located in the final cloze test. The texts were entitled (i) 'The Side Effect of Drugs' extracted from *Developing Reading Skills* (Stein, 1983), (ii) 'The Length of Life' extracted from *Expanding Reading Skills* (Stein, 1983), and (iii) 'The Power of Water' extracted from *Reading Passages* (Ahamadi,2006). All the above texts were decided by expert judges as developed by English native speakers and not gender oriented. Table 3 below presents the characteristics of the selected culturally neutral texts.

Main Idea	Length(words)	Readability	Unknown words
Drugs ' Side Effect	75	13.91	6
The Power of Water	110	19.42	7
The Length of Life	80	19.50	3
Total	265	52.83	16
Mean	88.33	17.61	5.33
Percentage			6.03%

Table 3. The features of the selected culturally neutral texts

As indicated in Table 3, the average length of the texts resembled that of the INUEE texts. Also the level of difficulty (readability) for the texts used in culturally neutral part of this study cloze test was quite closely like that of the INUEE texts. Finally, the percentage of the unknown words in this group of texts, as decided by expert judges, was not noticeably different from that of the texts used in INUEE. Thus, the above texts together with those discussed in *vii* above (culturally familiar texts) were decided to be used in the cloze test of this study.

2.2.2.4. Developing the cloze tests

The cloze tests of the INUEE are in multiple-choice format and include 5 blanks each. The deleted words comprise both content (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs) and functional words (conjunctions, in this case). The tests are not however standard cloze, as there is no pattern for the distance between each two blanks in the texts. The number, type, and

percentage of the deleted words in the INUEE cloze tests for the two fields of Science and Math in the years 2005 to 2009 are presented in Table 4 below.

Year of admin	Field of study	No. of Blanks	Content words				Functional words		
			V	N	Adj.	Adv.	Conj.	Prep.	Art.
2005	Science	5	1	1	2	0	1	0	0
2006	Science	5	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
2007	Science	5	2	0	1	1	1	0	0
2008	Science	5	2	1	1	1	0	0	0
2009	Science	5	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
2005	Math	5	2	1	1	0	1	0	0
2006	Math	5	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
2007	Math	5	3	1	0	1	0	0	0
2008	Math	5	1	2	1	0	1	0	0
2009	Math	5	2	1	2	0	0	0	0
Total		50	18	10	13	4	5	0	0
Percentage		100%	36%	20%	26%	8%	10%	0	0

Table.4: The features of the deleted words in the INUEE cloze tests (2005-2009)

As indicated in the above Table, the deleted words in the INUEE cloze tests during the years 2005 to 2009 were verbs 36%, nouns 20%, adjectives 26%, and adverbs 8%. However, as for the function words, it seems only conjunctions were attractive to the test developers as 10% of the total deletions comprised this grammatical form only.

The above features of the close tests were used as the basis for the development of the cloze tests for this research (i.e. culturally neutral and culturally familiar cloze tests). That means, we decided to approach, as closely as possible, the characteristics of the cloze tests which appeared in the INUEE. A brief review on the two Tables below, Tables 5 and 6, would show how the features of the INUEE cloze tests have been observed in developing culturally familiar as well as culturally neutral texts employed in this study.

Main Idea	*Blanks*	*Omitted words*				
		V	*N*	*Adj.*	*Adv.*	*Conj.*
Naghshe-e- Jahan Sq.	*5*	*3*	*1*	*1*	*0*	*0*
Amir Kabir	*5*	*2*	*1*	*1*	*0*	*1*
Nowrouz	*5*	*1*	*1*	*1*	*1*	*1*
Total	*15*	*6*	*3*	*3*	*1*	*2*
Percentage	*100%*	*40%*	*20%*	*20%*	*6.66%*	*13.33%*

Table 5. Deleted Words in culturally familiar cloze tests

Main Idea	*Blanks*	*Omitted words*				
		V	*N*	*Adj.*	*Adv.*	*Conj.*
The Side Effect of Drugs	*5*	*1*	*2*	*1*	*1*	*0*
The Power of Water	*5*	*2*	*1*	*1*	*0*	*1*
The Length of Life	*5*	*2*	*1*	*2*	*0*	*0*
Total	*15*	*5*	*4*	*4*	*1*	*1*
Percentage	*100%*	*33.33%*	*26.66%*	*26.66%*	*6.66%*	*6.66%*

Table 6. Deleted words in culturally neutral cloze tests

As the above Tables show, in almost all our word deletions we observed the type, and number of INUEE pattern. However, if in some cases (e.g., 'nouns' in culturally neutral; and 'adjectives' in culturally familiar texts) the difference in the percentage of our word deletions is a bit bigger (i.e., more than 5%) than that of the INUEE, it is because we wanted to keep the number of word-intervals as close to that of the INUEE as possible.

The final step in the construction of the cloze tests for this study was the preparation of item distracters. In so doing, the final six texts were given in fill-in-the-gap format to 20 students with similar characteristics as those of the target participants of this study. The students were asked to fill in the blanks with the best words of their choice. Then, the most frequent mistakes were changed to the distracters for each item (blank) in the texts.

That last phase ended the process of constructing the culturally familiar and culturally neutral cloze tests of the present research. These two tests were then put together to form one test which as expert judges decided resembled that of the INUEE quite closely. This final test was then piloted with a similar group of students with those of this study's target participants. The next section is a report on this.

2.2.2.5. Pilot study

We asked 30 students to attend our piloting session. The students were expected to complete the test exactly as it would be done by the main groups of participants. This was to help the researchers decide for the time the test needed to be completed, the appropriate functioning of the test distracters, and the meaningfulness of the instructions. The piloting phase and its subsequent item analysis revealed that some of the distracters needed to be changed, as they attracted no attention. The revised test was given to another group of 30 pre-university students for piloting purposes. The analysis of the students' responses to the test indicated that the test items were acceptable and hence the test could be used in the further stages of the study. The piloting phase also revealed that the reliability of

the final close test was .91 in terms of Cronbach's Alpha. Thus, it was reliable enough to be used as the instrument of this study.

3. Procedure

The main study was conducted in November 2009. Data collection was carried out in one session for each gender. Before taking the test, the students were given a brief explanation as to how to complete the test. They were also reassured of confidentiality of their test results. They were asked to submit the test in no more than 75 minutes (the time reached after the piloting phase).

4. Data analysis

For data analysis, the SPSS software, version 16, was used. The analysis of data comprised two steps:

1. A paired sample t-test was run on the performance of all participants irrespective of their gender. This was to indicate if there was any significant difference between the performance of the participants on culturally familiar and culturally neutral sections of the cloze test (our first research question).

2. An independent sample t-test was run on the performance of male and female participants of the present study. This was to show if there was any significant difference in the performance of male and female test takers on the culturally familiar section of the cloze test (our second research question).

5. Results

As mentioned above, in order to answer the first question concerning the difference between the performance of the participants on the culturally familiar vs. culturally neutral cloze tests, a paired sample t-test was applied onto the data. Table 7 below shows the results.

		Paired Differences			t	df.	Sig (one-tailed)
		Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean			
Pair 1	Culturally Familiar - Culturally Neutral	2.3625	2.15385	.24081	9.811	79	.000

Table 7. The result of paired sample t-test on culturally familiar vs. culturally neutral cloze tests

As the above Table shows, the obtained *t* value was 9.811. This was much higher than the critical value of *t* for the same df. (i.e., 1.671). Thus, since the observed *t* value exceeds the critical one, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference *(p< .000)* between the performance of the participants of this research when completing the culturally familiar cloze tests as opposed to culturally neutral ones.

Further, to see if male and female participants of the present study performed significantly differently on the culturally familiar section of the cloze test an independent sample t-test was run on the data. Table 8, below, presents the results.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Culturally Familiar Cloze Test	.097	.757	-.444	78	.658
			-.444	77.964	.658

Table 8. T-test for males and females' performance on culturally familiar cloze test

As indicated in the above Table, the *t* observed (-.444) was much smaller than the *t* critical (1.671) *(p <0.658)*. Thus, the independent sample t-test did not show any statistically significant difference between the two groups of male and female participants who completed the culturally familiar cloze test. In other words, both groups of males and females functioned on culturally familiar cloze tests in the same way.

6. Discussion

The results discussed above show that the findings of the present research are in line with those of Chihara *et al.'s* (1989). There is nevertheless a small difference between this study and that of Chihara and his colleagues. In their study, Chihara and his colleagues changed only very simple elements (nouns) in their texts into more culturally familiar ones (Hiroshi, Osaka, Daiei) for the Japanese participants. However, the fact that their results are in line with the findings of this study may suggest any culturally familiar aspect of the texts (no matter how minute it may be) used in a cloze test would function to the benefit of the test takers.

Also, the findings of the present study supported those of Sasaki (2000). Using a process-oriented method and the same cloze tests used by Chihara *et al.'s,* (1989), Sasaki found that test takers could improve their scores on the cloze test with culturally familiar aspects. In addition, Sasaki found that test takers would not only comprehend and hence perform better on the culturally familiar cloze tests, but also they would be more successful in recalling the content of such texts as opposed to culturally unfamiliar ones.

Moreover, the findings of this study seem to support Oller's (1995) claim that the formation of schemata promotes better cloze test performance. One of the reasons for better performance of the test takers on culturally familiar cloze tests can be described on the account of Horiba's (1996) findings. Horiba found that linguistic knowledge is supported by the formation of schemata, and that the supported linguistic knowledge can potentially lead to test takers' better interpretation of texts and hence their better performance on tests.

In concert with the above, Sasaki (2000) reported that the participants who completed the culturally familiar cloze test (i.e. familiar group) obtained higher scores compared with those who completed a culturally unfamiliar one (i.e. unfamiliar group). Sasaki also found that the test takers in the familiar group had attempted significantly more items than those in the unfamiliar group. Sasaki therefore suggested the test takers' awareness that they could form a coherent story out of the culturally familiar cloze tests may have highly motivated them and hence they attempted all the given blanks and therefore completed more test items.

The findings regarding the second question of this research showed that there is no significant difference between males and females' performance on culturally familiar cloze tests. This seems to be in line with Young and Oxford's (1997) findings. These researchers found that there was no self-

reported difference between genders when they rated their cultural familiarity with passages used in their study.

However, Lin and Wu (2004) found that males significantly outscored females when completing cloze tests. Contrary to this, Behrouzi and Zoubin (2009) found that the females significantly outperformed males when completing the tests of cloze type.

To sum up, it seems that research into gender-related differences in completing cloze tests is inconclusive. The findings reported in the relevant studies are inconsistent, and hence there is no consensus among the language testing practitioners in that relation. More research is therefore required to give a clearer picture whether gender differences exist in completing cloze tests, in general, and culturally familiar cloze tests, in particular.

7. Pedagogical implications

From a pedagogical point of view, the results of this study provide implications for (i) language testers, (ii) material developers, and (iii) test takers. As for the language testers, the results of this study suggest that using cloze tests with culturally familiar texts may help the testers to obtain a more reliable picture of the test takers' ability, and therefore interpret the test scores in a more meaningful (trustworthy) way. In other words, the culturally familiar cloze tests function to the advantage of the test takers, and hence help them tap their knowledge in the best possible way. In line with that, this study seems to provide a helpful guide for designing and developing valid and reliable cloze tests. Further, since the findings of this research suggested there was no significant gender difference in completing culturally familiar cloze tests, it is presumably a fair decision to welcome the development of culturally familiar cloze tests especially when nation-wide high-stakes tests like INUEE are taken into consideration.

Secondly, the results of this study may be helpful to material developers. The findings reported above indicated that many examinees missed the cloze items not due to their lack of knowledge but because of their lack of cultural information. Material developers can, therefore, prepare teaching materials which contain texts related to various cultures, specifically that of the L2. In other words, when L2 culture is of specific importance and thus texts reflecting this are deliberately included in the tests, material developers can familiarize learners with the target culture by including cultural texts in the text books. Such texts can also be used when

designing text-book activities and/or exercises.

Finally, the findings of this study may be useful to test takers as well. It was shown by the present investigation that test takers will face fewer problems comprehending and hence concentrating on how to complete the tests when such tests are culturally familiar to them. This would in turn promote their performance on cloze tests and therefore show their true ability of using the language in a more reliable way.

8. Conclusion

This research aimed at investigating the effect of content schemata activated by culturally familiar texts on test takers' performance on cloze test. The findings of the present research suggested that the participants performed significantly better on the cloze tests with culturally familiar as opposed to those with culturally unfamiliar texts. However, the obtained results indicated that the participants' gender had no significant effect on their performance on culturally familiar cloze tests. This latter result is however in contrast with some research in the literature. Future investigation are therefore hoped to tackle this more deeply.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: "The developed cloze tests for this study"
http://hdl.handle.net/2142/27674

Appendix B: "The cloze tests of the INUEE"
http://hdl.handle.net/2142/27674