Vocabulary Learning of Socially Relevant/Irrelevant Texts by English Students of Islamic Azad University

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Abstract
Learning English vocabulary has been considered somehow problematic at all levels. The present research endeavors to investigate the degrees of difficulty in the process of learning of new vocabulary in familiar and unfamiliar contexts for Iranian learners of English as a foreign language. In the first phase, 113 subjects were grouped into three English proficiency levels on the basis of their scores on the TEOFL Test; 40 at pre-intermediate, 38 at intermediate, and 35 at upper-intermediate group. Then they were given two texts to read; one about Halloween, relatively unfamiliar to Iranian students, and another text about Chaharshanbe Suri, a familiar issue for Iranian students. The subjects were to mark all unknown words and, if possible, guess the meanings of words. All successful guessing resulted from contextual clues were crossed out lest it should nullify the whole investigation. Statistical analysis of the participants' performance indicates the following: a) guessing new vocabulary in familiar and unfamiliar texts pose different levels of difficulty; unfamiliar texts being more difficult. b) This difficulty pattern is not affected by the proficiency level of the students.

Introduction

Aspects of Vocabulary

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure distinguished between form and substance (signifier and signified). The technical term 'sign', then, is defined as a mixture of a signifier and a signified. The sign, in fact, is the combination of a word and the concept it represents. There is nothing, of course, inherent in a word and the concept it stands for.

Vocabulary has various aspects learners need to master. Emphasizing on conceptual or denotative meaning is but one of them. General aspects of vocabulary may be classified as follow (Lotfipour-Saedi, 2008):

1. Denotative meaning (dictionary meaning);
2. Connotative meaning (socio-cultural and 'personal' association (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign;
3. Figurative meaning (words used in some way other than the usual meaning to suggest a picture in the mind);

4. Stylistic meaning (refers to the situation and the addressee to whom someone is talking/writing);
5. Affective meaning (reflects the writer/speaker's feeling and beliefs);
6. Inter-textual meaning (a word from other text to convey local meaning);
7. Contrastive meaning (position and relationship a word has with other words in the semantic field).

Words asFormally Encoded Elements or as Utterances

Perspectives on language in general and vocabulary in particular can be very different indeed. A word can be seen as a combination of letters or sounds, a constituent of a sentence, or an isolated unit of meaning like a dictionary entry. Conceptual meaning encoded in the word itself is what this perspective adheres to. On the other hand, a word can be seen, not as isolated linguistic item to be internalized but, as an indexical item in its actual use in context to be interpreted. The former assumes that the content of the language subject to be taught should be a direct projection of linguistic description, whereas the latter takes a pragmatic view emphasizing on the use of language in context (Widdowson 2003). The former employs various linguistic or cognitive strategies to internalize conceptual meaning of words, namely mnemonic techniques, semantic mapping, natural chain, or grouping strategies. The latter uses interactive and interpretative strategies to reconstruct the original intended meanings in context.

> Communication, then, is a matter of mutual accommodation of type and token as appropriate to purpose. Our concepts of meaning provide us with bearings on what words mean in context and context in turn provides us with evidence for extending our conceptual representation of those meanings.
> (Widdowson, 1990:101)

This research takes the latter point of view and tries to evaluate the pedagogic relevance of vocabulary learning in context for Iranian ELT students empirically.

The Role of Words in Communication

There are occasions in which words alone are enough to communicate meanings successfully. As Widdowson (1990) points out, a surgeon addresses words such as 'Scalpel!", 'Swab!', Clamp!' etc. to his assistants in the operating theatre to communicate to them effectively. Here there is no sign of grammar: no interrogative forms, model verbs, question tags, no sentence at all. Just words. The context of shared knowledge, here, makes it possible to use minimal cues. Conceptual meaning, in fact, is sufficient for its indexical purpose. But very

often, we need grammar to mediate between words and context. In the following example contextual features are not sufficient to allow the words to achieve the intended meanings.

hunter lion kill. (we are unable to assign the participant role of 'patient' or 'agent')

Widdowson et al. argues, in these occasions, grammar is used as a resource for adaptation of lexis. Grammar, in other words, is a device for indicating the most common and recurrent aspects of meaning which it would be tedious and inefficient to incorporate into separate lexical items.

To explain the complexity of communication and to show the difference between conceptual meaning and indexical purposes, elsewhere Widdowson (1996) points out that what language means is not the same as what people mean by the language they use, how they actualize its meaning potential as a communicative resource. The following may illustrate the point:

The parson may object to it.

As a sentence, this poses no problem for understanding. But as an utterance, it is quite incomprehensible. This means that for different contexts, we will have different interpretations. We may interpret this expression either as a warning, a reason for a decision taken, or as an objection to a particular course of action according to the context in which it has been expressed. Meaning is not encoded in the language itself alone but is achieved as it is used in context.

In the search for an answer to our question then, the mechanism of discourse interpretation in general and word comprehending, learning, and using in particular, the steps that applied linguistics has taken hitherto seem to be obliging.

Review of Literature

How We Make Sense of Discourse

1. Discourse Coherence

Discourse coherence refers to interpretation of a text so that it makes sense. To demonstrate this, Widdowson (1975) provides the following example:

    A1: That's the telephone.
    B: I'm in the bath.
    A2: OK.

Seen as a response to A1's statement, B is irrelevant. But A relates B's expression to that of his. He considers his own expression –That's the telephone- not as a statement but as a

request to get the phone, and interprets B"s response not again as a statement but an indirect refusal to his request and shows his acceptance of B"s refusal with his next expression, OK.

Edmonson (1981) claims that it is difficult to create non-coherent texts from random sentences because some sort of context can generally be created, which give coherence to any set of sentences. He challenges van Dijks' (1977) assertion that the following two sentences are incoherent:

> We will have guests for lunch.
> Calderon was a great writer.

Edmonson et al. argues that the following context can lend coherence to these two sentences:
> Did you know Calderon died exactly one hundred years ago?
> Good heavens! I'd forgotten. The occasion shall not pass unnoticed.
> We will have guests for lunch. Calderon was a great Spanish writer. I shall invite Professor Wilson and Senor Castellano right away ….
> (Edmonson 1981:13)

Nunan (1993), however, believes that establishing coherence is a matter of listeners/readers using their linguistic knowledge to relate the discourse world to people, objects, events, and states of affairs beyond the text itself.

2. Speech Acts

Language philosophers introduced the concept of 'speech act' for a successful performance of which certain socio-cultural conditions should be met. (Austin 1962; Searle 1969 & 1975) These socio-cultural conditions are called felicity conditions. First a conventional procedure must exist for doing whatever is to be done, and that procedure must specify who must say and do what and in what conditions. Second, all participants must correctly carry out this procedure and carry it through to completion. Finally, the necessary feelings, ideas, and intentions must be present in all parties. There are three types of act in general, to perform (Widdowson, 2007); propositional reference-what is referred to, illocutionary force-what is done when something is said, and perlocutionary effect-the effect that illocutionary act has on the second-person receiver. The following example may clarify the issue:

> She gave the flowers to him.

Propositional reference: Who gave the flowers?
> Which flowers you are talking about?
> To whom?

Illocutionary force: What is meant by this utterance? Is it an advice, a warning, or contempt? Perlocutionary effect: What is the effect on the second-person? Is he embarrassed, frightened, or happy?

Broadly speaking, texts of different kinds have been described to carry out two main functions, representative vs. expressive (Buhler 1934), referential vs. emotive (Jacobson 1960), ideational vs. interpersonal (Halliday 1970), descriptive vs. social (Lyons 1977), transactional vs. interactions (Brown & Yule 1983), and conceptual vs. interactive (Widdowson 1984).

3. Frame Theory

Frame theory suggests that our past experiences help us construct sets of stereotypical situations or 'frames' in memory to make sense of new experiences. For instance, our former experience of 'going to a restaurant' provides us with a frame that allows us to predict what is likely to occur when we next go to a restaurant. It should be mentioned that our expectations are not always fulfilled, and, when this occurs, we have to modify our pre-existing frames to accommodate the new experiences.

One of the major problems this theory has refers to the lack of explanation of why one frame might be selected rather than another.

4. Schema Theory

Bartlett (1932) coined the term 'schema' in his classic study of how human memory works. Our knowledge, in this theory, is organized into interrelated patterns out of our previous experiences to enable us to predict about future experiences. Accepting that interpretation of discourse is a process of using both linguistic and content knowledge, these schemata or 'mental film scripts' are extremely important.

Widdowson (1978) suggests that meanings are not merely achieved from what is said or written. Readers and listeners use their previous linguistic and content knowledge to reconstruct the original meanings of the creator of the discourse.

Later on Widdowson (1983) provided a new interpretation of schema theory from the viewpoint of discourse comprehension. Making sense of a given discourse, he argues, has two dimensions, systemic (linguistic knowledge) dimension and schematic dimension. He argued that to understand a given piece of discourse necessitates matching up our schematic knowledge with that of the writer or speaker. In fact when we read or listen, we must interpret what is said or written. Cicourel (1973) showed that we use procedures of interpretations to supply meanings that are not in the discourse itself. In fact the reader or

listener has to keep a track of various things and events that are referred to within the discourse through making use of the various cohesive devices.

Background knowledge at functional level, too, might help us interpret discourse. The focus here is not on what is said or written. It is on what is achieved through language. Widdowsom (1983) provided piece of interaction to demonstrate this aspect of interpretation.

A: I have two tickets to the theatre tonight. (Function: indirect invitation)

B: My examination is tomorrow.(Function: polite refusal)

A: Pity. (Function: acceptance of refusal)

How We Process Discourse

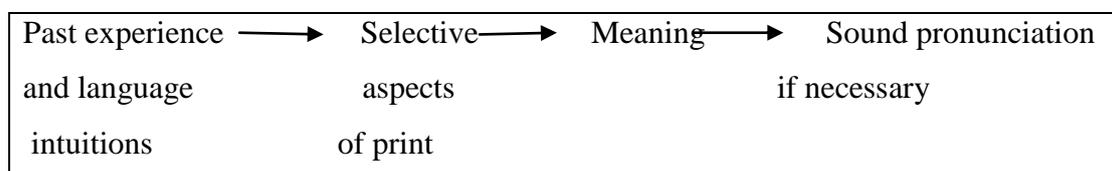   1. **Bottom-Up and Top-Down processing Models**

In the bottom-up model, the assumption is that by decoding the smallest meaningful units of language, the whole text will be understandable. In the case of reading for example, the reader first identifies each letter in a text then blends them together to make words. Words are chained together to form sentences, sentences are linked together into paragraphs; and paragraphs are tied together to form complete texts. Comprehension is thus the final step of decoding larger units of language.

Evidence against the bottom-up model has come from various investigations such as errors made when reading a text aloud, human memory, impossibility of decoding letters in a serial manner, and questionability of the implicit assumption that the reader possesses an oral vocabulary that is extensive enough to allow decoding to proceed.

Evidence from sources such as reading miscues have led to an alternative language processing known as top-down approach. In this model, readers/listeners move from the highest units towards the smallest ones to make sense of discourse.

Cambourne (1979) suggested the following diagrammatic representation in relation to reading.

Top-down Processing Model

Past experience →	Selective →	Meaning →	Sound pronunciation
and language	aspects		if necessary
intuitions	of print		

In this theory, background knowledge of the subject, knowledge of the overall structure of the text, knowledge and expectations of how language works, and motivations, interests and attitudes towards the text and the context it contains is used to make sense of a text. In this model, the language user forms hypotheses about what might follow in the text and then reviews them to see if they are correct.

The strategies this model employs are as follow:

1. Using background knowledge to assist in comprehension a particular text;
2. Scanning;
3. Skimming;
4. Identifying the genre of the text;
5. Discriminating between more and less important information.

This model is very similar to that of pragmatic expectancy grammar developed by Oller (1979). They both emphasize on background knowledge and language at the same time in understanding discourse. The more predictable the sequences of language and the content, the more readily the text will be understood.

However, as Smith (1978) argues, this model fails to distinguish adequately between fluent readers and beginners. Here 'interactive compensatory model comes to the scene.

2. Interactive Compensatory Model

Stanovich (1980) rejected the idea that processing precedes making hypotheses and predictions about what might follow in the text and about the content. In comprehending discourse, he argues, we use information from more than one level simultaneously. No need to wait for the completion of decoding to make inferences, for instance, as bottom-up approach supposes. Or it is not a bad idea, as top-down approach supposes, to allow lower-level processing to direct higher-level ones. In fact in this model, deficiencies at one level can be compensated for by any other level.

3. Negotiating Meaning

The process of communication involves the engagement of two types of knowledge (Widdowson 2007). People make sense of text by relating it to their schematic knowledge, assumptions about how reality is ordered, and to how communication is managed. But people need to know the knowledge of language itself in order to realize, pragmatically, a discourse function. So it is that what the first-person party intends to mean, and what the second-person party interprets the first-person party as meaning come into correspondence. This

correspondence sometimes is not easy to tell. The two parties may be at cross-purposes. The second-person party may not know what the first-person party is talking about or what illocutionary meaning s/he wants to perform, and what effect is intended. In these occasions, people negotiate meaning. It has been argued that the second language acquisition process is enhanced by classroom tasks in which the learners are required to negotiate meaning (Swain 1985). Various researches indicate that problem-solving and information-gap tasks seem to stimulate the maximum amount of negotiation.

4. Intercultural Communication

The performance of speech act and dynamics of communication differ from language to language and culture to culture. So learning a foreign language involves more than learning pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (Nunan, 1993). Apart from functionality differences, learners from different cultures have very different types of background knowledge. Steffensen (1981) showed that texts describing aspects of unknown culture to foreign readers will be very difficult to understand. Unfamiliar schematic knowledge will result in communication breakdown.

The Study

The starting-point of this project was the realization that many ELT students in universities either have difficulties in learning new vocabulary or do not achieve their full potentials. Students' poor vocabulary learning rates are alarming for both students and teachers. Apart from those students who have difficulties with new words, lack of achievement is evidenced by those who cannot communicate effectively and fluently. There could be many reasons for these phenomena, but it occurred to us that two questions were particularly relevant. a) Is there any significant relationship between students' social background knowledge and the process of learning new words? b) Does the proficiency level of the learner transform the above-mentioned process?

The Hypotheses

Early research in the area indicated that in general those students who learn new words from the context through synonyms, antonyms, common sense, affixes, derivatives, Latin roots or Greek word elements seem to make the most successful students. But we think that this general picture needs to be modified and expanded in accordance to recent researches. These techniques are consistently related to good degree results, but the effect of social background knowledge is far from being clear. We, therefore, formulated two main null hypotheses as follow:

1-Social background knowledge plays no role for ELT students in the process of vocabulary learning. ($p \le 0.05$)

2- ELT students' proficiency level (pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate) has no effect on the learning process of new words as far as social background knowledge is concerned. (p ≤ 0.05)

The sample

Participants included 40 pre-intermediate, 38 intermediate, and 35 upper-intermediate students of Islamic Azad University of Tabriz and Teacher Education University of Azarbayjan majoring in ELT and English Language Literature. The proficiency level of the students was measured by the TEOFL Test.

The Instrument

Two non-simplified authentic discourses of expository genre about Chaharshanbe Suri and Halloween were taken from Wikipedia with some modification; the language of the texts, which the participants were fully familiar with, being formal written one. The topics belonged to the same socio-cultural field and genre.

Obtaining the data

The students were given the texts to read; one about Halloween (relatively unfamiliar issue for Iranian ELT students) and the other about Chaharshanbe Suri (a familiar issue for Iranian ELT students). The task the students were to perform was a common one in academic discourse. They were to underline all unknown words and, if possible, guess their meanings. We deliberately asked the students themselves to mark unknown words rather than giving them a vocabulary test because their previous linguistic knowledge could affect the inquiry, and we couldn't say if their successful guessing was due to their previous knowledge or because of their familiarity of the issue. And since their incapacity to write in English could affect the result, we allowed them to give the meanings in Farsi.

In order to control the extraneous factors, we crossed out all their successful guessing if we thought it might have resulted from textual clues such as synonyms, antonyms, affixes etc.

Data Analysis

Table1 below shows the results of three pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate students' performances on Text1 (Chaharshanbe Suri, Appendix1) and Text 2 (Halloween, Appendix2). As it is clear, all proficiency groups have done better in Text1. Considering the level of language difficulty, length, genre, and the authenticity of the texts, we come to this conclusion that the only difference to justify the difference is the familiarity of Text1 to all students in three proficiency groups. The familiarity of Text1 has helped them guess successfully more words in comparison to Text2.

Table 1: Descriptive data for paired samples statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	preText1	.058155	40	.0409539	.0064754
	preText2	.007734	40	.0159118	.0025159
Pair 2	InterText1	.216702	38	.0730305	.0118471
	InterText2	.014216	38	.0206208	.0033451
Pair 3	UpperText 1	.429365	35	.1425417	.0240939
	UpperText 2	.066492	35	.0592136	.0100089

Text 1 = Chaharshanbe Suri
Text 2 = Halloween
Pre = Pre-intermediate
Inter = Intermediate
Upper = Upper-intermediate

This fact can be better shown in Table2 where the means of each proficiency group is compared on the basis of their performances on Text1 and Text2 with significance level of more than 99 percent. This, therefore, rejects our first null hypothesis that familiarity of a text has no effect on successful guessing of new words in context.

Table 2: Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				Sig. (2-tailed)
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	
		Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	preTest1 - preText2	.0367938	.0640485	7.484	39	.000
Pair 2	InterTest1 - InterText2	.1781418	.2268296	16.853	37	.000
Pair 3	UpperTest1 - UpperText2	.3148793	.4108665	15.366	34	.000

In order to examine and compare differences among three proficiency groups, one way analysis of variance (One Way ANOVA) was conducted. The analysis shows, with more that 99 percent significance, that the difference between pre-intermediate and intermediate students is meaningful, as far as the level of difficulty(not the difficulty pattern) is considered, whereas no significant difference is there between intermediate and upper-intermediate students. This may be justified by the fact that the ratio of difference between pre-intermediate and intermediate students is not identical with the difference between intermediate and upper-intermediate students. But in any case, familiar texts are easier in comparison to unfamiliar ones to all proficiency groups (See Table3 below). Therefore, our second null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 3: One Way ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Text1	Between Groups	2.578	2	1.289	148.674	.000
	Within Groups	.954	110	.009		
	Total	3.531	112			
Text2	Between Groups	.076	2	.038	28.675	.000
	Within Groups	.145	110	.001		

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Text2	Between Groups	.076	2	.038	28.675	.000
	Within Groups	.145	110	.001		
	Total	.220	112			

Means Plots
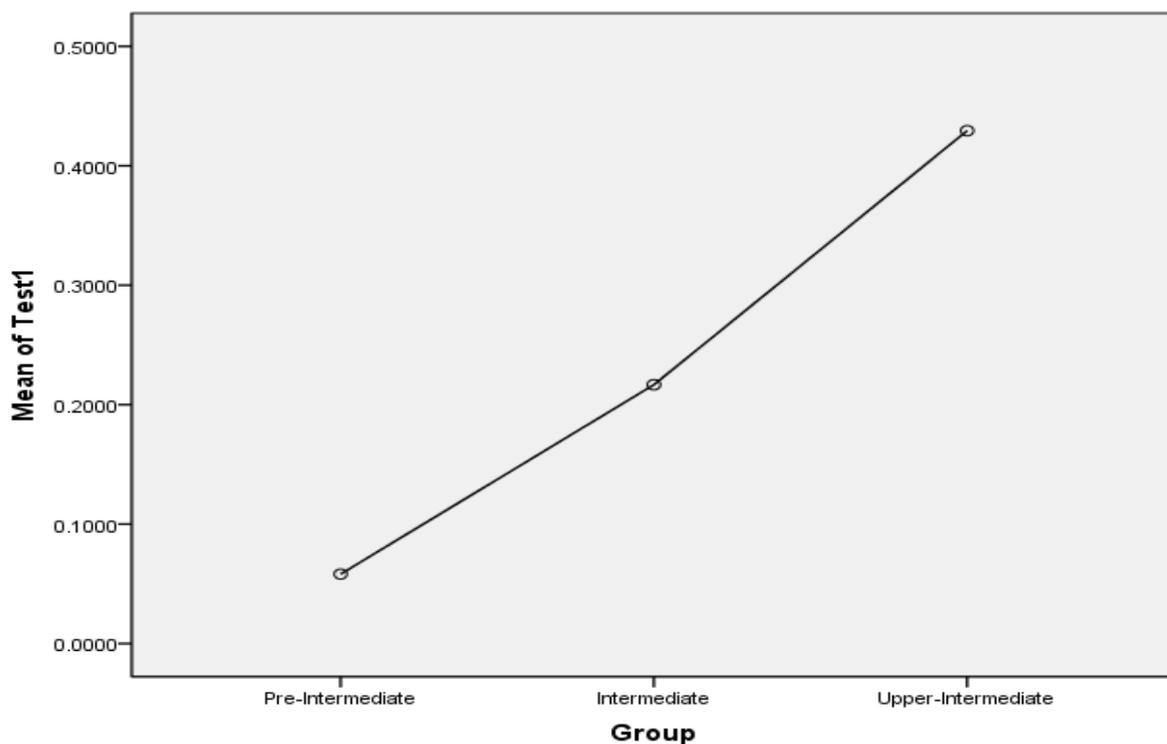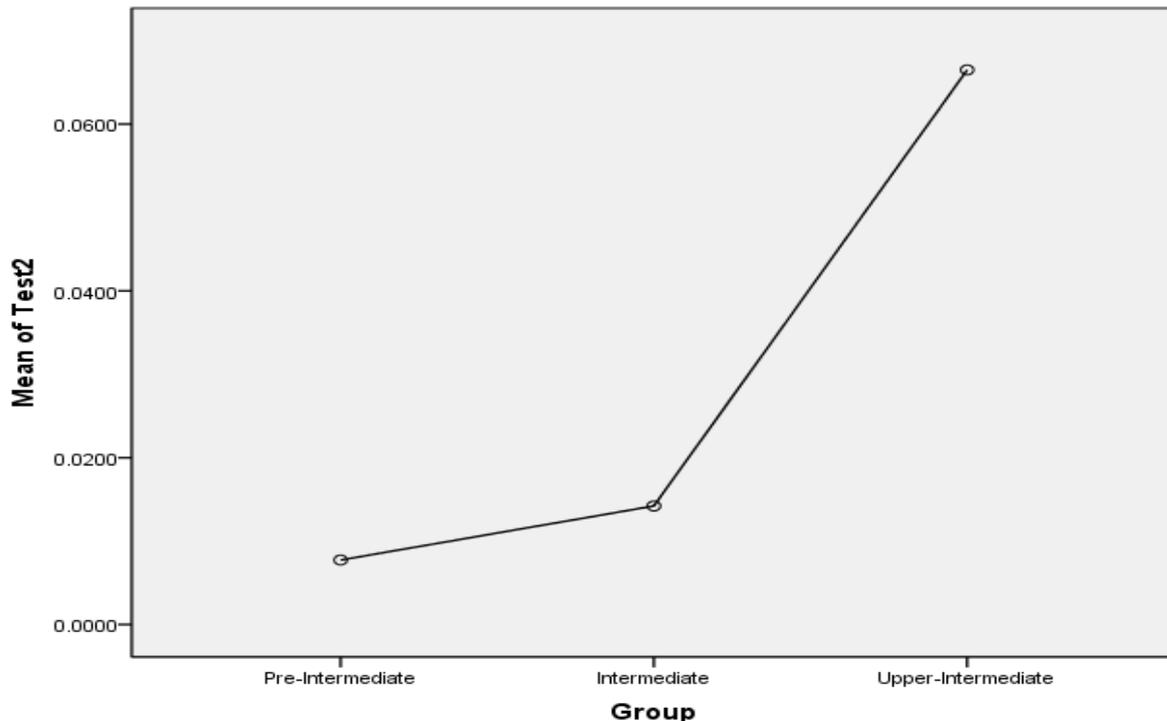
Preliminary Results

The study suggests two important findings:

1. Guessing new vocabulary in familiar and unfamiliar texts pose different levels of difficulty; unfamiliar texts being more difficult.
2. This difficulty pattern is not affected by the proficiency level.

Conclusion

Pedagogy will be effectiveonly if it takes into account the attitudes, interests, predispositions, and background knowledge of the learners. Learners should have a say, directly and indirectly, both in the content of curriculum (what is taught) and the learning process (how it is taught). This autonomy, of course, is to be negotiated and will be determined in reference to particular teaching/learning situations, which in some cases may be beyond the learners' control. But learners should always have some set of bearings to enable them to find their way. This seems to be done trough better understanding of the learners' characteristics and socioeconomic circumstances. We hope that our results, if confirmed by further research, could be taken into consideration in designing textbooks more appropriate to learners' socio-cultural background and in engaging them in the process of purposeful meaning negotiation

with the text through interpretative and interpersonal strategies. Next researches can focus on the effect of social background knowledge on writing, reading, listening/speaking or on advanced English proficiency level.

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Appendix A

Instruction: First read the following passage carefully circling all unknown words. Reread the passage for the second time trying to guess the meanings of the unknown words. Give Farsi/English equivalences of the unknown words in the answer sheet, if possible.

Chaharshanbe Suri

The last Wednesday of the Iranian year known as Chahar Shanbeh Suri, the eve of which is marked by special customs and rituals, most notably jumping over fire. On the eve of last Wednesday of the year (Tuesday night, Wednesday morning), literally the eve of 'Red Wednesday' or the eve of celebration, bonfires are lit in public places with the help of fire and light, it is hoped for enlightenment and happiness throughout the coming year. People leap over the flames, shouting: Sorkhi-ye to az man; Zardi-ye man az to (Give me your beautiful red colour; And take back my sickly pallor)

Chahārshanbe-Sūri meaning **Wednesday Feast**, from the word sour which means feast in Persian is an ancient Iranian festival dating back to at least 1700 BCE of the early Zoroastrian era. Also called the **Festival of Fire**, it is a prelude to Nowruz, which marks the arrival of spring. The words Chahar Shanbeh mean Wednesday and Suri means red. Bonfires are lit to "keep the sun alive" until early morning. The celebration usually starts in the evening, with people making bonfires in the streets and jumping over them singing zardi-ye man az to, sorkhi-ye to az man. The literal translation is, my sickly yellow paleness is yours, your fiery red color is mine. This is a purification rite. Loosely translated, this means you want the fire to take your paleness, sickness, and problems and in turn give you redness, warmth, and energy. There is no religious significance attached to Chaharshanbeh Soori and it serves as a cultural festival for Persian people: Persian Jews, Muslims, Persian Armenians, Kurds, and Zoroastrians, as well as for Azeri peoples. Indeed this celebration, in particular the significant role of fire, is likely to hail from Zoroastrianism.

Another tradition of this day is to make special ajeel, or mixed nuts and berries. People wear disguises and go door to door knocking on doors as similar to Trick-or-treating. Receiving of the Ajeel is customary, as is receiving of a bucket of water.

Ancient Iranians celebrated the last 5 days of the year in their annual obligation feast of all souls, Hamaspathmaedaya (Farvardigan or popularly Forodigan). They believed Faravahar, the guardian angels for humans and also the spirits of dead would come back for reunion. There are the seven Amesha Spenta, that are represented as Haftseen or literally the seven S. These spirits were entertained as honored guests in their old homes, and were bidden a formal ritual farewell at the dawn of the New Year. The festival also coincided with festivals celebrating the creation of fire and humans. In Sassanid period the festival was divided into two distinct pentads, known as the lesser and the greater Pentad, or Panji as it is called today. Gradually the belief developed that the 'Lesser Panji' belonged to the souls of children and those who died without sin, whereas 'Greater Panji' was truly for all souls.

Appendix B

Instruction: First read the following passage carefully circling all unknown words. Reread the passage for the second time trying to guess the meanings of the unknown words. Give Farsi/English equivalences of the unknown words in the answer sheet, if possible.

Halloween

Halloween also known as **Hallowe'en** or **All Hallows' Eve**, is a yearly holidayobserved around the world on October 31, the night before All Saints' Day. Much like Day of the Dead celebrations, the Christianfeast of All Hallows' Eve, according to some scholars, incorporates traditions from paganharvest festivals and festivals honouring the dead, particularly the CelticSamhain; other scholars maintain that the feast originated entirely independently of Samhain. Typical festive Halloween activities include trick-or-treating (also known as "guising"), attending costumeparties, carving jack-o'-lanterns, lighting bonfires, apple bobbing, visiting haunted attractions, playing pranks, telling scary stories, watching horror films, as well as the religious observances of praying, fasting and attending vigils or church services.

Halloween is also thought to have been heavily influenced by the Christian holy days of All Saints' Day (also known as **Hallowmas**, **All Hallows**, and **Hallowtide**) and All Souls' Day. Falling on November 1 and 2 respectively, collectively they were a time for honoring the saints and praying for the recently departed who had yet to reach heaven. By the end of the 12th century they had become days of holy obligation across Europe and involved such traditions as ringing bells for the souls in purgatory and "souling", the custom of baking bread or soul cakes for "all crysten [christened] souls". It was traditionally believed that the souls of the departed wandered the earth until All Saints' Day, and All Hallows' Eve provided one last chance for the dead to gain vengeance on their enemies before moving onto the next world. To avoid being recognised by a soul, Christians would wear masks and costumes to disguise themselves, following the lighted candles set by others to guide their travel for worship the next day. Today, this practice has been perpetuated through children guising (trick or treating).

In Britain the rituals of Hallowtide and Halloween came under attack during the Reformation as Protestants denounced purgatory as a "popish" doctrine incompatible with the notion of predestination. In addition the increasing popularity of Guy Fawkes Night (5th November) from 1605 on saw Halloween become eclipsed in Britain with the notable exception of Scotland. There and in Ireland, they had been celebrating Samhain and Halloween since the early Middle Ages, and the kirk took a more pragmatic approach towards Halloween, viewing it as important to the life cycle and rites of passage of local communities and thus ensuring its survival in the country. North American almanacs of the late 18th and early 19th

century give no indication that Halloween was recognized as a holiday. The Puritans of New England, for example, maintained strong opposition to the holiday and it was not until the mass Irish and Scottish immigration during the 19th century that the holiday was introduced to the continent in earnest. Initially confined to the immigrant communities during the mid-19th century, it was gradually assimilated into mainstream society and by the first decade of the 20th century it was being celebrated coast to coast by people of all social, racial and religious backgrounds.