Students in any one classroom may represent many backgrounds and bring to the reading task the diversity and richness of many languages and cultures. While there are basic similarities in the fluent reading process across languages (Hudelson, 1981), specific language and cultural differences can affect reading, especially as differences exist in orthographies, morphology, syntax, and patterns of discourse. On a broader level, how do cultural differences in background knowledge influence reading comprehension? How can teachers facilitate the English reading comprehension of culturally different students? This article discusses these issues.

To understand cross-cultural influences on comprehension, it is important first to understand the role that background knowledge plays in the reading process.

Schemata and Reading

Current psycholinguistic research supports the claim that reading is a meaning-driven (Goodman, 1970; Langer & Smith-Burke, 1982), multileveled, interactive, hypothesis-generated process (Spiro, Bruce, & Brewer, 1980). It is multileveled in that the reader uses various levels of language simultaneously (graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, etc.) (Goodman, 1970). It is interactive in that reading is driven by the structure and content of the text and the reader’s prior knowledge (Rumelhart, 1977). It is hypothesis-generating in that fluent readers predict and confirm information while reading a text (Goodman, 1970).

Readers bring to a text a wide range of experiences with the world and with discourse, which they use in constructing a meaningful representation of the text. Their prior knowledge,
organized in topical clusters (schemata), provides a context for comprehension (Anderson, 1977; Morgan, 1983; Spiro, 1980). For example, the sentence *The note was sour because the seam split* (Bransford & McCarrell, 1974) is difficult to comprehend unless readers know that the discourse topic is bagpipes. Causal sentence structures can be either difficult or easy to comprehend (Barnitz & Morgan, 1983).

Many studies show that schemata affect reading comprehension. Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, and Goetz (1976) presented two groups of university students (music education students and physical education students) with ambiguous passages. One passage could be interpreted as relating either to an evening of card playing or rehearsal of a wind ensemble. Another passage could be interpreted as a prison break or a wrestling match. The two groups interpreted the passages differently. For example, music majors interpreted the first passage to be about a rehearsal.

Similarly, Pichert & Anderson (1976) presented college students with a story that described features of a house and items in it. Readers were asked to take one of three perspectives (potential home buyer, burglar, or no special perspective) before they read the passage. The perspective had a significant effect on which ideas were recalled. That is, the “burglars” tended to recall more information about the “loot,” while the “home buyers” were more concerned with the number of rooms, the leaky ceiling, etc.

Similar work confirms the role of perspective and schemata in adults’ comprehension (Anderson & Pichert, 1977; Anderson, Pichert, & Shirey, 1979; Goetz, Reynolds, Schallert, & Radin, 1982). Pichert (1979) documented how these perspectives influenced the reading of children in Grades 3, 5, and 7, and graduate students. The children did not always agree with adults in what they viewed as important details; children also did not always keep a perspective in mind during reading.

These studies imply that teachers should become aware of how their students’ background knowledge influences reading comprehension and the need to provide appropriate contexts.

### Cross-Cultural Schemata: Adults

An interrelationship between the structure of discourse and the thought patterns of people from various cultures is well documented (Kaplan, 1980). Story organization may also vary across cultures. For example, 80% of the Japanese folk tales studied by Matsuyama (1983) did not have main characters who were goal oriented. This is important for European and American readers, accustomed to stories with goal orientation, to know if reading a Japanese story, and vice versa.

Cultural content can also influence a reader’s recall. American university students gave better summaries for a story from Western culture than for a collection of Alaskan Indian myths (Kintsch & Greene, 1978). When they listened to a Brothers Grimm fairy tale and an Apache Indian tale, their sequential recall of the Apache tale was poorer. Thus, both story structure and content differences affected the students’ comprehension.

However, cross-cultural story structures do not always decrease comprehension or recall. When Mandler, Scribner, Cole, and DeForest (1980) told European stories to Liberian subjects in their native language, Vai, and to American subjects in English, no significant differences occurred in comprehension. The researchers argued that many story structures are universal.

Another study more decisively illustrates the influence of cross-cultural schemata. Steffenson, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979) had American and East Indian university students read two letters—one on an American wedding, the other about a wedding in India. The American rituals involve clothing, flowers, and receptions, with the bride the dominant figure. In Indian weddings,
the groom’s family, financial interests, and the social status of the two families are prominent. The students read faster the passages that matched their own cultural framework. Asked to recall the culturally unfamiliar text, readers distorted facts and inserted ideas from their own culture. For example, Americans refer to the ceremony as the “wedding” and the resultant state as “marriage.” No such differentiation is made by the Indian culture. Reading about an heirloom dress, an American commented on its sentimental value and the tradition of wearing something old and something borrowed, but an Indian reader commented on its being out of fashion. American readers changed “gifts to the in-laws” to read “the exchange of gifts,” viewing the act as reciprocal. The Indian reader recognized the gifts as part of the dowry given to the groom’s family. This study again clearly shows the role of cultural schemata in the reading process.

Similar findings were documented in a listening comprehension study comparing American and Australian Aboriginal female listeners who heard two stories about illness and treatment (Steffensen & Colker, 1982). The Western passage described a boy’s illness as a result of eating spoiled meat and related his mother’s reactions and the treatment. The Aboriginal passage told about a man of the Walbiri tribe and how the spirit of a sacred site introduced bones into his body. Here too, elaborations and distortions were noted. Westerners “remembered” that the mother called and made an appointment before going to the doctor, though no such reference was made in the passage. In the Aboriginal treatment of the victim, the kinsmen cut their arms, and the sick man drank the blood. American listeners recalled this as a blood transfusion.

Second Language Effects

In reading comprehension, students of English as a second language (ESL) also are affected by language complexity and cultural background. Research on these effects sometimes focuses upon the adaption of text as well as vocabulary presentation. Johnson (1982) noted that prior experience prepared ESL students to comprehend information about Halloween, yet varying the amount of vocabulary exposure had no significant effect. In an earlier study with native Iranian and American subjects, Johnson (1981) found that a text’s semantic and syntactic complexity had less effect on comprehension than did its cultural origin. Again, students understood stories from their native cultures better. This may also be related to the affective response of readers to material in their own culture (Joag-Dev & Steffensen, 1980).

It should be noted that in addition to story familiarity, context is a crucial aspect of comprehension. Students learning to read English are less proficient in using both textual and contextual clues (Carrell, 1983b; Carrell & Wallace, 1983), especially as they are also struggling with other aspects of the language.

Teachers need to become more familiar with linguistic (Cowan, 1976) and cultural differences in comprehension. The area of background knowledge has been neglected in ESL reading instruction (Carrell, 1983a; Hudson, 1982).

Cross-Cultural Schemata: Children

While cross-cultural differences in story content and familiarity affect the reading of adults, can the same phenomenon be found in young people’s reading? Only a few studies examine this question (Andersson, 1981; Andersson & Gipe, 1983; Lipson, 1983; Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1981). Reynolds et al. investigated the effects of cultural differences between urban, working-class black students and white students from an agricultural area. Eighth graders from the two populations read a letter written by a friend who had moved away,
describing a critical episode in a school cafeteria. The letter contained verbal insults among the students such as “You so ugly that when the doctor delivered you he slapped you in the face.” Asked to read the letter and recall it, the urban black students tended to interpret the passage to be about verbal play, ritual insults, or “sounding,” a common verbal style in the black community, whereas the white students tended to interpret the passage as involving physical aggression.

Religious schemata, too, affect children’s comprehension of texts that reflect religious practices. Fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, some Catholic, some Jewish, reading two passages entitled “Bar Mitzvah” and “First Communion” (Lipson, 1983), recalled more information and were able to generate more inferences when they were familiar with the events in the passage. They also made fewer errors in recall and took less time to read the familiar passage. Cultural-religious schemata influenced the children’s comprehension of familiar and unfamiliar texts about religious events.

A new study has compared the effects of cross-cultural schemata on the reading comprehension of sixth graders in a New Orleans, Louisiana, area Catholic school and a New York Greek Orthodox school in their inferential reading (Andersson, 1981; Andersson & Gipe, 1981). This study considered geographical, ethnic, and religious influences on children’s reading comprehension, using paragraphs involving 12 familiar and 12 unfamiliar schemata. There was a strong relationship between cultural group and performance on the inferential measures.

These studies all illustrate the need for teachers to facilitate reading comprehension by considering cross-cultural schemata.

Reading Comprehension Instruction

Following are some guidelines for developing comprehension of culturally different students. These guidelines are also relevant to teaching content area material to any students.

• Select appropriate reading material for reading comprehension instruction. Students will be more involved, interested, and successful in reading material that relates to them and that matches their cultural background. Yet reading to learn implies reading material that is unfamiliar, whether it is content area material or culturally different material. If students are to develop proficiency in reading unfamiliar material, then teachers should provide contexts and schemata that support comprehension of both background knowledge and the text’s structure. These include prereading activities such as providing pictures, learning to do an activity that is mentioned, or discussing cultural experiences. Teachers must bridge the gap between the text’s content and the reader’s schemata.

• Use methods and approaches that are sensitive to the readers’ cultural schemata. Useful ones include the Language Experience Approach (Allen, 1976; Hall, 1981; Stauffer, 1980), the directed reading-thinking activity (Stauffer, 1980); and the experience-text-relationship method (Au, 1979).

In the Language Experience Approach (LEA), the student dictates stories to the teacher, who writes them down for subsequent reading and language expansion. LEA is useful for culturally different students because the reading material matches the students’ cultural concepts. The teacher can easily build on the dictated stories to help students expand their language and cultural knowledge.

The directed reading-thinking activity (DRTA) orchestrates the prior knowledge of the reader and the content of the material. It has prereading, reading, and postreading phases in which the teacher guides students to set purposes for reading, to process ideas, and to justify
predictions made through reading (Stauffer, 1980). Questioning and interacting with the students, the teacher can relate culturally different content to their prior knowledge. Students become active thinkers as they read familiar and unfamiliar content.

In a similar way, the experience-text-relationship method allows students to relate their own experiences to the culturally different text (Au, 1979). Students discuss their past experiences related to the story, then read silently a specified amount of text. Teacher questions may be interjected. Next, the teacher and students draw relationships between the text and their prior cultural experiences. In this step, cultural experiences can be compared, contrasted, or classified so that the students can expand their cross-cultural schemata.

No matter what approaches are used, the teacher must provide meaningful contexts for comprehension.

• Cross-cultural vocabulary development is a crucial part of reading comprehension instruction. Vocabulary is best learned when the target words are learned in context (Gipe, 1978–1979), as there is a link between vocabulary and schemata (Anderson & Shifrin, 1980). Yet, teachers must become aware of the cross-cultural differences in vocabulary and how meaning may be represented differently in various languages. For example, cut and carve have distinct meanings in English that are represented by just one word in French, couper (Macnamera, 1972). Thus, a French speaker has to learn semantic distinctions in the concepts of cut and carve. Similarly, city students may need to learn to distinguish among a bayou, swamp, and marsh, while students from warm regions may need to learn to distinctions among toboggan, sled, and sleigh.

For suggestions on semantically based vocabulary methods, see Johnson and Pearson (1978) and Johnson (n.d.).

• Consider cross-cultural schemata when assessing reading ability. The research reviewed earlier shows how the context of the readers’ prior experiences influences their recall and comprehension of culturally different material. Be aware of this fact when interpreting test results. Are the stories in the test or informal reading inventory controlled for cultural differences? Test items should be examined carefully and interpreted cautiously. If you are constructing an informal reading comprehension inventory, you should probably try to balance the number of culturally familiar and culturally unfamiliar passages. Students’ responses should be examined in light of their cultural backgrounds.

• Finally, many culturally different readers will need language instruction. Their reading problems may be linguistic, if they do not have command of the language structures and functions needed to read well. In schools without intensive ESL or bilingual classes, many of these students will be in the regular reading classroom. Thus, reading teachers should be familiar with language differences and techniques for developing English proficiency. For surveys of techniques for facilitating English language and reading growth, see Celce-Murcia and McIntosh (1979), Mackay, Barkman, and Jordan (1979), and Rodrigues and White (1981).

We have examined the role of cross-cultural schemata in comprehension and the need for teachers to incorporate this knowledge in reading instruction. As more students make our classrooms more multicultural, their learning to read and reading to learn can be enriched with the cross-cultural understanding of their teachers.

References


