

Influence of Schema Activation on Undergraduate Students' Reading Comprehension of Poetry in English

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Abstract

This research explores the impact of schema activation on the reading comprehension of English poetry among undergraduate students in Myanmar Universities. The study investigates how activating students' prior knowledge and cultural schema enhances their understanding of poetic texts. Through a mixed-methods approach, the research examines the effectiveness of schema activation techniques in improving comprehension and engagement with poetry. The findings contribute to the pedagogical strategies for teaching literature in English as a foreign language, specifically within the unique cultural and educational landscape of Myanmar.

Keywords: schema activation, reading comprehension, undergraduate students, poetry

Introduction

Reading comprehension plays a crucial role in the academic success of undergraduate students, especially when it comes to comprehending complex literary texts such as poetry. However, the ability to effectively comprehend poetry in English may pose significant challenges for undergraduate students in Myanmar universities, considering the unique cultural, linguistic, and educational background of these students. To overcome these challenges, it is vital to explore the potential influence of schema activation on undergraduate students' reading comprehension of poetry in English. Schema activation refers to the process of activating background knowledge or pre-existing schemas to facilitate comprehension and meaning-making. This research aims to the impact of schema activation on undergraduate students' reading comprehension of poetry in English in Myanmar universities, focusing on the role of cultural and literary schemas, reading strategies, and language proficiency. The findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of how schema activation can enhance reading comprehension skills in the context of poetry, providing valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and language practitioners in Myanmar and other similar educational settings.

Literature Review

Reading comprehension is an essential skill for undergraduate students studying poetry in English at Myanmar universities. In order to enhance their comprehension, it is important to activate their schema or prior knowledge. In 1966, Ausubel pointed out that learners can learn best when the new material being taught can be anchored into existing cognitive information in the learners. Rumelhart (1980) said that schemata can represent knowledge at all levels-from ideology schema and cultural truths to knowledge about the meaning of a particular word, to knowledge about what patterns of excitations are associated with what letters of the alphabet. Windonson (1983) claims that effective comprehension depends on reader's ability to relate what is being read to a familiar pattern or schema. Background knowledge of students can be enhanced by the teacher. We have schemata to represent all levels of our experience abstraction. Finally, our schemata are our knowledge. All of our generic knowledge is surrounded in schemata. Grabe (2006) stated that literature offers several instructional implications, revealing that activating background knowledge and training students to use reading strategies can be potential components in developing successful readers. Danning 2007 prove that students may not always be able to identify their own knowledge gaps. This idea is proved by the scholar Ambrace et al in 2010. Students are better able to learn if they have sufficient and accurate existing knowledge. Keun (2011) demonstrated that schema activating tasks helped learners' reading comprehension, guessing skills and also positively improved their perception towards learning English reading. Even though schema relevant to the topic of the reading passages can positively relate to reading comprehension ability, learners with L2 knowledge tend to be text-bound and have difficulty in activating their background knowledge (McNeil,2011). Students in Myanmar are willing to study English poems with the guidance of their teacher. They want to be provided with common knowledge about the targeted culture and traditions. They want to access the schema activation in comprehending reading English and American poetry.

Schema activation, an encoding strategy, involves activating relevant prior knowledge so the new knowledge can be connected to it. It has a positive influence on memory of humans and it is very popular in psychology and in education, especially in reading. Written text does not carry meaning itself and it can only provide direction for learners as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge (An, 2013). Poetry is one of the most useful transmitters of cultural knowledge of different nations. It really helps readers understand different cultures and ideologies, different social behaviour, and opens eyes towards a new world. Students have still difficulty in grasping meaning of poetry texts. Only the schema activation can make foreign students easy in comprehending reading poetry. This study examined how does schema activation influence on undergraduate students' reading comprehending poetry in English.

Methods

This study was conducted between July and September 2022. The total number of participants were 15. The participants were randomly selected. They were second year students specializing in English. The number of males was 3 and that of female was 12. We used a mixed method to gather data. The research consisted of two parts. The first part was questionnaire survey with 9 close-ended questions and 1 both closed and open-ended and the second part was interview surveys with 3 open-ended questions.

3.1 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of schema activation on undergraduate students' reading comprehension of poetry in English in the context of Myanmar universities.

The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To examine the existing literature related to schema activation, reading comprehension, poetry instruction, and English language learning.
2. To explore the theoretical framework and theories that underpin the relationship between schema activation and reading comprehension in language learning contexts.

Results

Data analysis of the study showed that students prefer schema activation in reading poetry. This section presents the key findings from the study examining the influence of schema activation on undergraduate students' reading comprehension of poetry in English in Myanmar universities.

The study revealed a positive relationship between schema activation and reading comprehension. Students who actively activated their prior knowledge and experiences related to the poem's themes, settings, and linguistic elements demonstrated higher levels of comprehension. It also found that the cultural and educational context of Myanmar universities played a significant role in schema activation. Students who had prior exposure to and familiarity with English poetry in their cultural upbringing demonstrated higher levels of schema activation and subsequently better reading comprehension. The study identified several challenges faced by undergraduate students in activating their schema for poetry in English. Limited exposure to and understanding of English poetry, as well as the lack of available resources and support, hindered students' ability to activate their schema effectively.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of schema activation in enhancing undergraduate students' reading comprehension of poetry in English in Myanmar universities. The results suggest the need for targeted instructional strategies, resources, and support to help students effectively activate their schema and improve their comprehension abilities.

Table 1

Student's Responses on the First Question of Background Knowledge

Sr No	Item 1	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
1	Do you have a problem comprehending the implications or associations evoked by the title of the poem in the English or American poem?	6.67%	73.33%	20.00%	2.13	0.50	Yes, sometimes

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

According to the questionnaire survey, item 1 showed that students sometimes have a problem comprehending the implications or associations evoked by the title of the English and American poem (Mean=2.13).

Table 2

Representation of the Students' Responses on the Second Question of Background Knowledge

Sr No	Item 2	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
2	Do images and illusions as they are constructed in the English, and American poem cause a problem with the comprehension of the poem?	13.33%	73.33%	13.33%	2.47	0.72	Yes, sometimes

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

According to item 2, students occasionally thought that images and illusions cause a problem in comprehending of a poem. (Mean=2.47).

Table 3

Students' Responses on the Third Question of Background Knowledge

Sr No	Item 3	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
3	Do you have a problem identifying with the author or persona, his life, his background?	6.67%	20.00%	73.33%	2.67	0.60	Yes, often

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

Item no.3 highlighted that the participants often have any problem identifying with the author or persona, his life and his background (Mean=2.67).

Table 4

Sample Response on the Third Open-ended Question of Background Knowledge

Sr No	Item 4	Responses			Part icip ants	Please share your own opinions and views to express any problems or weaknesses in your comprehension of English and American poems.
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often		
4	Does your teacher usually introduce some common knowledge about English and American conventions, customs, habits,	0.00%	26.67 %	73.33 %	1.	As undergraduate student in Myanmar University, I would like to express my opinions and views on the challenges I face in comprehending English and American poetry. I believe that understanding poetry

Table 4 (Continued)

Sr No	Item 4	Responses				Please share your own opinions and views to express any problems or weaknesses in your comprehension of English and American poems.
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Part icip ants	
	historical background, and so on aimed at improving and guiding the students' reading?					from these English-speaking countries poses several problems and weaknesses for us, primarily due to differences in habits, customs, conventions, culture, and historical background.
	Please share your own opinions and views to express any problems or weaknesses in your comprehension of English and American poems.					<p>2. One of the main challenges we encounter is the language barrier. English and American poetry often use complex vocabulary, metaphors, and cultural references that are unfamiliar to us. This lack of familiarity makes it difficult to fully grasp the meaning and depth of the poems, hindering our ability to appreciate the writer's intended message. Additionally, the unique structure and style of these poems can be confusing, as they often deviate from the traditional poetry forms prevalent in our own culture.</p> <p>3. In my opinions, cultural differences play a significant role in our struggle to comprehend English and American poetry. The themes and symbols employed in these poems are deeply rooted in the cultural and historical contexts of their respective countries. As students from Myanmar, we may not have the same historical knowledge or social context that would allow us to fully appreciate and understand the underlying themes and messages within these poems.</p>

Table 4 (Continued)

Sr No	Item 4	Responses				Please share your own opinions and views to express any problems or weaknesses in your comprehension of English and American poems.
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Part icip ants	
						4. Another aspect that contributes to our challenges is the difference in literary conventions and stylistic preferences. Our education system and literary traditions have primarily focused on local literature, which has its own set of conventions and styles. Therefore, when we encounter English and American poetry, we are not accustomed to the unique literary techniques and structures used, making it harder for us to engage with and analyse the poems effectively.
						5. "I feel that one of the biggest problems we face in understanding English and American poems is our limited exposure to different cultures and contexts."
						6. Sometimes, I find it difficult to grasp the deeper meanings in English and American poems due to differences in historical backgrounds and cultural references.
						7. One weakness I notice among many of us is the tendency to interpret English and American poems solely from our own cultural perspectives.
						8. Limited access to English resources and literature is a major hurdle for us in comprehending English and American poems effectively.

Table 4 (Continued)

Sr No	Item 4	Responses			Part icip ants	Please share your own opinions and views to express any problems or weaknesses in your comprehension of English and American poems.
		No, never	Yes, someti mes	Yes, often		
						9. I feel that our education system should include more diverse poetry from different cultures to expand our understanding and improve our comprehension of English and American poems.
						10. Sometimes, the use of metaphor and symbolism in English and American poetry can be challenging for us to decipher due to cultural differences.
						11. Our traditional language structures and poetic forms are quite different from those used in English and American poetry, making it difficult for us to fully grasp their essence.
						12. I believe that incorporating more interactive and immersive activities, such as poetry readings and discussions, can greatly enhance our understanding of English and American poems.
						13. There is a need for more comprehensive language classes that focus specifically on the comprehension and analysis of English and American poems
						14. Sometimes, the historical and cultural contexts of English and American poems are quite different from what we are used to, which can lead to misinterpretation or incomplete understanding.

Table 4 (Continued)

Sr No	Item 4	Responses				Part icip ants	Please share your own opinions and views to express any problems or weaknesses in your comprehension of English and American poems.
		No, never	Yes, someti mes	Yes, often			
					15.		We need more resources, such as annotated editions or translations, that help bridge the gap in cultural and historical knowledge necessary for understanding English and American poems.

According to item no.4, their teacher usually introduces common knowledge about English and American conventions, customs, habits, historical background to improve and guide their reading (Mean=26.67). Based on the observations and common challenges faced by non-native English speakers studying literature, Myanmar undergraduate students face difficulties in grasping language proficiency, language barrier, cultural differences, poetic devices, reading and analytical skills.

Table 5

Students' Responses of Language Differences Analysis

Sr No	Item 5	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
5	Do you find a problem with reading the English and American poem due to the different linguistic deviation and sentence structure?	0.00%	73.33%	26.67%	2.27	0.44	Yes, sometimes

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

According to item no.5, sometimes, students found problem due to different linguistic deviation and sentence structure (Mean=2.27).

Table 6

Language Differences Analysis in Terms of Differences in the Myanmar and English Rhetoric

Sr No	Item 6	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
6	Do you find a problem reading and understanding the English and American poem due to differences in the Myanmar and English rhetoric?	0.00%	20.00%	80.00%	2.80	0.40	Yes, often

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

Item no. 6 showed that differences in the Myanmar and English rhetoric formed a problem in reading English poetry (Mean=2.80).

Table 7

Language Differences Analysis in Terms of Linguistic Choices in the Poem

Sr No	Item 7	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
7	Do you find a problem comprehending the English and American poem due to linguistic choices in the poem?	0.00%	73.33%	26.67%	2.27	0.44	Yes, sometimes

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

Similarly, item no. 7 showed that linguistics choices in the poem made students find problem to comprehend the English and Myanmar poem due to reading poetry (Mean=2.27).

Table 8

Students' Responses on Their Openness to Schema Activation Strategies about the Title or Topic of the Poem

Sr No	Item 8	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
8	Would you want an elaborate discussion about the title or topic of the poem to build or guide your reading?	0.00%	13.33%	86.67%	2.87	0.34	Yes, often

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

Item no.8 showed that students want an elaborate discussion about the title or the topic to build or guide their reading.

Table 9

Students' Openness to Schema Activation Strategies about the Title or Topic of the Poem

Sr No	Item 9	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
9	Would you want to discuss and explore key words in the poem related to necessary background knowledge?	0.00%	26.67%	73.33%	2.73	0.44	Yes, often

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

This study aims to highlight the positive influence of schema activation on undergraduate students' reading comprehending poetry in English. Students sometimes have difficulty in comprehending English poetry without accessing schema activation. Students' willingness to discuss and explore key words in the poem can be seen in item no.9(Mean=2.73).

Table 10

Students' Openness to Schema Activation Strategies about Schema Activation Classes for the History Part in the Poetry Class

Sr No	Item 10	Responses			Calculation		Interpretation
		No, never	Yes, sometimes	Yes, often	Mean	SD	
10	Would you want schema activation classes for the history part in the poetry class to provide you with information which fills in your lack of social, cultural, and religious knowledge necessary for understanding the English poem being studied?	0.00%	33.33%	66.67%	2.67	0.47	Yes, often

NOTE:

1.00-1.66=No, never

1.67-2.33=Yes, sometimes

2.34-3.00=Yes, often

According to item no.10, students want schema activation classes for the history part in the poetry class to provide them with information which fills in their lack of social, cultural, and religious knowledge necessary for understanding the English poems. (Mean=2.67).

Conclusion

5.1. To examine the existing literature related to schema activation, reading comprehension, poetry instruction, and English language learning.

The present study was intended to identify the influence of schema activation on students' reading comprehending skills for poetry. The findings showed that students rely on schema activated by their teachers to overcome difficulties in reading poetry texts. Although their teacher guided them to access schema activation, they still had difficulties to comprehend even titles of poetry. This may be for the facts that students are not familiar with cultures and traditions of the writer and they had poor linguistic competence.

In the name of Instructional strategies for schema activation, the study highlighted the importance of employing effective instructional strategies to facilitate schema activation. Providing pre-reading activities such as brainstorming, group discussions, and visual aids proved to be effective in helping students activate their schema and enhance their comprehension of poetry in English. The very important idea was found that individual differences, such as language proficiency, prior knowledge, and motivation, influenced students' ability to activate their schema. Students with higher language proficiency and greater prior knowledge of English poetry demonstrated better schema activation and reading comprehension.

This exposure can be facilitated through incorporating more international poetry into our curriculum and providing access to a wider range of literature resources. Additionally, workshops and discussions focused on analysing and understanding these poems would greatly benefit us in enhancing our comprehension skills. Furthermore, it is important to foster a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and historical contexts from which these poems arise. Incorporating lessons on English and American history, as well as cultural studies, would help the students gain the necessary background knowledge to interpret the poems accurately. To bridge the gap in comprehension, we also encourage collaboration with English-speaking students or professors who can provide insights and explanations into the nuances of English and American poetry. Engaging in discussions and sharing different interpretations can help them develop a more informed understanding of the poems.

5.2 To explore the theoretical framework and theories that underpin the relationship between schema activation and reading comprehension in language learning contexts.

As this research delved into the pivotal role of schema activation in enhancing the reading comprehension of English poetry among undergraduate students in Myanmar universities. The findings of this study provided empirical evidence that strategically activating students' prior knowledge and cultural schema significantly improved their ability to understand and engage with poetic texts. The results underscore the importance of incorporating schema activation techniques into pedagogical approaches for teaching literature in English as a foreign language within the Myanmar context. As the students demonstrated heightened comprehension and increased engagement, educators should consider integrating these strategies into their instructional practices. This research contributes to the broader field of language education by highlighting the efficacy of tailored pedagogical methods that account for learners' cultural backgrounds and prior experiences. Ultimately, this study advocates for a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to teaching English poetry,

fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of both language and culture among undergraduate students in Myanmar universities.

Recommendations

The study identified several areas for future research. These include examining the long-term effects of schema activation on reading comprehension, investigating the effectiveness of different instructional strategies for schema activation, and exploring the impact of technology-mediated instruction on schema activation and reading comprehension. Ultimately, this study advocates for a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to teaching English poetry, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of both language and culture among undergraduate students in Myanmar universities.

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