

## **Foreign Language, Local Culture: How Familiar Contexts Impact Learning and Engagement**

**Robert Sheridan**

Kindai University, Nara, Japan

<Robert@nara.kindai.ac.jp>

**Kathryn M. Tanaka**

Otemae University, Nishinomiya, Japan

<k.tanaka@otemae.ac.jp>

**Nicholas Hogg**

Osaka Yuhigaoka Gakuen High School, Osaka, Japan

<nicholashogg@hotmail.com>

### **Abstract**

Analysis of the different methods of teaching English has become increasingly important as the subject of global Englishes receives greater attention. In Asia, more educators have been using textbooks that are culturally specific in their design; however, a limited number of studies have been conducted that demonstrate their practical efficacy. Building on a preliminary study into the effectiveness of culturally familiar materials in EFL education in Japan, a crossover study using both quantitative and qualitative methods was conducted to examine the influence of cultural familiarity on university students' reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, and interest in the texts. Seventy-eight lower-intermediate level EFL students from four intact classes were divided into two groups with equivalent vocabulary proficiency. Participants read four simplified newspaper articles that contained culturally familiar or unfamiliar proper nouns allocated using a crossover design. Pre- and post-lesson tests were used to gauge the effectiveness of culturally familiar proper nouns on reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, and interest of each article. The results revealed that students who read the culturally familiar version of the articles scored higher in reading comprehension and vocabulary retention, and generally reported greater interest and engagement. These findings provide important insights to EFL educators, learners and material designers.

*Keywords:* cultural familiarity, reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, student interest

## Introduction

In recent years, the approaches to teaching and learning the English language in Asia have displayed a shift from western-oriented English as a second language (ESL) to English as a foreign (EFL) or global language (Leung & Dewey, 2010). Researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of background knowledge and the use of culturally familiar texts in the second/foreign language (L2) classroom to improve learning (Anderson, 2004; Brown & Lee, 2015; Grabe, 2004, 2009; Rumelhart, 1984). There has been a growing interest in culturally specific material design; however, few studies have investigated the practical effectiveness of such materials in Asian contexts (Alptekin, 2006; Chihara, Sakurai, & Oller, 1989; Demir, 2012; Sasaki, 2000; Weng, 2012; Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2016). This work builds on a preliminary study into the effectiveness of culturally familiar materials in English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan (Sheridan et al., 2016). The present study was designed to overcome the limitations of the previous research in order to examine the influence of culturally familiar proper nouns on reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, and interest of Japanese university EFL students.

## Literature Review

Researchers have long recognized the critical role played by background knowledge in reading comprehension (Bensoussan, 1998; Chan, 2003; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Nelson, 1987; Pritchard, 1990; Rumelhart, 1984; Weng, 2012) with much of this research centered on schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Carrell, 1984). Simply stated, schema theory posits that all prior knowledge is organized into schemata or units of knowledge about concepts such as objects, situations, events, sequences and actions (Rumelhart, 1984). Readers bring these concepts to the printed material in order to make sense of its meaning, as meaning is not found in the text itself (Anderson, 2003, 2004; Brown & Lee, 2015; Grabe, 2004, 2009).

Problems with comprehension in the L2 classroom occur when learners are given materials in which they lack the background knowledge or expertise to understand (Anderson, 2004; Grabe, 2004). Despite their widespread use in textbooks and EFL materials, proper nouns such as Western names and places are often problematic for students (Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Ketchum, 2006). Brown and Lee (2015) argue that when L2 learners are given a task within a context that is familiar to them, they are more likely to acquire new grammatical, lexical, and discourse forms.

Over the last two decades, there has been a shift towards retaining culturally familiar contexts in language education (Mizumura, 2015; Pennycook, 1994, 2001; Tanaka, 2015). While a number of scholars have asserted the benefits of utilizing L1 in the L2 classroom (Cook, 2001; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Nation, 1997; Timor, 2012), further studies focusing on cultural schema theory claim that cultural adaptation in EFL courses can be very effective, particularly in Middle Eastern contexts (Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Keshavarz, Atai, & Ahmadi, 2007; Tavakoli, Shirinbakhsh, & Rezazdeh, 2013). As English continues to become a common global language, it is increasingly important to assess the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching EFL.

Following the seminal research of Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979), utilizing L1 cultural contexts as a scaffolding strategy in L2 education has been advocated by a number of educators and researchers. Alpetkin's (2006) concept of nativization defines this pedagogical

tactic as the “sociological, semantic and pragmatic adaptation of the textual and contextual cues of the original story into the learner’s own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact” (p. 497).

Studies from the Middle East, Turkey, and Spain suggest the use of culturally familiar contexts effectively engages learners (Demir, 2012; Erten & Razi, 2009; Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Kuhl, Asl, & Yavari, 2013; Pulido, 2004). Demir’s study (2012) gave seventh-grade students either nativized or what he called “denativized” or “authentic” texts, with the “name of the cities, countries, events, and dates” featuring culturally familiar or foreign elements. Both Demir’s study and a number of others have shown cultural familiarity can increase comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Erten & Razi, 2009; Tavakoli et al., 2013) and vocabulary retention (Pulido, 2004).

While several studies have been carried out on the effectiveness of culturally familiar materials to increase language learning in the Middle East, little research has been conducted in Japan. (Chihara et al., 1989) first demonstrated that students’ cloze scores improve when English names of people and places are changed to Japanese (for example, Joe was changed to Hiroshi, and Bellevue was replaced with Kyoto). Sasaki (2000) replicated their results while also showing improved verbal recall of vocabulary and content by students who read culturally familiar texts. In spite of the limitations in our initial pilot study (Sheridan et al., 2016) (as discussed in the methodology section of this paper), the homework and class discussions showed that Japanese students were more engaged with articles that took place in their home country. The findings from these three studies echo the results of those from the Middle East, indicating that minor changes to meet readers’ cultural expectations yield clear positive benefits to language learners.

Building on the aforementioned research in the Middle East and Japan, this study was conducted to more deeply gauge the effectiveness of culturally familiar material in EFL education in Japan. We also aimed to fill several gaps in the previous research, which did not consider qualitative results or student interest. Thus, while building on extant scholarship, our work also extends prior studies in significant ways. Akin to the majority of the aforementioned studies (Chihara et al., 1989; Demir, 2012; Erten & Razi, 2009; Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Sasaki, 2000), this study also uses parallel reading texts where proper nouns and other indicators of context such as monetary denominations or units of measurement were changed to reflect culturally familiar or unfamiliar contexts. While previous studies in Japan (Chihara et al., 1989; Sasaki, 2000) are limited to completing cloze tests, this study differs from their work in that it partially replicates the work by Demir (2012), as it separately investigates the effect of cultural familiarity on both comprehension and vocabulary recall. Unlike Demir’s study, however, the tests themselves were also in English and not in the learners’ L1. Finally, this study adds a significant new line of research inquiry which has not been investigated in any of these other studies through its qualitative analysis as well as its comparison of student interest in the culturally familiar or unfamiliar texts. Therefore, this study is unique in that, to the authors’ knowledge, no single crossover study has examined the effect of cultural familiarity on comprehension and vocabulary retention, while also adding a qualitative element and gauging student interest in the materials. Specifically, this study set out to answer these research questions:

1. Do culturally familiar proper nouns improve L2 reading comprehension and vocabulary retention?

2. Do L2 learners express greater interest and engagement in culturally familiar contexts?

## Methodology

### Participants

Seventy-eight students (37 female, 41 male) at two private universities in western Japan participated in this study. The students belonged to four intact lower-intermediate level English classes and ranged in age from 19 to 21. The four classes were taught by two of the researchers.

At the onset of this study, the participants who were present ( $n = 72$ ) took the New General Service List Test (NGSLT; Stoeckel & Bennett, 2015) to determine their approximate English vocabulary sizes and to assign the classes to two groups. The NGSLT was used because it effectively covers ninety percent of the core English language used in reading, listening, and speaking (Browne, Culligan, & Phillips, 2013). The mean NGSLT scores of the four classes were 80.65 ( $n = 17$ ), 71.14 ( $n = 21$ ), 70.95 ( $n = 20$ ), and 69.00 ( $n = 14$ ) respectively. To balance out preexisting vocabulary knowledge, two groups were formed by combining the classes with the highest and lowest NGSLT scores, and the two remaining classes. This resulted in two groups with mean NGSLT scores of 75.39 ( $n = 31$ ), and 71.05 ( $n = 41$ ). A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to determine the relationship between the NGSLT scores of the two groups. The ANOVA was non-significant,  $F(1, 70) = 3.27, p = .08$ . Thus, the groups were considered equivalent in terms of their initial vocabulary knowledge. The NGSLT results and demographic details of the two groups are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Group Data**

Group 1	Group 2
34 participants (23 female, 11 male)	44 participants (14 female, 30 male)
2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students	2 <sup>nd</sup> year students
Mean NGSLT score: 75.39 ( $n = 31$ )	Mean NGSLT score: 71.05 ( $n = 41$ )

### Research Design

The design of the study was comparative between two groups, each of which was comprised of two intact classes. Concerns regarding using intact classes and non-random assignment were mitigated by the use of a crossover research design, where the two groups alternated roles of reading simplified newspaper articles that contained either culturally familiar or unfamiliar proper nouns. After the classes were assigned to one of two groups according to their NGSLT results, the instructors gave them four sets of paired reading assignments, with students completing one of the assignments per month.

The assignments were modified newspaper articles. Instructors chose two articles set in a Japanese cultural context, and two set outside of Japan. For each of the four articles, an alternate version was created where proper nouns were changed to those that would reflect culturally

familiar or unfamiliar contexts. Of the four articles, two were from American newspapers: “Dogfights in Japan are a Family Outing” (Wofford, 2016) and “Japan UFO Video Mysteriously Deleted From YouTube” (Speigel, 2013); and two from British newspapers: “Great Barrier Reef: Bleaching ‘kills 35% of area’s coral” (BBC News Staff Reporter, 2016) and “Wife trashed house, bound herself in duct tape and faked violent burglary as she was too scared to tell her husband the truth” (Campbell, 2016). The lessons were based on newspaper articles as they are a source of authentic language usage (Demir, 2012; Tanaka, 2015). A paragraph was added to each of the articles to promote classroom discussion by introducing moral ambiguity and to slightly increase the length of the articles.

For each of the four assignments, one group received the original article while the other group received a version that was identical apart from altered proper nouns and other indicators of context such as monetary denominations or units of measurement. As shown in Table 2, the context read by each group was alternated for each subsequent assignment.

**Table 2. The Cultural Setting of Groups’ Reading Assignments**

Article	Group 1	Group 2
1. Dog Fights	Familiar	Foreign
2. Global Warming	Foreign	Familiar
3. Fake Robbery	Familiar	Foreign
4. UFOs	Foreign	Familiar

The articles were assigned as homework readings. Prior to reading each article, students took a vocabulary pre-test during class. The pre-tests were the same for both groups. Students were then given either the culturally familiar or unfamiliar version of the article, and identical homework assignments. After study and class discussion in the next meeting, both groups took the same vocabulary post-tests, comprehension tests, and completed a survey item regarding their interest in the article. Although four articles were used in this study, due to space limitations, this paper introduces the article, pre- and post-tests, and homework through examples from the first two articles: “Dogfights in Japan are a Family Outing” (Wofford, 2016) and “Great Barrier Reef: Bleaching ‘kills 35% of area’s coral” (BBC News Staff Reporter, 2016). These two articles appear in [Appendix A](#). All of the modifications that were made to the two articles are italicized in parentheses. The homework assignment the students completed for each of the articles is given in [Appendix B](#). The pre-tests and post-tests for the first two articles are shown in [Appendix C](#), and the survey item used to gauge student interest for all of the articles can be found in [Appendix D](#).

**Table 3. Breakdown of the Lexical Items in Articles 1 & 2**

Article 1: Dog Fights

Frequency level bands	Current profile (token %)	Items on pre-test & post-test
NGSL_1	85.84%	None
NGSL_2	1.29%	None
NGSL_3	5.58%	boost, controversial, illegal, loose, perceive, unfortunate
NAWL	0.43%	None
OFF	5.58%	veterinarian, stitch, mandatory, unfortunate (Japanese or foreign proper nouns)

Article 2: Global Warming

Frequency level bands	Current profile (token %)	Items on pre-test & post-test
NGSL_1	81.47%	None
NGSL_2	8.88%	extreme, incident
NGSL_3	3.47%	recovery, destruction, planet, tourism, overcome, disaster
NAWL	0.39%	Oxygen
OFF	5.41%	bleach (Japanese or foreign proper nouns)

*Note.* NGSL\_1 is the first 1000, NGSL\_2 the second 1000, and NGSL\_3 the third 1000 most frequent English words.

As in the previous study, vocabulary recall and content questions were used on both the pre-tests and post-tests with all classes. By comparing the lexical text analysis on VocabProfile (Cobb, 2015) to the student results on the NGSLT, words were selected for the vocabulary recall tests that the students were less likely to know. All items were chosen from the high end of the second 1000-word level (1800th word level or above) of the NGSL, along with some off-list words which were important to the topic. This was done to overcome any ceiling effect, which was a problem in the pilot study (Sheridan et al., 2016). Items from the first two bands of the NGSL were ignored because the majority of the students from both classes had achieved a near perfect score on this section of the NGSLT. Each pre-test and post-test contained 10 multiple-choice vocabulary questions with three distractors each and three content questions ([Appendix C](#)). The lexical breakdown from each of the frequency bands of the NGSL, the

NAWL, and off-list words of the first two articles is shown in Table 3. All of the off-list items which did appear on the test or were not proper nouns were replaced with simplified lexical items.

On the post-test we also included five multiple-choice comprehension questions with three distractors each because the previous study had no way to assess comprehension ([Appendix C](#)). Finally, to better quantitatively gauge student interest, which was not done in the preliminary study, students were asked to indicate their reactions to the article on a 7-point Likert scale on the post-test ([Appendix D](#)). Tests were identical for both classes.

The testing apparatus, homework, and assessment tools as described above were adjusted in several ways to overcome limitations in the pilot study (Sheridan et al., 2016). First, in the pilot study, assessment of student comprehension of the reading passages was limited. Only comprehension of individual lexical items was tested, and our test items were not difficult enough to discriminate effectively among students. In order to correct this ceiling effect, the present study included more difficult lexical test items. Furthermore, the present study included comprehension questions on the post-test aimed at measuring more global understanding of the materials the students read ([Appendix C](#)). These questions were also multiple choice with four items. Moreover, the study was designed to take place over the course of one semester to eliminate participant attrition which was a problem in the pilot study. Additionally, in order to limit reader bias, we limited the source materials from which we took our newspaper articles. We did this because, based on the results of our pilot study, we hypothesized that students may have more implicit bias in their reading of articles set in what linguist Braj Kachru calls outer-circle, post-colonial English speaking countries (1985). The pilot study demonstrated that students brought different reading biases to articles that were purportedly set in outer-circle countries such as Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Singapore (Author, 2016). In order to eliminate this bias, therefore, we limited the countries in this study to Britain, Australia and Japan. A final adjustment we made to our current study was the inclusion of a Likert scale in order to measure student interest. This was an important addition as it allows us to effectively correlate student interest with a qualitative analysis of their homework answers. As previous studies have been purely quantitative, the addition of the Likert scale and our qualitative study offer significant new findings.

## Results

### Quantitative Results

**Interest in articles set in culturally familiar and unfamiliar contexts.** To determine the influence of the cultural context of the articles on students' interest in them, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted for each reading. The independent variable, the cultural context of the article, had two levels: Japan, and foreign. The dependent variable was the self-reported interest scores on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, with increasing scores indicating greater interest. As shown in Table 4, for the first two readings, the mean interest scores were higher for articles set in Japan. However, the ANOVA results for those readings were non-significant,  $F(1, 75) = 1.27, p = .26$ , and  $F(1, 75) = 3.14, p = .08$ . The mean interest scores for the third reading were also higher for the group that read the culturally familiar version, and the ANOVA was significant,  $F(1, 71) = 11.00, p < .01$ , with the cultural context of the reading accounting for 13% of the difference in interest, as assessed by  $\eta^2$ . This was in accord with the expectations

of the authors. The mean interest scores were higher for the fourth reading set in a foreign country. However, the ANOVA results were non-significant,  $F(1, 70) = 2.59, p = .11$ .

**Table 4. Interest Survey Scores and Comparisons between Groups**

Article	Group	Context	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>SD</i>	Difference of <i>M</i>
DF	1	Japan	34	2	7	4.59	.20	1.16	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Foreign	43	1	7	4.23	.23	1.53	0.36 ( $p = .26$ )
GW	1	Foreign	34	2	7	5.00	.19	1.13	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Japan	43	3	7	5.44	.16	1.05	0.44 ( $p = .08$ )
FR	1	Japan	31	3	6	5.45	.13	0.72	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Foreign	42	1	7	4.64	.19	1.21	0.81 ( $p < .01$ )
UFO	1	Foreign	30	3	7	5.20	.17	0.92	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Japan	42	2	7	4.74	.21	1.36	-0.46 ( $p = .11$ )

*Note.* DF= Dog Fights, GW= Global Warming, FR= Fake Robbery, UFO= Unidentified Flying Object

**Comprehension of articles set in culturally familiar and unfamiliar contexts.** Following each reading, participants took a five-item multiple-choice comprehension test. To examine the relationship of article setting on comprehension, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted for each comprehension test, with the independent variable being the cultural context of the article. The dependent variable was the scores on the comprehension tests. Table 5 shows the mean comprehension scores of both groups for each of the four articles read. For the first three readings the group that read the culturally familiar article had higher mean scores on the comprehension tests, and the ANOVAs were significant,  $F(1, 75) = 6.97, p = .01$ ,  $F(1, 75) = 9.24, p < .01$ , and  $F(1, 72) = 14.11, p < .01$ . As assessed by  $\eta^2$ , the cultural setting accounted for 9%, 11%, and 16% of the difference in comprehension test scores respectively. While the mean comprehension score of the group that read the fourth article set in a familiar context slightly exceeded that of the other group, the ANOVA was non-significant,  $F(1, 70) = .83, p = .37$ .

**Table 6. Vocabulary Gains and Comparisons between Groups**



**Table 5. Comprehension Test Scores and Comparisons between Groups**

Article	Group	Context	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>SD</i>	Difference
DF	1	Japan	34	1	5	3.74	.20	1.16	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Foreign	43	0	5	3.02	.18	1.18	0.72 ( $p = .01$ )
GW	1	Foreign	34	0	5	2.94	.25	1.48	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Japan	43	2	5	3.84	.17	1.11	0.90 ( $p < .01$ )
FR	1	Japan	31	1	5	3.77	.24	1.36	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Foreign	43	0	5	2.60	.20	1.29	1.17 ( $p < .01$ )
UFO	1	Foreign	30	0	5	3.20	.26	1.42	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Japan	42	1	5	3.48	.18	1.15	0.28 ( $p = .37$ )

*Note.* DF= Dog Fights, GW= Global Warming, FR= Fake Robbery, UFO= Unidentified Flying Object

**Vocabulary recall through articles set in culturally familiar and unfamiliar contexts.**

Participants took vocabulary pre-tests prior to, and post-tests following each reading. The same 10 items appeared on the pre- and post-tests. In order to determine the relationship between the cultural familiarity of articles' settings and vocabulary acquisition, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted for each reading. The independent variable was the cultural context of the article. The dependent variable was the gains from vocabulary pre-tests to post-test. Table 6 shows the mean vocabulary gains for both groups for each of the four articles. For the first reading, the group that read the culturally familiar article achieved greater mean vocabulary test gains from the pre-test to post-test, but the ANOVA was non-significant,  $F(1, 75) = 1.43, p = .26$ . With the second reading, the group whose article was culturally familiar achieved greater mean vocabulary test gains, and the ANOVA was significant,  $F(1, 75) = 4.66, p = .03$ , with the cultural setting of the article accounting for 6% of the difference in the vocabulary score gains, as assessed by  $\eta^2$ . For the third article, the group that read the culturally familiar article had higher mean vocabulary gains, but the ANOVA was non-significant,  $F(1, 70) = 2.93, p = .09$ . For the fourth article the group that read the culturally familiar article had higher mean vocabulary gains, and the ANOVA was significant,  $F(1, 69) = 13.39, p < .01$ , with 16% of the difference in vocabulary gains accounted for by the cultural setting, as assessed by  $\eta^2$ .

**Table 6. Vocabulary Gains and Comparisons between Groups**

Article	Group	Context	n	Min	Max	M	SEM	SD	Difference
DF	1	Japan	34	-2	7	1.82	.34	2.01	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Foreign	43	-3	4	1.33	.25	1.64	0.49 (p = .26)
GW	1	Foreign	34	-1	4	1.12	.24	1.39	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Japan	43	-1	5	1.81	.22	1.42	0.69 (p = .03)
FR	1	Japan	29	-1	6	2.00	.34	1.85	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Foreign	43	-4	5	1.21	.30	1.97	0.79 (p = .09)
UFOs	1	Foreign	30	-3	3	0.37	.30	1.65	(Japan – Foreign)
	2	Japan	41	-3	7	2.20	.37	2.35	1.83 (p < .01)

*Note.* DF= Dog Fights, GW= Global Warming, FR= Fake Robbery, UFO= Unidentified Flying Object

## Discussion

### Analysis of Quantitative Results

While the results show greater mean reported interest for three of the four articles when culturally familiar, only one of those differences was statistically significant. This offers some support for the hypothesis that articles set in culturally familiar places are more interesting to readers. One possible limitation that may have contributed to not finding a stronger relationship between the articles' setting and reader interest is the way some participants interpreted the statements, "How interested were you in this article? Circle the number which best shows how you feel about the article." Some participants may have thought the question was asking how much they enjoyed reading, or liked the article, when in fact interest can also be very high in a topic we feel very negatively about, such as dogfighting, global warming, theft or government conspiracy. Indeed, as one student who ranked the article as a three out of seven remarked, "I like dogs, but I don't like dog fighting because I think it is too dangerous and uncommon. I wanna read the funny article." Another student who gave the article a low ranking remarked, "When I researched pictures of dogfighting to know it... I felt very sad. There are many pictures of dogs, but dogs were very injured. I want to stop dogfighting." Here, the student was interested enough to do outside research into the subject and have an invested opinion about the topic; the low ranking on interest here seems to reflect the student's negative feelings about the topic.

Also, the content of some articles may suit certain cultural settings better, as may have been the case with the fourth article, which was about UFOs and government conspiracy. Some of the participants may have felt the concept of government conspiracy in Japan was unbelievable as a student who ranked their interest in the article as a one remarked, "I don't know this video

from Youtube. I believe the government in Japan,” while another who ranked their interest as a two stated, “I think that all information is not true.” On the other hand, the counter-group may have been more interested and open to the possibility of a foreign government’s conspiracy to hide UFOs in the UK. Taking both of these limitations into consideration, future research should take a more in-depth approach to assessing reader interest, and a careful consideration of article content in relation to setting. These results indicate that students may be more willing to believe events or things that appear unbelievable in culturally familiar contexts when told they happen in a foreign country, suggesting an intriguing avenue for further study.

Participants who read the articles set in Japan achieved higher mean comprehension scores, which were statistically significant for the first three articles. The same three groups also reported greater interest in the Japanese versions of the readings than the counter-groups. The group which read the fourth article, UFOs, set in Japan reported less interest in the article than the counter-group, and while they did achieve greater mean comprehension scores, the difference was not statistically significant. Combined, these results provide strong support for the hypothesis that culturally familiar texts lead to greater comprehension and suggest an interconnectedness between interest and comprehension.

Participants who read the articles set in Japan also achieved greater vocabulary pre- post-test gains for all four articles, with the results showing statistical significance for the second and fourth articles. This provides strong support for the work done by previous studies that demonstrates that readings with culturally familiar contexts lead to better retention of new vocabulary. Also interesting is that the group that read the culturally familiar fourth article reported less interest than the counter-group, yet they made the greatest gains in vocabulary of all eight subgroups. This is contrary to the expectations of the authors but is an intriguing finding. It suggests that greater interest and comprehension when reading culturally familiar texts may not be the only factors that enhance vocabulary retention – there may be a more direct influence as well. This could be explained by the fact that with culturally familiar texts, the number of unfamiliar proper nouns is reduced, thus decreasing the total lexical burden of the reading, and leaving readers with more available cognitive resources to apply to the unfamiliar lexical items (Jalilifar & Assi, 2008; Ketchum, 2006).

In addition to aforementioned limitations regarding measuring participant interest, the following two general limitations may have decreased the differences the authors hoped to find. First, some of the participants were absent from some of the classes, thus reducing the sample sizes for some of the sub-groups. Second, some of the participants actually achieved negative vocabulary gains from pre- to post-tests, which suggests that random guessing may have played a greater role in some of the test scores than was desirable.

### **Analysis of Qualitative Results: Homework Answers and Post-test Content Results**

The inclusion and analysis of homework answers in addition to in-class work is a unique addition to our study and breaks new ground in the research on culture and EFL teaching in that it allows us to make a preliminary assessment of the ways in which culture affects student reading and homework methods. As was the case in the pilot study, the results for this experiment demonstrated that the way students approached the text was implicitly colored by the scaffolding they brought into the piece. When the reading was culturally familiar, students tended to respond to the text more personally and reflect on its meaning and import in their

own lives. In contrast to this, when the text was set in foreign contexts, students often responded more generally, writing broadly about global trends and avoiding personal connections or comments on the text.

Thus, student answers to homework, test questions, and the Likert scale revealed several biases that were dependent on the cultural context of the article the students read. While almost every student disagreed with the idea of dog fights and thought they should be banned, students who read the article based in Japan also listed elements of the article they agreed with or factors they thought might complicate banning dog fights in Japan.

For example, students who read the dog fighting article based in Japan made the point that they had not known about dog fighting in Japan before and were surprised to learn it existed. As one student wrote, "After I read this article, I feel shock. Because I knew the dogfighting by this article, and I knew that dogs are fought by human." A second student wrote simply: "I was surprised that dog fighting is held in Japan."

A second common thread that was repeated in the responses of students who read the nativized article was to note that the fact the dogfights were "Japanese tradition" complicated an issue that they might otherwise see as a clearer case of animal cruelty. Several students said that while they disagreed with dog fighting, they agreed that as a tradition it was part of the history of Japan. As one student lamented, "Tradition is difficult to eliminate." At the same time, the fact that the dogfights were argued to be traditional in the article led some students to ask questions about their own culture and its traditions: "I want to know why people do it and a relation between dog fighting and the history of Japan." It also led some students to judge "Dog fighting is a bad tradition in Japan."

Finally, a number of students drew attention to the association of the yakuza with the dogfights. For students who read the nativized article, the mention of the Japanese mafia, or the yakuza, and their association with the dogfights evoked ideas of illicit activities and fear, with students going so far as to argue that because of yakuza influence, the fights were presented as safer and more important to local economies than they were in actuality: "I think that the article has black censored side that they didn't include. It is obvious to say safe things specially if your family is involve and you don't want to be in trouble with the mafia or yakuza." Again, other students were more succinct: "I scared the yakuza."

Students who read the article set in England had very different responses. Many students gave answers that revealed they felt some distance from the topic and had trouble relating to it when they believed the context to be foreign: "I have never seen dogfight and this article is in oversea story. It is difficult that imagine of dogfight." Another student wrote: "I was interested in dogfighting in London. But I can't imagine it because I didn't know it." A third student said: "I didn't know dogfighting until read this article. Because, I can't watch it in Japan."

In general, students who read the article set in London were less likely to acknowledge the role of tradition in continuing the fights, and were more likely to disagree with the article in its entirety, not listing any elements they agreed with.

The student responses to the article on global warming were likewise revealing. Students who read the article based in Japan often responded with reflections on their own role in the creation of the problem: "I should have responsible," wrote one student, while a second wrote, "It [the article] encourage me to take an action for saving corals." Further student comments on the

article based in Japan included, “Everyone should do something. We must consider what should we do.”

In contrast to this, qualitative analysis seemed to indicate that students who read the foreign-based global warming article rarely responded with reflections on personal responsibility or calls to action. Rather, they described the problem in larger and more abstract terms: “I think that global warming should be stopped by human,” wrote one student, while another remarked, “We must find effective ways to protect and recover the coral all over the world.” When students did connect the issue to their lives, it was in more abstract terms: “Because I like the Great Barrier Reef very much. I want to go there before I die, so I feel sad when I knew that many coral are dead.” Another student added, “Great Barrier Reef is very beautiful. I have see it on TV. That great things are lost is a so terrible problem.” The responses to the foreign article lacked the personal calls to action that were often part of student reflections to the article based in Japan.

As was the case in the pilot study, these responses indicate that students read differently and engage with the text in different ways depending on the cultural context of the material they are given. The results demonstrate qualitative as well as quantitative benefits to culturally familiar texts.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Recent evidence suggests that the use of culturally familiar contexts increase language learning; however, most studies in the field have only focused on a single language proficiency level. In a future study, we will look to fill this gap in the research by examining the influence of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, and interest of Japanese university EFL students at different language proficiency levels.

### **Conclusion**

This study has corrected the significant limitations of our pilot study to effectively demonstrate the importance of culturally familiar contexts in materials for EFL education in Japanese universities. In addition to greater vocabulary gains and comprehension that are activated by the scaffolding provided by culturally familiar nouns and contexts, through allowing students to make a personal connection to the material, our study also highlighted the fact that students generally self-report greater interest in culturally familiar topics. Our qualitative analysis of their written homework and test responses further illustrates the ways in which student engagement with the material differs significantly depending on the cultural context of the assignment. Their responses indicate a personal connection with readings set in culturally familiar contexts that correlates not only to increased language learning, as other studies have demonstrated, but also to greater interest in the material and a more personal engagement in the homework assignments. This research provides strong evidence that culturally familiar materials act as scaffolding to support greater student gains. It also effectively demonstrates qualitatively that student engagement with the assignments differs remarkably depending on the cultural context, a result that suggests intriguing directions for future study into the correlation of culture, interest, and student engagement.

As a whole, our findings not only reinforce previous research but also offer significant new insights into the way EFL can be taught to maximize student interest and engagement, and they

also suggest more effective ways that reading materials and homework can be designed. Finally, our work contributes important evidence to the growing body of scholarship about which contexts best support student learning.

## About the Authors

**Robert Sheridan** (M.S.Ed. in TESOL) is a tenured lecturer in the Faculty of Agriculture at Kindai University in Nara, Japan. He serves as the program chair of Osaka JALT. His research interests include vocabulary acquisition, CLIL, extensive reading, motivation, and culture in education.

**Kathryn M. Tanaka** (Ph.D, University of Chicago) is a tenured lecturer in the department of Cultural and Historical Studies at Otemae University. Her research interests include illness and human rights in modern Japanese literature, and the place of human rights education, culture, and literature in EFL and CLIL courses.

**Nicholas Hogg** (M.S.Ed.) is a full-time instructor and international-exchange liaison at Osaka Yuhigaoka Gakuen High School in Osaka, Japan. His professional interests include second language fluency development, vocabulary acquisition, educational research design, and assessment.

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## Appendix A: The First Two Articles

### ***Dogfights in Japan (England)***

On weekdays, Hiroshi Sudo (*Richard Sullivan*) is a veterinarian at an animal hospital in Toride (*Liverpool*), about 40 kilometers northeast of Tokyo (*London*). On weekends, he works at dogfights. He stitches cuts and pulls loose teeth. “We do emergencies only here,” he says.

These fighting dogs rarely die; however, some unfortunate ones do. “It happens, but not that many,” Sudo (*Sullivan*) says. The dogs, he explains, are like marathon runners: Sometimes they push themselves too far. But veterinarians like Sudo (*Sullivan*) try not to let that happen. They try to keep the dogs healthy.

Licenses are not mandatory to fight dogs, so there’s no record of how many fights happen each year. Teruaki Sudo (*Steven Sullivan*), president of the East Japan (*East Britain*) Dogfighting Association (and Hiroshi’s (*Richard’s*) father), says his group holds eight or nine tournaments per year.

Between 60 and 100 dogs might fight in a small tournament. In a large tournament, that number could be 250. It’s impossible to say how many illegal fights happen each year because they are held by the Japanese (*British*) mafia, or Yakuza (~~*or Yakuza*~~). Dogfighting is a controversial issue in Japan (*England*). Only five of the country’s 47 prefectures (*48 counties*) have laws against dogfighting.

“Dog fighting is a sport and is perceived as a part of the history of Japan (*England*),” Sudo (*Sullivan*) says. “It helps boost the local economy. We make it as easy for the dogs as we can, and it is always interesting to watch.”

### ***Great Barrier Reef (Okinawan Reefs): Bleaching ‘kills 35% of area’s coral’***

At least 35% of coral\* in the northern and central parts of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef (*Japan’s Okinawan Reefs*) have been killed by bleaching, Australian (*Japanese*) scientists say.

Bleaching occurs when warmer water causes coral to become weak and lose the colorful algae\*\* that provide oxygen and food the coral needs to live. It has been linked to climate change.

35% of coral on 84 reefs\*\*\* are dead. This is the third time in 18 years that the Great Barrier Reef (*Okinawan Reefs*) has (*have*) experienced a mass bleaching caused by global warming. The current bleaching is the most extreme ever.

The scientists warned that the recovery of coral cover is expected to take 10 years or longer. But it will take much longer for the largest and oldest coral to grow back again. Losing the coral hurts tourism and is an environmental disaster. Scientists worry that this time, the reef will not recover.

“This is a horrible incident. Such environmental destruction should be illegal. We need to make a global effort now,” said James Randolph (*Misaki Yamamoto*), a scuba diver. He

looked through pictures of the dead, white reef on his underwater camera. “Last year, this reef had so much color and life. It is all dead now, and it is our fault.”

However, finding support to overcome this problem is difficult due to recent conflicting scientific studies which suggest that humans are not responsible for the rise in the temperature of the planet. 31,000 scientists have signed a letter saying humans aren’t causing global warming.

\*coral サンゴ、 \*\*algae 藻, \*\*\* reef 礁

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**Appendix B: Homework Assignment**

Summarize the main points of the article in your own words. What is most important about the article?

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Write down three open-ended discussion questions you have after reading the article.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
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Write your opinion! What do you think about the article? What do you agree with? What do you disagree with? Why?

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## Appendix C: Pre-test for Article 1

### Vocabulary questions:

**veterinarian:** She loves her job working as a *veterinarian*.

- a) animal doctor
- b) animal groomer
- c) animal trainer
- d) zookeeper

**stitch:** The doctor *stitched* the cut on his arm.

- a) bandaged
- b) cleaned
- c) examined
- d) sewed

**loose:** The button on his shirt is *loose*.

- a) missing
- b) not present
- c) not properly attached
- d) tight

**rarely:** She *rarely* goes to a restaurant on weekdays.

- a) almost always
- b) almost never
- c) often
- d) sometimes

**unfortunate:** His case is an *unfortunate* one.

- a) messy
- b) scary
- c) unlucky
- d) unorganized

**mandatory:** It is *mandatory* that all students take 2 years of math.

- a) important
- b) encouraged
- c) necessary
- d) optional

**illegal:** It is *illegal* to take things that are not yours.

- a) allowed
- b) moral
- c) not common
- d) not permitted

**controversial:** Animal testing has become a *controversial* issue.

- a) certain
- b) common
- c) disputed
- d) popular

**perceive:** She is *perceived* as the smartest person in her class.

- a) chosen
- b) got
- c) regarded
- d) voted

**boost:** By changing the price, we hope to *boost* sales.

- a) decrease
- b) find
- c) increase
- d) maintain

**Discussion questions:**

1. There are some traditional activities that are dangerous to humans and/or animals. Should these traditions be continued?

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2. Do you believe animals should be used for sport? Why or why not?

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3. Should dogfighting be against the law? Why or why not?

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### **Appendix C: Post-test for Article 1**

*Note: The vocabulary and discussion questions in the pre-test were identical; we reproduce here the comprehension questions that were only included on the post-test.*

#### **Comprehension questions:**

How does the veterinarian help the dogs?

- a) He feeds them after the fights.
- b) He gets them ready for the fights.
- c) He helps them after the fights.
- d) He trains them for the fights.

How often do the dogs die?

- a) They always die.
- b) They never die.
- c) They rarely die.
- d) They sometimes die.

Why is the number of dogfights each year not known?

- a) Because dogfights are against the law throughout the country.
- b) Because licenses are not necessary.
- c) Because there are too many to count.
- d) Because they are too popular.

How many dogs fight in a large tournament?

- a) About 100.
- b) About 150.
- c) About 200.
- d) About 250.

What does it do to the local economy?

- a) It creates interest.
- b) It doesn't do anything.
- c) It has a bad effect on it.
- d) It helps improve it.

## Appendix C: Pre-test for Article 2

### Vocabulary questions:

**oxygen:** There wasn't much oxygen in the room.

- a) a gas all animals need to live
- b) a gas dangerous to humans
- c) a lot of space to live
- d) a place for a lot of people

**bleach:** These products won't bleach your hair.

- a) add color
- b) help grow
- c) make dark
- d) remove color

**recovery:** He had a quick recovery.

- a) feeling sick
- b) getting rest
- c) returning to normal
- d) taking a nap

**destruction:** There was a lot of destruction in the area.

- a) building or construction
- b) growing or quickly increasing
- c) farming or cultivating
- d) killing or completely damaging

**planet:** He wants to save the planet.

- a) an object that goes around the sun
- b) a large forest where animals live
- c) a lot of money from work
- d) a source of energy

**extreme:** Use extreme caution when you drive.

- a) really calm
- b) really careful
- c) very great
- d) very slow



**tourism:** Tourism is increasing here.

- a) buying goods or services
- b) purchasing souvenirs
- c) traveling to a place for fun
- d) visiting your hometown

**overcome:** They must overcome the issue.

- a) determine
- b) learn
- c) recognize
- d) solve

**incident:** I'll explain the incident to you.

- a) event
- b) example
- c) question
- d) solution

**disaster:** It was a disaster no one expected.

- a) accident
- b) benefit
- c) creation
- d) success

**Discussion questions:**

1. Do you think global warming is a serious problem? Why or why not?

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2. In your opinion, what is the biggest environmental problem today?

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3. What can you do to protect the environment? Do you have any ideas?

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### **Appendix C: Post-test for Article 2**

Note: *The vocabulary and discussion questions in the pre-test were identical; we reproduce here the comprehension questions that were only included on the post-test.*

#### **Comprehension questions:**

How has the coral been killed?

- a) It has been bleached.
- b) It has been destroyed by divers.
- c) It has been destroyed by tourists.
- d) It has been eaten by fish.

What percentage of the coral is dead?

- a) 25%.
- b) 30%.
- c) 35%.
- d) 40%.

How long will it take most of the coral to recover?

- a) 5 years.
- b) 10 years.
- c) 15 years.
- d) 20 years.

According to the article, losing the coral is bad for what?

- a) Fishing.
- b) Science.
- c) Surfing.
- d) Tourism.

What do some scientists believe?

- a) Global warming has ended.
- b) Humans aren't responsible for global warming.
- c) Mass bleaching didn't kill the coral.
- d) This problem can be easily fixed.

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**Appendix D: Survey Item to Gauge Student Interest**

How interested were you in this article? Circle the number which best shows how you feel about the article.

Not interested			Somewhat interested				Very interested
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

Why do you think so?

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