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### **How Readers Incorporate Their Own Cultural Knowledge into Reading**

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Reading is a complex activity in which readers do not simply decipher strictly text-based information, but rather bring in, inevitably, their own real-world knowledge and cultural experiences to arrive at their individual interpretations: in this sense, there should be no prescribed, autonomous reading of any text. This defies too much credibility ascribed to any widely-used reading test. Despite the fact that we language teachers have to rely on some measurements of student language ability, we cannot be too cautious about the partiality of these measures and the danger of unnecessarily penalizing otherwise “creative” readers. In an effort to achieve more cultural fairness in reading tests, not to mention basic psychometric qualities such as validity and reliability, it is valuable to know how readers’ minds function in reading; how they process the literal information retrieved from the text, highlighting some details while marginalizing others; and how their cultural background interacts with the information-decoding and interpretive process.

This study is an attempt to closely analyze the interplay of text-based information and readers’ cultural knowledge in their interpretive process. Two different types of English reading items (one of expository and the other of narrative nature) were selected from the

1995 version of one of the most influential standardized tests in Japan - “The Center Exam,” and were given to 10 college students including returnees from different countries. This is a descriptive case study which is accompanied with detailed record of observation. The subjects were asked various “probe” questions as they read the texts and answered test questions (think-aloud protocol) as well as after the task (retrospective protocol), the whole process of which was tape-recorded. The “probe” questions were carefully constructed to elicit the responses to some major developments in the texts. They were designed to tap what happens in readers’ minds, soliciting information on 1) what kinds of real-world knowledge or concept of reality the students utilize to fill in the gaps (= embedded ambiguity) that exist in between details, 2) what they presuppose in judgment and inference in order to spin a cohesive story, 3) the manner by which they combine such cultural knowledge with the given surface information.

The writer will present the summary of the analysis with some notable excerpts from the student responses. She hopes to bring more attention to the possibility of diverse interpretations, both of focal and minor points, using the two English reading items sampled from probably the most well-validated standardized test in Japan. The hypothesis is that the range of interpretation is significantly attributed to different life experiences the subjects reflect to reading. Though the purpose here is not to point to inappropriate test questions, just as a tentative conclusion, some suggestions will be made for the construction of more culturally-fair test questions, deriving insights from the findings.

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**Handout:**

**I. Summary of the Study**

1. **Hypothesis:** Readers utilize their real-world knowledge/concept of reality to fill in the gaps (=embedded ambiguity) that exist in between details of a text, in order to construct a cohesive story; thus, the resulting variation in interpretation can be significantly attributable to the varied life experiences/cultural backgrounds that are brought to the reading.
2. **Research Questions:** When and how do readers feed their own cultural knowledge into the interpretation of a given text? Specifically, dealing with the test items that require strictly text-based, autonomous interpretation, how does the reader reconcile the conflict encountered between the text and their own individualistic heuristic frame?
3. **Material:** Two English reading items (one of an expository and the other of a narrative nature) from 1995 version of “The Center Exam”. (Due to the page limitation, the presenter will distribute the copy of the material on site with its schematic representation utilizing episode/plot unit/preposition network [Black:1985, Kintch&van Dijk:1978].)
4. **Subjects:** 10 college students with varying backgrounds: 3 returnees and 7 non-returnees who differ in gender, major, overseas experience, geographical/cultural upbringing (including coaching experience), motivation, attitude toward English, and cognitive learning/problem-solving strategies.
5. **Methodology:** Qualitative case study based upon the analysis of the detailed record of interviews. Carefully-constructed “probe” questions were given to the subjects so that what happens in the reader’s mind can be coaxed into verbalization in a step-by-step process as he or she follows the thematic or logical development of the text (think-aloud protocol) as well as more general questions that ask for the reconstruction/recall of the content after the task has been completed (retrospective protocol).
6. **Findings:** Though most subjects were able to follow major/global points of the text, there were some noteworthy instances in which they came up with some unexpected or creative interpretations. Certain patterns in which those variations occurred can be associated with some of the background factors of each student, while other patterns seem to occur at random. Still, the finding that no two students arrived at the exactly same interpre-

tation is sufficient to support the hypothesis; and actually, each subject had quite a distinctive type of conflict with the textual flow -- the incongruity he or she perceived as opposed to their own presupposition/inference. By and large, the range of interpretive variation is smaller in the expository passage than in the narrative passage, and subjects relied more on a global interpretive frame in decoding the narrative passage than the expository one.

## II. Presentation Procedure

1. **Text Analysis of the Material:** In addition to the overall schematic representation of the two texts in terms of episode/plot unit/proposition network, some local analysis of the nature of cohesive ties will be provided, especially concerning those points where subjects' interpretations differed dramatically.
2. **Presentation of Interesting Cases/Patterns:** The presenter will touch on some salient cases/patterns of deviation in interpretation with possible reasons: some deviations are relatable to the problems inherent in the text or the test construction, while others are more likely to have been caused by personal tendencies deriving from the diverse cultural experiences of the subjects. Problems often arose when the subjects' spontaneous surface retrieval was disrupted by the references that generated some marked inference /connotation to the reader's mind -- that is, in case of either positive or negative highlighting. Also, the alignment of the test questions sometimes confused subjects since the questions that require global interpretation and local details are juxtaposed, quite arbitrarily, which tended to disturb the smooth evolution of test-takers' frame of reference.
3. **Suggestions to Improve the Test Design**
4. **Future Research Possibilities**

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