Cross-Cultural Pragmatics of Reading:
The Case of American and Turkish Students Reacting to a Turkish Text

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ABSTRACT

Studies indicate that cultural properties of texts affect reading at the content and textual levels. However, research has not adequately addressed the effects of the cross-cultural pragmatics of discourse on readers. Therefore, this study explored whether or not cultural factors play a role in reading comprehension by comparing Turkish and American readers' reactions to a Turkish editorial. Participants read a Turkish editorial, and marked the places where they found it difficult (to understand the content), different (from what they would have expected in an editorial), or effective (in terms of various discourse features, such as being well articulated). Then, a stimulated-recall interview *(a retrospective protocol) was conducted. The findings revealed that American participants had more difficulty and saw more differences than did the Turkish participants, and that cultural differences have more effect on content meaning and word sentence rather than at a textual level (related to the organizational features).*

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

It is now widely accepted in the language education field that reading is not a passive process, but rather an active and interactive one, involving both readers and writers in meaning making and communication. Communicative interaction approaches to discourse, for example, maintain that a text is a basis for interaction that is both the representation of the producer's choices and the reflection of the receiver's interpretations (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; Martin, 1992). The *transactional socio-psycholinguistic theory* of reading states that comprehension is a transaction between a reader and a text, and while reading a text, each person's unique personal background knowledge and previous experience with texts determines which textual features the person will attend to, and how she or he will interpret and restructure the texts (Goodman, 1992, p. 3). The *schema-theoretic* models of reading further suggest that texts themselves do not provide meaning; it is the readers who make meaning by going through a process in which they reject or accommodate new information according to its consistency with stored knowledge (Rumelhart, 1980; Anderson & Pearson, 1984). This already existing knowledge in one's mind was classified into two major types: the *content schemata* related to the knowledge about the content area of a text, and the *textual (formal) schemata* related to the rhetorical organizational structures of a text (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

This background schema in writers' and readers' minds was argued to be context-dependent and culturally sensitive (Hyland, 2003). Social-constructivist approaches to writing, for instance, assert that texts are created for the expectations and needs of readers in specific contexts; therefore, each text comes into existence and gains meaning only in a particular contextual situation (Nystrand, 1986). Therefore, for a text to be fully understood, and for communication to take place, readers and writers should have a common context of shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions in terms of various aspects of discourse (Anderson, Reynolds, Shallert, & Goetz, 1977; Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2003; Widdowson, 2007). However, such shared background schema is often missing when readers and writers come from different cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, this lack of common cultural schema between writers and readers is likely to cause varying degrees of misunderstandings or misperceptions in cross-cultural communication (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Boxer, 2002). According to Wang (2004), background knowledge may hinder reading, and cause cultural barriers between a writer and a reader in terms of different cultural dimensions (such as historical, regional, social, and religious), different categories (such as word-level, sentence-level, and text-level features), and, finally, thought patterns (values and ethics, such as politics, morality, politeness, and what is accepted and what is not accepted in each society). That is, not only can readers' unfamiliarity with the content and textual organizational structure of the text cause problems in reading comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Carrell, 1984), but also can "common background beliefs and pragmatic assumptions [that] impose constraints on what is reasonable, necessary, and appropriate" in a text (Hinkel, 1994, p. 355). According to Pratt (1991), cultural tension often occurs because readers recognize "only legitimate moves," and "ignore or miss those behaviors that do not fit their cultural analytic framework" (cited in Zamel, 1997, p. 344). As a result, a text containing unfamiliar cultural elements is likely to clash with the readers' expectations or cultural preferences, and negatively affect comprehension and communication (Ono & Nyikos, 1992). Consequently, when the cultural distance between readers and writers is huge, cross-cultural pragmatic failure in communication may take place (Thomas, 1983).

The empirical evidence to support the effects of cultural schemata on reading mainly comes from studies that focused on content and textual schemata. The first group of studies (Steffenson, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirley, & Anderson,1982; Johnson, 1981, 1982; Floyd & Carrell, 1987; Malik, 1990; Razi, 2004) explored the relationship between the *cross-cultural content schemata* and reading, and revealed that when students read a text with a culturally familiar content (such as a traditional wedding, a story based on the folklore, mythology, or legends of a peculiar culture, or a special occasion such as Halloween), this cultural content schemata had a significant positive effect on their reading comprehension, and also affected the amount of information recalled, reading speed, strategy use, and/or text interpretation.

Other studies have investigated the effects of textual schemata on reading. Hind's (1983) study, for example, found that the Japanese writing style, which is inductive and lacking cohesive devices (thus leaving to the reader the responsibility for organizing information and making meaning), was evaluated highly by the speakers of Japanese, but found difficult by English native speakers. Carrell (1984), on the other hand, illustrated that four different English organization patterns (i.e., collection of descriptions, causation, comparison, and problem/ solution) generally facilitated ESL students' encoding, retention, and retrieval; however, collection was also helpful for Arabic speaking subjects as *coordinate parallelism* (frequent use

of coordination) is their culturally preferred style. Eggington (1987) also revealed that Koreans recalled information more easily when the information was presented in a non-linear, rhetorical style, especially in delayed recall. Similarly, in Kobayashi & Rinnert's (1996) study, Japanese and American participants read sixteen versions of Japanese student compositions. These essays were constructed from 2 original student essays by manipulating discourse features so that the essays would reflect different culturally influenced rhetorical patterns. Findings showed that the Japanese students and teachers preferred the Japanese rhetorical pattern, while the Americans favored the American pattern. Finally, Taft, Kacanas, Huen, and Chen (2011) demonstrated that when asked to evaluate the texts in terms of rhetorical structure, Australian English NS, Spanish, and Chinese subjects showed significant preferences toward the texts written by individuals from their own-language backgrounds.

In terms of the interactions between content and textual schemata, Carrell (1987) reported that reading is enhanced when readers possess both content and textual schemata related to the text. And although content familiarity had an overall stronger effect on the recall of main topics and major idea units, textual schemata had a more important role in aiding the comprehension of the top-level episodic structure, event sequences, and temporal relationships among events in the text. Finally, Chu, Swaffar, and Charney (2002) found that unfamiliar culture-specific rhetorical conventions interfered with and negatively affected reading recall, especially when readers lacked the necessary content schemata.

Only two studies included in their investigation the *pragmatic discourse properties* that go beyond the meanings expressed by actual words or sentences in texts, including the distance between the expectations of readers and writers in terms of appropriacy and effectiveness of communication within certain contexts (Yule, 1996). Li (1996), for instance, explored American and Chinese teachers' "criteria for good writing" (p. 2) while evaluating compositions through a qualitative research method. The findings revealed that the criteria for "good writing" were shaped by cultural forces. Chinese and American teachers' views largely differed in terms of functions of writing, the need for sentimentality, natural versus poetic language use, the internal and external descriptions, traditional forms, what constitutes honesty and creativity, descriptions of introduction, necessity of a moral tag, and descriptions of natural surrounding. Similarly, Hinkel (1994) compared non-native and native English speakers' evaluations of essays written by both native speakers and advanced ESL learners, and found significant differences between non-native and native speakers' judgments of the texts, mostly related to the pragmatics of discourse (such as specificity, sufficiency of supporting details and information, persuasiveness, clarity of meaning, and explicitness).

These studies provide support for the view that cultural schemata (regarding content and textual/rhetorical conventions as well as pragmatic structures of texts) affects how readers react to the texts written by speakers of other languages. However, most studies to date have investigated the effects of cultural schemata merely in terms of content and/or textual organizational structures in a narrow sense; thus, the effects of other possible factors, such as the pragmatics of discourse, were not included in their explorations. Martin (1992) suggested that instead of formalistic approaches, more interactive and pragmatic approaches to a text should also be included in cross-cultural research.

Moreover, previous studies focused only on the effects of cultural factors on the product of reading, such as comprehension or amount of the text recalled, but not on the reading process; thus, what readers actually do while reading, and especially in terms of *how* cultural schemata interact with texts, was not investigated. Boxer (2002) advocates that research on cross-cultural

pragmatics should adopt qualitative approaches to collect and analyze data, as such research aims to find reasons for any clash in expectations or misperceptions about the other cultural group or product. Therefore, by focusing on the reading process through qualitative research methodology, this study explored whether or not participants from the same or different linguistic and cultural backgrounds would react to a text in different ways. In addition, a more flexible and comprehensive approach was employed allowing incorporation of various aspects of text in the analysis. The research questions that guided the study were: (1) Are there any differences between Turkish and American students' markings while reading a text written by a Turkish editorial columnist? (2) What are the Turkish and American students' articulated reasons for their markings in the selected text?

It was expected that the stored textual assumptions in the readers' schemata and the cultural expectations of an editorial would affect the Turkish and American participants' reactions to the Turkish text. As Reid, Kirkpatrick, and Mulligan (1998, p. 64) state, readers have expectations about texts at all levels, and their reactions reflect their frames of knowledge of the world; thus, their interpretations, in light of their cultural schemata, may create difficulties when reading. Since the Turkish participants were culturally more familiar with Turkish editorials than were the American participants, Turkish participants were expected to mark fewer places with regard to differences and difficulties, but more places with regard to effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Eight volunteers between the ages of twenty and thirty five (four from each cultural group) were selected for the study from among the graduate students with whom the author took a qualitative research course at an American University and from among the members of Turkish Student Association at the same university. The requirement for participation was at least a B.A. degree in their own educational systems (American or Turkish) because a university graduate would be highly literate and also familiar with the rhetorical conventions and norms of the culture in which he/she was educated. That is, the Turkish participants needed to have college degrees from Turkish universities and the Americans the same from American universities. (Appendix A provides more detailed information about the participants.)

Data Collection Procedures

Twenty-two editorials about the US Presidential elections and the Ossetia (Beslan School) massacre were chosen from the three leading national Turkish newspapers (*Milliyet*, *Sabah*, and *Hurriyet*), and were examined to find out if any common patterns of discourse or language style could be detected. Although editorials hugely differed from one writer to another, there still seemed to be some preferred characteristics of style that were used more than the others, such as unfinished sentences with ellipsis; use of anecdotes to support arguments; use of figurative language and sayings; one-sentence paragraphs; long sentences; and use of questions as direct appeals to an audience for attention or to support an argument. After that, a text including these features was chosen. However, in order not to cause too many problems in translation (such as loss or distortion of the meaning), the text, which did not have too much cultural, literary, and

figurative language, was chosen. To overcome the "semantic and conceptual problems that may stem from the translation of the text, the translation/back-translation method," which was rated high in "informativeness, source language transparency and security" (Behling & Law, 2000, p. 19) was employed. However, while trying to increase the reliability of the translation, most Turkish expressions, idioms or metaphors were translated literally, which might have caused problems in terms of the quality of translation. After the text was translated, a native speaker of English was also asked to proofread the text for any grammatical errors.

Once the text was selected and translated into English, each participant was asked to read the text and make markings on it. English-speaker participants read a translated version of the text, and Turkish participants read it from the original version. Looking at the text in terms of content, organization, coherence, clarity, directness, explicitness, use of words or sentence structures, appropriateness, persuasiveness, and language style, the participants were asked to underline or mark the places in the text that they found (1) *difficult* to understand (e.g., the places where they had to read more than once, (2) *different* than what they were used to seeing in an editorial column, and (3) *effective* (e.g., well articulated, easy to read, the places they liked). The participants were also allowed to write notes or comments on the text in addition to the markings, if they so desired.

In order to discover the reasons behind the markings, questions for stimulated recall interviews were prepared. The *stimulated-recall interview* method (in which participants are asked to make retrospective reports of their thinking, what happened and why it happened based on the retrieval cues about a past activity [Shavelson, Webb, & Burstein, 1986; Sasaki, 2002; Greene & Higgins, 1994]) was chosen to collect data because it was found effective to "uncover the cognitive processes in L2 research" (Gass & Mackey, 2000, p. 19). Bloom (1953) states that "a participant may be enabled to relive an original situation with vividness and accuracy if he is presented with a large number of cues or stimuli which occurred during the original situation" (p. 161). Bloom (1954) also found that if the stimulated recalls were prompted up to 48 hours after the event, recall was 95% accurate. Therefore, in this study, face-to-face audio-taped stimulated recall interviews were administered two days after the reading procedure. All data was collected within a two-week time, and the data was later transcribed and analyzed.

Data Analysis

The data was processed through a qualitative comparative analysis of Turkish and American readers' reactions to the Turkish editorial to see whether any systematic pattern of difficulties, differences, or effectiveness would appear. First, frequency analysis of the marked places was performed to find the total markings for each category. Then, the interviews were transcribed, and the reasons for the markings were grouped under three broad categories regarding *difficulty* (to understand the content), *differences* (from what they would have expected in an editorial) or *effectiveness* (in terms of various discourse features, such as being well articulated). However, these groups were sometimes not mutually exclusive because some markings fit into more than one category. For example, something that was marked as different might also be something that caused difficulty in understanding. In such cases, the same marking was analyzed under the categories of both difficult and different. (For the Turkish subjects, there were no overlapping categories.) Examples of these overlapping instances were:

Kevin: "catch a bird with his mouth" (different-difficult).

Sue: "shop window changes," "with his obsessions with the US" (difficult-different).

Robin: "old orbit," "shop window changes" (different-difficult).

Jane: The questions that the author asked (different-effective).

Then, sub-categories were formed based on the data from the participants' accounts from the stimulated-recall interviews. These sub-categories encompassed the difficulties, differences, and effectiveness at the content-meaning, textual-formal, and word-sentence levels. The content-meaning category included any comments related to not only the background knowledge on the topic, but also the pragmatics of discourse, which is concerned with "the meaning as communicated by a writer and interpreted by a reader" (Yule, 1996, p. 3), such as the "informativeness" of the message, the specificity and sufficiency of details, the appropriateness of the content, and the explicitness and directness of the message conveyed. The textual-formal category included any comments related to the overall organization, coherence, and cohesion, and the word-sentence category included the comments on syntactic and lexical usage. Under each sub-category, a cross-group contrast and comparison, followed by the within-group description of the markings by the American and Turkish participants, were provided to see whether the markings were shared or similar within each cultural group. Then, the selected quotes from participants for their specific comments on their markings were also included in the description. Any markings the participants linked to grammar problems that might stem from the translation of the text were excluded from the analysis so as not to contaminate the data.

RESULTS

The Frequency of the Markings

The total number of markings for the American participants was two times higher than the Turkish participants' markings. In terms of the markings according to the categories, the results indicated that American participants had more markings regarding difficulties and differences than did the Turkish participants, as expected. American participants had more markings than Turkish participants regarding difficulties at word-sentence level, and differences both at word-sentence and content-meaning level rather than at textual-formal level. Turkish participants, on the other hand, had more markings regarding difficulties at content-meaning and textual-formal levels than the Americans. In terms of effectiveness, however, no differences were observed in terms of the frequencies of the American and Turkish participants' markings. The summary of the markings, according to each category, can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The Frequency Counts According to Different Categories (Including Overlaps)

	Content-meaning Level		Textual-formal Level		Word-sentence Level		Total	
	American	Turkish	American	Turkish	American	Turkish	A	T
1-Difficult	0	6	2	5	**20**	**4**	**22**	15
2-Different	**13**	**0**	0	1	**11**	**0**	**24**	1
3-Effective	4	4	0	1	1	0	5	5

In order to better understand the specific reasons beyond the markings, the study also included a thorough examination of the participants' comments. The following section presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the stimulated-recall interview results (according to each category) through selected quotes from the participants' accounts.

Reasons behind the Markings

According to the analysis of the transcribed interview data, besides the three main categories with regard to difficulties, differences (strange or interesting), and effectiveness (or well-expressed), three sub-groups indicating the levels of difficulties, differences or effectiveness at content-meaning, textual-formal, and word-sentence levels were established (see Table 1 above). A between- and within-group description of the markings and the participants' accounts regarding their markings were presented under the main-and sub-categories.

Difficult

Unclear Content, Inadequate Information. For this category, the Turkish participants had more negative comments in terms of difficulties, revealing that their difficulties stemmed from inadequate background knowledge about the content. The female Turkish participants who were not familiar with the recent political issues seemed to need more explanation and examples in order to understand the issues. However, the American participants who had more background knowledge about the American presidential election and recent political issues could easily understand the content related to US-Europe relations and Osama Bin Ladin. Some examples of comments by participants can be seen as follows:

- For the marking "….. he threw the US in such severe opposite camps after…. support he gained just after September 11?":

  > The author introduced his idea implicitly without offering enough detail. I could not understand what the author meant by "opposite camps," I could not understand whether these opposite camps were the US and the world or Kerry and Bush. (Serpil)

- For the marking "… reelection of Bush made Bin Ladin and his followers very happy?":

  > I could not understand why Bin Ladin became happy with these results at all because the author did not explain it. (Serpil)

  > I could not understand why Bin Ladin became happy. People who already know these issues and who are interested in politics could understand this better, but this information is not clear for me. (Berna)

Unclear, Difficult or Did Not Sound Good at Textual-Formal Level. Although the American participants marked a few negative points related to coherence and overall organization, Turkish participants, again, had more negative comments. Surprisingly, as opposed to what was expected, the Turkish participants were found to be more concerned and uncomfortable with organizational problems in the text than the American participants. Some examples of comments are:

I think the text is incoherent. The sentence, 'in other words, he will not be the old Bush, he will start a more mature period,' doesn't fit to the rest of the text. (Kevin)

The text is not well-organized and not preplanned. There is not one central point to the article, but several different points. It is more like the author is reacting to the elections and writing down whatever comes to his mind. (Robin)

The text around questions made the text boring. (Berna)

The author did not focus on one topic, but talked about many options. The author wrote whatever he was thinking and concluded with saying what he wishes.… In the last paragraph, I expected that the author would give the answers of the questions and summarize the text, but the author just said these are the things I will talk about; understand whatever you can from all this mess. (Umur)

The text sounds like it was written spontaneously as the writer was thinking which made it incoherent sometimes. The author explained the situation, expressed his opinions, supported his ideas, but there was no certain conclusive statement at the end. (Murat)

Unclear, Difficult or Did Not Sound Good at the Word-Sentence Level. For this category, the American participants had five times more problems than did the Turkish participants. The two common problems shared by all the Americans were the difficulties they had with the sentence "Even if he does not take a sharp turn…he will change his old orbit' and the expression "shop window changes." Kevin and Robin had problems especially with wordiness and long sentences. Turkish participants, on the other hand, seemed to have more individual problems that could not be generalized to the Turkish group as a whole. However, it is notable that Umur shared the same concerns with Sue with the expression "with his obsessions of the US," and Murat shared Robin and Kevin's concerns regarding wordiness and long sentences. These findings suggest that despite the differences, there were also some similarities across the American and Turkish groups.

- For the marking, "Even if he does not take a sharp turn….. he will change his old orbit":

  The sentence was worded differently than what I used to see in an editorial, it was confusing. (Sue)

  The sentence is difficult to understand in terms of language use. (Jane)

  It sounds funny, but also problematic. (Kevin)

  This is unclear. There were a couple of times I had to reread things just because of long sentences connected with many commas with a lot of phrases in the middle of the sentences. (Robin)

  This is a very long sentence including a lot of information. There is a lot of extra information between commas that makes following the message difficult. (Murat)

- For the marking, "The things that I have done are the assurance of the ones that I will do":

  This sentence is awkward, the arrangement of words are different from how it would appear in English. It does not sound good. (Sue)

- For the marking, "with his obsessions with the US":

  I could not figure out whether this means Bush is patriotic or Bush is just interested in the US, and does not care about the others. (Sue)

  I could not understand what that means and could not make any sense out of it. (Umur)

- For the marking, "Kerry's announcement of his withdrawal from elections, in other words, accepting his defeat":

  I did not like the sentence because the author used unnecessary words and repeated himself. I would omit the part in other words, accepting his defeat because it was not necessary. (Kevin)

  I would not even include 'in other words accepting his defeat' because I think in editorials one should just declare statements simple and to the point to be more effective. (Robin)

Different

Unusual, Disturbing, or Inappropriate in Terms of Content and Meaning. The American participants marked a total of thirteen places as opposed to no markings by the Turkish participants. The American participants, as a group, shared markings and made similar comments. For example, prayer was pointed out by Jane and Robin as something taboo and not prevalent in the US media because it was a religious expression. Both Jane and Sue thought that the message was conveyed too directly, and was unusual. Criticism of the president as a person, as opposed to his policies, were disturbing to Sue, Kevin and Robin. Jane, Sue and Robin also found the expression "with his obsessions with the US" to be too honest, direct, or disturbing. These results suggest that there might be cultural differences in terms of what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of pragmatics of discourse across cultures. Some examples of markings by participants can be seen as follows:

- For the marking of the two paragraphs including the questions "Is he going to ask himself why almost half of the Americans are so much against him?" and, "Is he going to ask himself…. why his image is so down in Europe?"

  This is something different from what I am used to seeing in US. (Jane)

- For the marking "Prayer may be needed":

  In the US, people say God bless America, but not prayer may be needed. Americans often veil and they tend to prevent religious things. There is melting pot in the US thus there are people who had different backgrounds, people who do not even believe in God. So talking about religion had been a taboo, but recently things have changed a little of course. (Jane)

  Even in editorials in most American newspapers, most writers do not take any religious bent on what they are writing about. The fact that this author said that prayer would be needed just struck me because typically unless the whole theme of the editorial is about religion, it is not typical for US writers to use such phrases or reference to religion or prayer like that. (Robin)

- For the marking "with his obsessions with the US":

  > This is too honest, these are the things democrats would be willing to say, but majority of the country would not admit it. (Jane)

  > I do not understand what is wrong to be patriotic. Especially the older generation in the US says that while it is OK for foreign people to be patriotic in their own country, why they consider when a US citizen is patriotic as automatically bad. Another unusual thing is the way Bush was criticized as a person. This article focused on Bush more than his policies, there is implication that there is something wrong with the president as a person. For example, the expression self-centered is implying that there is something wrong with Bush as opposed to his policies. Criticizing your leader on that aspect by saying something is wrong with the president as person is still a taboo in the US. (Sue)

  > I would understand that this text was not written in the US even if you did not tell me because of the expressions like with his obsessions with the US because in the US, nobody would say that. It would be just a tip off. (Robin)

- For the markings including "accepting his defeat," "owner of the house," and, "US stubbornly went against the entire world":

  > These are different than what I used to see in an American editorial because there is no hedging while talking about risky things. US media would be afraid to talk about such things openly and it would be afraid to tell the truth. I think, *defeat* is a loaded word, owner lifts the veil of the financial power and --- no such sentence would appear in the US newspapers. Also, no newspaper would use the word *stubborn* because they would not want to make US look stubborn and they wouldn't point out that Americans are stupid and selfish. (Jane)

  > The word *defeat* would probably be worded as *conceded* in the US media, but here it is too direct. The word *owner* gives Bush more power than he actually has, and in the US, president is not considered as the owner of the White House. I am disturbed by the use of the word *US* in the sentence 'US stubbornly went against the entire world' in a way including American people as well as the government. I read both foreign and US news, but for the first time I have seen that people and government are not considered as separate, but as though they were the same. I am also an American and I am not against the world and there are many American people who are like me. (Sue)

      Unusual or Different at Textual-Formal Level. Both the Turkish and American participants thought that the organization of the editorial was no different from usual Turkish or American editorials. The American participants said that US editorials did not have strict organization norms, and that they were often written free style.

      Unusual or Interesting Use of Words or Phrases. The American participants had eleven markings for this category as opposed to no markings by the Turkish participants. Not surprisingly, the Turkish participants said that they found nothing unusual, interesting, literary or creative in the text as they were culturally familiar with the idioms and expressions in the text.

- For the marking "even if Bush catches a bird with his mouth":

  This is very interesting. (Jane)

  Interesting, but also difficult to understand. (Kevin)

- For the marking "carry water to the mill of radical Islamists":

  These are very creative, different, more personal and descriptive. The use of metaphors and descriptive language is richer in the text than it can be found in the US editorials because it is generally considered as a type of writing that cannot be rich or descriptive, that kind of language use is generally left to stories or novels. (Jane)

  This is a very interesting metaphor. I heard something similar to this expression in a story, but not in any newspapers. (Kevin)

- For the marking "old orbit":

  I am not familiar with these phrases and could only figure out what they meant by using the context of the paragraphs. (Robin)

Effective

Effective in Terms of Content or Message. The number of positive comments on the content and meaning of the text was equal for all participants. However, although Berna and Serpil liked the sentence, "US stubbornly went against the entire world" as effective, not surprisingly, this same expression was found disturbing by Jane and Sue.

- For the marking "From now on the period with many questions, but few answers is opened":

  It is nicely written and it has a very thoughtful insight. (Sue)

- For the marking of the two paragraphs including questions "Is he going to ask himself why almost half of the Americans are so much against him?... Is he going to ask himself why he is loved so little in the world, why Islam and Arab world hate him so much?"

  I liked it because it was questioning something US newspapers would not and I think somebody should ask these questions. (Jane)

  That paragraph is really very effective and clear. (Serpil)

- For the marking "The reelection of Bush made Bin Ladin and his followers very happy":

  This was the first time I thought about how Bin Ladin would think about this. (Jane)

- For the marking "US stubbornly went against the world":

  This explains it (the situation) very well. (Serpil)

  This part explains what the author is talking about very well. (Berna)

Effective at Textual-Formal Level. As opposed to what was expected, the Turkish participants did not have more positive comments on this aspect than American participants. At the textual level, the findings did not offer a meaningful explanation. Only Serpil said that the main idea was summarized very well in the last paragraph and that the author concluded in an effective way.

Effective at Word-Sentence Level. Only Sue had a comment on this category. She said that she liked the use of words, metaphors and descriptive language, and found the text very creative.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings partly confirmed the first hypothesis, that American participants would have more points to mark with regard to the difficulties and differences. As it can be seen in Table1, American participants had five times more markings than the Turkish participants for *difficulties* at word-sentence level. However, the content-meaning and textual features did not seem to cause any problems for the American participants. In a similar way, American participants had a lot of markings as opposed to no markings by Turkish participants for the *differences* at word-sentence and content-meaning levels. American participants, however, did not differ from Turkish participants with respect to their markings at the textual-formal level. The second hypothesis, on the other hand, was not confirmed at any level. As opposed to what was expected, the results indicated that Turkish participants did not necessarily prefer or like the Turkish text more than the American participants.

The difficulties American participants experienced with certain words and expressions were found to interfere with reading comprehension and, accordingly, effective communication. American participants stated that they had to reread some places to understand, that they tried to get the meaning from the context because they could not make sense of some words or sentence structures; some of the text was unclear or confusing, did not sound good, was awkward or was unnecessarily wordy. This finding revealed that besides the top-down factors, bottom-up factors (or linguistic/language schema, Singhal, 1998) also have an important effect on reading comprehension, confirming the interactive models to reading which suggest that "successful reading entails a balanced interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing skills" (Eskey, 2005, p. 565). This finding is also consistent with the communicative interaction approaches to discourse as Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) suggest: Grammaticality (grammatical correctness) and acceptability (what is actually accepted in communication) are different from each other, and there might be some structures which are less typical in one context, and thus might not be processed and accepted easily by others.

The difficulties Turkish participants faced with respect to content-meaning aspects highlighted once again the importance of background content schema in the comprehension of a text. The two female Turkish subjects could not understand some points because of their unfamiliarity with certain political issues in the editorial, although they were from the same cultural background as the author of the text. American participants, on the other hand, had no problem in understanding the text because they were all aware and knowledgeable of the issues raised. This finding was in line with the assertions of the transactional psycholinguistic and schemata theories (Rumelhart, 1980; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Goodman, 1992). As Carrell

(1985a) stated, "the role of background knowledge is essential in text comprehension" (p. 383) and "the context is not created solely out of the words, but also out of one's prior knowledge of the content domain" (p. 384).

In terms of the findings regarding differences, the results of the interview revealed that the markings for this category were more related to the pragmatics of discourse rather than textual/rhetorical organizational features. This finding was interesting when examined in the framework of the previous contrastive rhetoric research, which suggested that cultural differences come into play particularly with respect to textual (and especially organizational) features. However, this finding should be approached cautiously as the selected text was an editorial, and American participants stated that the editorial is a genre that does not require a strict organizational structure. Therefore, the American readers were probably more flexible while reading the text, due to genre-specific expectations (or lack thereof). However, if the participants had been asked to react to a scientific academic text, the American participants' comments for this category might have been different. As suggested by Carrell (1987), the content schema might have a stronger effect on reading than does the textual schemata; thus, as American students were familiar with the content they might have been less dependent on their textual-formal schemata.

It is also possible that, as Martin (1992) suggested, the pragmatic features of discourse might be as important as the textual-formal level rhetorical characteristics of texts in terms of effective communication. In the present study, American participants as a group marked similar points and made parallel comments about their markings, such as their discomfort with the use of religious referents, the criticisms of the president for his personality rather than his policies, and the use of too-direct and too-honest expressions to explain some situations. Concurring with Ono and Nyikos (1992), Pratt (1991, as cited in Zamel, 1997), and especially with Hinkel (1994) and Wang (2004), this finding pointed out that American participants might have reacted to the text based on their common background and the pragmatic assumptions (as suggested by Hinkel, p. 355), resulting in cultural clashes in terms of values, ethics, morality, what is accepted (or considered appropriate and reasonable) or taboo.

As for the differences in terms of the word-sentence level, as opposed to the Americans, the Turkish participants had no markings for interesting or creative words or phrases. This result was parallel to the findings of Li (1996) who found that what is considered as very dull, ordinary and cliché in one language can be perceived as creative, literary and interesting by the members of another culture.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study had two important limitations that were inherent in such an investigation, and were difficult to overcome. The first limitation is the representation problem: A single text written by a single author had to be chosen for the study, and it was not possible to say that this text was representative of all Turkish editorials or Turkish culture. Second, because of the limited number of subjects (due to the qualitative nature of the study), it was also difficult to make broad generalizations about the findings of the study. However, due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative methodology, which is naturally more flexible, had to be adopted, thus enabling a richer understanding of the possible factors regarding reasons for the

markings. Another limitation was that the politically polarized content of the editorial against Bush's political actions might have had an impact on the responses as well.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, it was possible to understand specific reasons behind some difficulties and discomfort experienced by participants while reading a text produced in a different cultural context. Thus, the methodology adopted was proved to be effective to answer the research questions. However, future studies should include more subjects and different types of texts to be able to make stronger claims and generalizations about the cross-cultural factors on reading comprehension and communication.

In terms of pedagogical implications, although it is hard to make specific and detailed suggestions for classroom applications at this stage, some points can be taken into consideration in second/foreign language instructional contexts. First, this study pointed out that cultural perceptions are likely to play an important role in determining the quality and effectiveness of a text, and even a text written by a professional writer in one country may be evaluated as strange and difficult to understand by readers from a different culture. This situation may cause serious disadvantages for non-native speakers particularly in the contexts of intercultural communication and in the writing and reading components of international language tests such as TOEFL and IELTS.

Therefore, as a first step, foreign/second language teachers and assessors should be aware of the cultural subjectivity involved in the writing and reading processes during their classroom teaching and assessment procedures, especially with multicultural students. Then, foreign/second language teachers should provide background content, and explain culturally unfamiliar concepts or culturally loaded vocabulary through pre-reading activities as also suggested by previous researchers (Pearson-Casanave, 1984; Chen & Graves, 1995). In addition, explicit instruction on culturally appropriate textual features in the target language should be introduced to students (Grabe, 2004). As Carrell (1984) revealed, ESL students have difficulties identifying the target language rhetorical organization in texts when reading because of not having the cultural schemata for these textual-formal structures. However, after receiving instruction in the English rhetorical organization, the amount of information ESL students recalled significantly increased (Carrell, 1985b). Finally, explicit instruction on the pragmatics of discourse such as hedging and the appropriate level of directness, as well as information about the topics that may be considered as taboo or disturbing in the target culture should be offered to students. Such an emphasis in instruction may help foreign/second language students recognize and appropriately use these features to better comprehend and tolerate a text written in/for a culture that is different than their own.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMATION ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Two female Turkish participants (Serpil and Berna) hold B.A. degrees in early childhood education from different universities in Turkey. Serpil and Berna were ESL students in an intensive English program at an American university. Murat was a Ph.D. student in a physics and astronomy program in the US, (who had received a B.A. degree in electrical engineering from a Turkish university). Umur was a postdoctoral research scholar at an American university; he completed his graduate studies in a physics and astronomy program in the US (who also had a B.A. degree in physics from a Turkish university). Except for Berna who was very busy with her new baby, all participants said that they read national Turkish newspapers online, such as *Milliyet*, *Hurriyet*, *Zaman*, *Yeni Safak*, *NTV*, and *Sabah* everyday. Umur and Murat said that they also read American newspapers online.

American participants were all graduate students at the same American university in the College of Education. Jane was a Ph.D. student in the Language Literacy and Culture Program, was working in the writing center, and had degrees in anthropology and English (non-fiction writing). She said she worked as a journalist for fourteen years so she was very familiar with the rules and conventions of writing newspaper columns. Sue was a Ph.D. student in a social studies education program. She had a degree in history education, and she had worked as a history and ESL teacher in a high school. Kevin was a Ph.D. student (and a Teacher's Assistant) in the Curriculum and Instruction program. Robin was a student in the Curriculum and Supervision program who was also interested in linguistics with an emphasis on TESL. All American participants said that they read national and local American newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, and they visit various internet cites such as *CNN*, *FOX*, and *MSNBC* every day. Jane, Robin and Sue said they also read foreign news, such as British news, and Sue said that she sometimes reads online foreign news other than British that are written in English. Robin also said that she had subscriptions to the *Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harpers*, and read editorials in these magazines as well.