A Composite Textual Comprehension Model for Literacy in the LOTE Classroom

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Numerous investigations have demonstrated the importance of cultural understanding in making the interpretation of written texts more meaningful to readers (Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson, & Pollard-Durobola, 2007; Roswell, Sztainbok, & Blaney, 2007; David & Norazit, 2000; and Cazden, 1988). This research suggests that culture is the foundation on which the writer's meaning is encoded and implies that if readers fail to take into account the deep and often hidden cultural premises that dwell within a text, they will fail to uncover the meaning of written documents. It is incumbent, therefore, upon language instructors to come to an understanding of the role of culture in decoding texts as well as of the means to facilitate learners' understanding of meaning hidden under multiple layers of cultural and linguistic strata. With the importance of cultural influences on comprehension of texts in mind, this brief paper will focus on the role of cultural understanding in helping students create a composite understanding of texts that incorporate threshold reading skills as well as higher-order critical thinking abilities. In addition, this paper will introduce a proto-model of a reading skills pyramid that can be used to foster greater understanding of the skills and tools needed for successful reading in any target language (TL) and will conclude with a discussion of implications for the practicing language teaching professional and suggestions for practical improvements in reading instruction.

In the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, reading instructors, public policy analysts, and other educational reformers have joined a debate over best practices in the teaching of reading. Discussions have centered on the benefits of either phonics or whole language approaches to teaching reading. In phonics, teachers focus on phonemic awareness and

the relationship between symbols and sounds. When translated into instructional design, this approach to teaching reading requires that instructors provide students with core information about the relationship between sounds and symbols, and the opportunity to view numerous examples of both regular and irregular sequences of sound-symbol clusters. Although there are numerous ways to describe whole language instruction, typically, those who prefer this method tend to generate lessons that focus on the creation of meaning from texts while reducing the study of structural components of the language. In this manner, meaning is constructed from context, world knowledge, and the nature and purpose of the text. In both cases, the notion of cultural differences and their relationship to the creation of meaning is ignored in favor of the cognitive skills and universal understanding of the world that are seen as the keys to the successful decoding of texts, regardless of the intended audience.

Although a majority of the debate has focused on first language teaching, the foreign language education field has also been touched by implications stemming from these discussions. Given the foreign language field's tendency to adopt a deficit model when teaching language skills, teachers are inclined to promote the use of phonics-based curricula (Cohen, 2007). This results in drilling for correct pronunciation of lexical items and the almost automatic translation of the L2 into the L1. In a sense, reading in the L2 becomes a skill associated with determining the meaning of individual words or phrases while rarely demanding the exploration of the overall meaning of the text. Indeed, more often than not, reading assignments, as well as tests, are composed of discrete questions that focus narrowly on individual passages and key phrases instead of on the larger implications of the text. Heath (1996) suggests that these pedagogical and evaluative practices are the result of Western insistence on cognitive and behaviorist approaches to learning, which has caused researchers to ignore the important, indeed

fundamental, nature of historical and cultural elements in learning about and comprehending others. Following Heath's lead, the essential underlying theoretical perspective within this paper revolves around the notion that textual comprehension is mediated or inhibited by cultural (mis)understanding. There is little doubt that foreign language teaching and learning are predicated on the understanding that culture bubbles forth in many different contexts and can impede successful interpretation of utterances, written or verbal, of native speakers of the language. Moments of cultural confusion, defined as moments when language learners transfer their own cultural norms, values, and understandings of self onto the L2, are well discussed in the literature and are thought to be an important fault line where communication breaks down (Chick, 1991/1996; Olshtain & Weinback, 1988; Manes & Wolfson, 1981).

While much of the research treats interpersonal communication, face-to-face interaction is not the only area where cultural differences can impede comprehension. As has been suggested above, the reading of texts, cultural tidbits, and longer works of literature are also replete with cultural information that poses challenges to readers who approach the text from a different cultural background. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to assert that texts are not inert, stale words printed on lifeless parchment. Rather, they possess a life of their own that weaves in and out of the cultural and linguistic fiber of the society for which they were created.

As language professionals engage in the teaching of reading, they quickly realize that teaching reading in the L2 classroom involves simultaneously imparting a myriad of skills to students. These include what Koda (2004) refers to as (1) decoding, (2) text-information building, and (3) situation-model construction. At the first and most basic level, readers must be able to decode the text and decipher the sounds associated with the graphemes of the target language (TL). Although it might be tempting to dismiss this introductory level of reading as one

that needs little intellectual acumen on the part of the L2 reader, experiences with the phonics movement suggests that one of the essential building blocks of reading is mastering the sound-symbol correspondence between letters and the sounds that they represent. This initial stage of decoding written language cannot be overlooked as students attempt to access a foreign code that often presents peculiar obstacles to learners. Indeed, significant research suggests that the acquisition of phonological awareness is a necessary first element in the acquisition of reading skills (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; Adams, 1990; and Bradley & Bryant, 1983).

In Koda's (2004) second level of reading, text-information building, learners can not only decipher the phonetic code of the language but also attach meaning to the sounds they produce. The ability to bind sounds to meaning represents a significant step in the acquisition of reading skills and serves as the gateway into the realm of reading for meaning. Couched within this seemingly simple concept lies hidden areas that reading teachers must address. Rather than simply focusing on word definitions and the parsing of sentences (or longer passages), the teaching of reading should include a close look at how the use of diverse grammatical constructions influences meaning. Teachers can engage students in discussions of the impact of the tense-aspect system of verbs, the use and purpose of passive constructions, and subjugation as a means of influencing the reader's interpretation of text. In addition to helping students gain a better understanding of the TL, these discussions can also form a bridge to other language arts courses outside the foreign language section of the school.

Finally, in the third level of reading, situation-model construction, prior knowledge interacts with information gathered directly from the text to create textual comprehension. From Koda's (2004) point of view, therefore, successful reading "is governed by three competency

groups: visual information extraction, incremental information integration, and text-meaning and prior-knowledge consolidation" (p. 5).

What is taken for granted in this model is the sharing of a common, perhaps even universal, culture among and between the author and the readers. Much as current reading research (Koda, 2004; Anderson, 1999) rejects the existence of universal reading processes that cross linguistic boundaries, this paper posits the notion that deeply embedded cultural knowledge is idiosyncratic and therefore cannot be transferred across cultural boundaries often delimited by languages. Indeed, behind the curtain of words that confronts the reader and that often hides the meaning of text, lies another layer of meaning that is imbued with cultural idiosyncrasies and intentional ties that escape the uninformed or ill-informed reader. Entering into the conceptual and idiosyncratic world that writers inhabit necessitates entering into their cultural realms while concomitantly understanding and contemplating the propositions imposed by the culture. That is to say, we must labor to co-construct meaning on a common cultural field that fuses the reader and the text in a relationship that allows for comprehension at both personal and broader cultural levels. Otherwise, there can be no common ground on which to perform the intricate dance of intentional authoring, purposeful reading, and co-construction of meaning.
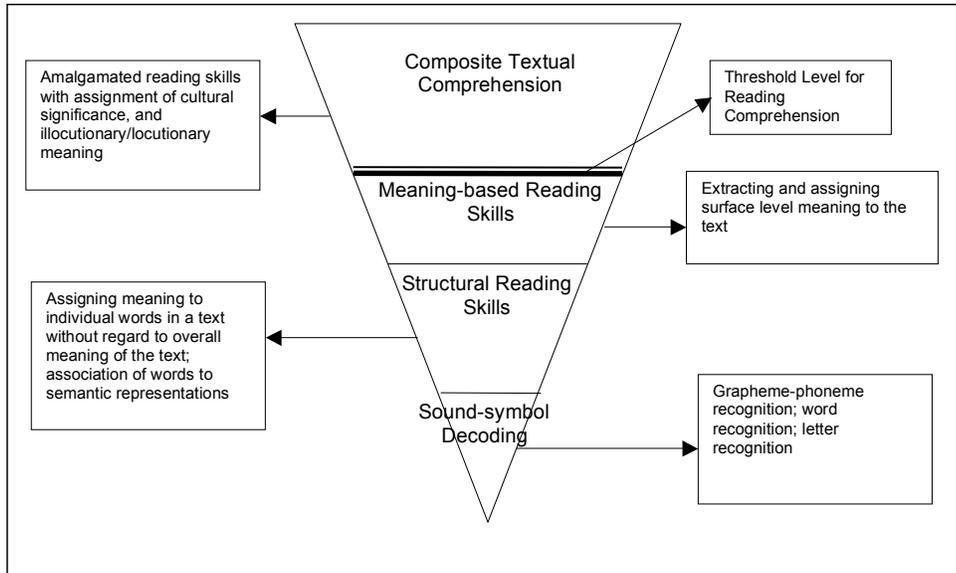
Koda's model, like many others that outline the skills needed for successful reading, represents the threshold level of reading. These skills provide the pedestal on which deeper comprehension of the text can be based. Alone, however, they serve simply as the means to scratch the surface of a deep pool of knowledge that must be explored for complete understanding of the text. Therefore, to Koda's (2004) three-tiered model, we must add a fourth level of reading skills that acknowledges the importance of cultural understanding in the interpretation of texts. This ultimate level of reading comprehension binds the lower levels in a

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composite literacy that allows for the decoding of signs and symbols as well as the assignment of contextualized and cultural meaning to the concepts presented in the text. To achieve this level of reading comprehension, learners must invest time and energy in the acquisition of skills that allow for the automatic decoding grapheme-phoneme relationships between signs and their vocal representation while also ensuring appropriate conceptual manipulations of the text's propositions.

The four reading skills discussed above are presented in Figure 1, A Proto-model of a Reading Skills Inverted Pyramid. This diagram suggests that reading becomes increasingly difficult, not less so, as readers gain the basic skills of structural decoding and move toward the ultimate goal of reading for culturally based meaning. The uppermost level of the pyramid represents the attainment of reading skills that encompass all the lower levels, including the ability to decode grapheme-phoneme relationships, the assignment of meaning to lexical items, and understanding the surface level meaning of the text. This ultimate level represents a higher-order comprehension of the text that is based not solely on structural decoding but also on cultural comprehension. At this level, interaction with the text is mediated by an in-depth understanding of the culture, history, civilization, and values of the audience for whom the text was intended. Be cautious, however. This diagram is not intended to suggest that the reading process is linear, progressing from the decoding of symbols to the grasping of textual meaning. Rather, we should understand that successful readers weave their way up and down the pyramid as they hypothesize, relate the text to their personal schemata as well as their understanding of the purpose of the text, the cultural element present in the text, and their knowledge of the intended audience.

It seems clear, then, that as readers move toward their ultimate goal of reading for deep meaning, they must employ reading strategies that allow them to compensate for incomplete knowledge in any of the four skill areas. A great deal of research (Koda, 2004; Paul & Quigley, 2001; Anderson, 1999) has focused on the strategies and processes that readers use to compensate for their lack of knowledge of lexical items, grammatical structures, and content. Those who believe that reading comprehension is facilitated through the interplay of structural aspects of reading, that is the deciphering of symbols into sounds and their associated meanings, and activation of schemata suggest that comprehension of a text hinges on the interaction of top-down and bottom-up processing. In general, much of this research suggests that the interplay of top-down and bottom-up processing allows readers to use their knowledge of the world, or schemata, and their understanding of the L2 to fill in gaps in their language systems as they decode reading passages and venture from the lower-level reading skills to those of a higher order. This vision of creating meaning from written texts is powerful and provides insights into how successful readers avail themselves of the knowledge of structure and semantics to disambiguate complex texts.

Figure 1, A Proto-model of a Reading Skills Inverted Pyramid

Composite Textual
Comprehension

Amalgamated reading skills
with assignment of cultural
significance, and
illocutionary/locutionary
meaning

Threshold Level for
Reading
Comprehension

Meaning-based Reading
Skills

Extracting and assigning
surface level meaning to the
text

Structural Reading
Skills

Assigning meaning to
individual words in a text
without regard to overall
meaning of the text;
association of words to
semantic representations

Sound-symbol
Decoding

Grapheme-phoneme
recognition; word
recognition; letter
recognition

Briefly, top-down processing assumes that readers are actively engaged in the creation of

meaning as they test self-created hypotheses based on interaction with the text and their personal

schemata. In essence, top-down processing integrates textual intention, word recognition, and the

reader's knowledge of the world in attempts to assign meaning. Bottom-up processing, or what is

sometimes referred to as data-driven processing, depends solely on the information available in

the text. By relying on the reader's recognition of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, general

grammatical rules, and the assignment of meaning to lexical items, readers are able to construct

meaning from the text without resorting to their knowledge of the world or previous personal

histories.

The interplay between top-down and bottom-up processes provides the foundation on

which meaning is constructed from textual elements as well as personal schemata. Yet, the glue

that binds this interplay in the context of reading in a foreign language is subject to failure. As readers decode symbols, engage in strategic manipulation of content, and struggle to understand larger concepts in the text, they impose their own personal schemata, or understanding of the world and its possibilities, onto the readings. The idiosyncratic nature of one's own experiences as they are couched within a specific cultural context cannot be overestimated. Some argue, in fact, that the cultural background of readers plays an important, if not determining, role in the ability to decode texts for meaning (Steffenson & Joag-Dev, 1984; Pearson & Gordon, 1979). Therefore, any attempt to transfer one's own understanding of the world, one's own personal culture, into an unfamiliar and unknown context can produce misunderstanding of the text that disallows comprehension and that creates a situation in which transference of the text's message fails. With the reading process so full of entanglements and possibilities of failure, it is important for the reading teacher to consider the reading process from the first interaction with the text to the expected final product of composite textual comprehension. Perhaps the first consideration should be the nature of differences, if they exist, between L1 and L2 reading processes. Early research, following in the footsteps of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), suggested that reading in the L1 and L2 was bound by a universal reading framework that focused on the interrelationship between L1 and L2 reading and the linguistic distance between the native and target languages (Cummins, 1979; Legaretta, 1979; Troike, 1978). Generally, this research suggested that reading processes transferred across linguistic boundaries and were troubled only when two languages were perceived as being extremely dissimilar in their basic linguistic structures. More recently, however, research has focused on language-specific reading processes and has identified different cognitive strategies used during L2 reading (Koda, 1990; Wang, Koda, & Perfetti, 2003; Juffs, 1998). With this new research in mind, it is incumbent upon the

language instructor to envision reading in the L2 not as a process of transferring reading skills from the L1 to the L2, but rather as a separate pathway that must be identified, discussed, and practiced.

Figure 2 represents a reading flowchart, or pathway to comprehension, that begins with the first interaction with the text and concludes with either failure or success at deciphering the intended meaning. As students embark on their reading journey, the imposition of perceived language universals and the transfer of L1 reading skills onto the L2 can lead to a breakdown in the cognitive processes needed to successfully navigate the text. Indeed, the inability to identify morphosyntactic differences as well as variations in information processing procedures between languages can limit the readers' ability to fully integrate the message into their cognitive and social structures. These issues are simply compounded by the imposition of L1 schemata, or what is referred to as the L1 cultural lens, onto the text. When merged, these two issues create reading difficulties at multiple levels, thereby decreasing the chance that reading comprehension will occur. The other pathway, wherein readers recognize cognitive-processing and cultural differences, offers a surer path to Composite Textual Comprehension (CTC). Here, it is suggested that readers have achieved the reading threshold level, the ability to recognize grapheme-phoneme relationships and the capacity to assign meaning to lexical items encountered. Concomitant with these essential reading building blocks, readers also recognize important morphosyntactic differences between the L1 and the L2, and adjust their processing procedures accordingly. However, the ability to realign cognitive processing is not sufficient to achieve CTC. The proficient L2 reader will also alter his or her cultural lens from the L1 to the L2. When combined, this integrated modification of the reading process will result in a truer and more sophisticated understanding of the text. It is clear, then, that the L2 teacher must

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reconceptualize reading as more than a passive skill acquired through traditional language study and the learning of vocabulary items. Reading is, rather, a multi-tiered, difficult, and powerful act that serves as an entrée into critical thinking skills, self-reflection, and the culture, history, and values of the L2 society.

As suggested in Figure 2, the ability to create and interpret written texts is a potent skill that must be privileged and honed over time. Yet, in many classrooms, the teaching of reading is often overlooked in favor of explanations of additional grammatical constructs. Indeed, the extent to which reading programs are employed in existing curricula ranges along a continuum from nonexistent to highly incorporated. While many programs employ advanced extensive reading programs to enhance the acquisition of language skills, others rely heavily on chapter-ending cultural and reading blurbs that, while short, are intended to provide fodder for interpersonal communication and other oral activities. Differences in the degree of inclusion reflect real-life pedagogical issues, district- and state-wide curricular objectives, the teacher's perception of the importance of reading, the notion that reading skills transfer across linguistic boundaries, and time constraints. Taken as a whole, these issues play an important role in pushing reading into an overlooked corner of the language classroom. In addition, too often, the crowded foreign language curriculum, with specific topics to be covered and strict deadlines for their coverage, discourages teachers from spending large segments of class time on reading. When taken together, these concerns and impediments to the introduction of a rigorous reading program deprivileges reading instruction while favoring mechanical drills and the teaching and learning of grammatical forms.

Figure 2. Reading Flowchart
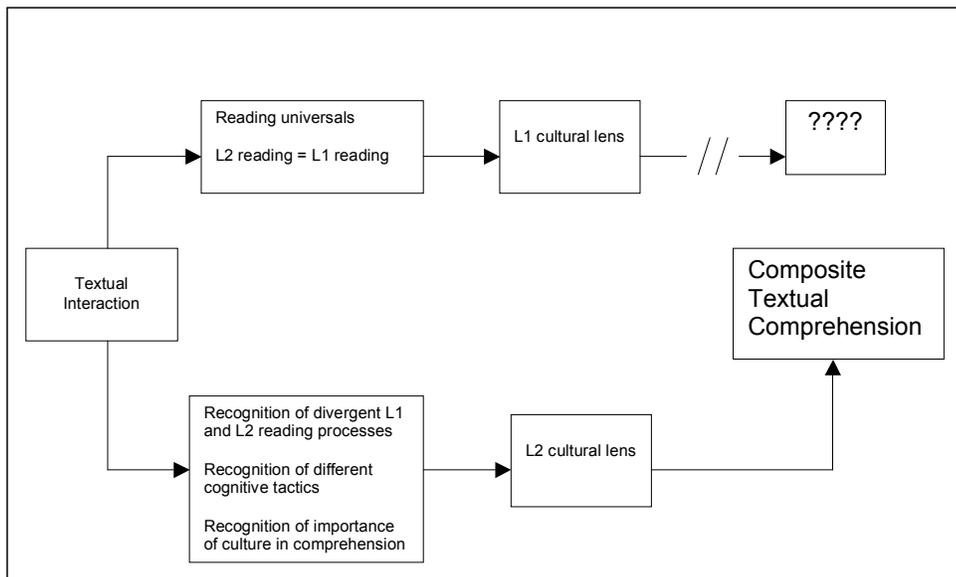
The aforementioned concerns are not, however, the only obstacles to a fully integrated reading program in the LOTE classroom. Rubinstein-Ávila (2003/2004) suggests that language learners' struggles present another set of hurdles in the L2 classroom. Primarily, these struggles are associated with one of three separate categories, including readers "who spend too much energy decoding printed words" but who fail to derive meaning from these words, readers who possess limited word recognition skills, and finally, readers who are "able to decode but fail to activate their schemata and thus do not interact with the text" (p. 290). In addition to this list, we might add a separate category, discussed in this paper, wherein students activate and impose their native language/culture schemata on the text and thus interpret the reading inappropriately. When joined with curricular impediments to the teaching of reading, students' struggles create a

context in which even the most conscientious language instructor might not be faulted for failing to incorporate an in-depth reading program into the L2 classroom. Yet, research informs us that reading presents significant opportunities for language acquisition and teaching. Indeed, beyond an entrée into the culture of the language, reading in the TL increases student exposure to comprehensible input and language (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1982), enhances learners' general language skills (Paran, 1996; Grabe, 1991), increases vocabulary knowledge (Nagy & Herman, 1987), and motivates students to improve their language skills (Bell & Campbell, 1996/1997). Beyond these intrinsic values, reading also offers teachers the opportunity to connect the language to other disciplines. Indeed, by focusing on student interests, school-wide themes, and connections to instructors outside the foreign language department, LOTE teachers can increase the array of topics available to students, thus helping to foster enthusiastic participation in reading projects. With such a strong litany of skills and competencies associated with the act of reading, it becomes incumbent upon the L2 teacher to explore means to increase reading practice as well as their own personal pedagogical proficiency in this area.

To accomplish this difficult task, teachers should view reading as an integral, indeed essential, part of the L2 curriculum. From this stance, teachers will promote the recognition among colleagues and students that reading in the L1 and L2 differs in cognitive processes employed and strategies used to generate meaning from the text. Finally, L2 instructors should understand that culture influences the intentions of the author and the textual interpretation of the reader. Armed with this sophisticated understanding of the role of reading and the multitude of skills that reading for meaning encompasses, the L2 reading teacher can employ several strategies that will help ensure Composite Textual Comprehension (CTC), as described above.

Among the first elements of successful reading instruction is the use of lesson plans that provide a framework on which to hang comprehension of the text. Lesson plans should use pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities that allow students to foreground their comprehension of the text as well as to personalize their understanding of the concepts related by the author. Foreign language instructors should also be wary of their hyphenated position between student and text. Too often, students assume that instructors will use their knowledge of the L2's structural and cultural code to provide textual interpretation when students encounter difficulties. Reliance on the teacher for interpretation or translation of material does not, however, promote self-directed learning and student independence, two skills that will benefit learners beyond the confines of their academic studies.

Effective lesson plans for reading incorporate pre-reading exercises, first-pass activities, in-depth reading questions, and personalization activities that allow students to move beyond the text and relate information to their lives. While the following is not provided as an exhaustive list of possibilities, pre-reading activities can take a variety or forms, including classroom brainstorming, free-writing activities about the topic, arranging graphic organizers, simple questions, and short readings that provide information about the author, the context, and the historical/cultural importance of the text. In each of these cases, the common thread is the activation of schemata that offer students the opportunity to begin to digest the text prior to reading. It should be noted, however, that teachers must ensure that the schemata activated allow for the successful cultural comprehension of the text. That is to say, that the activation of the L1 cultural lens can interfere with rather than promote CTC. Following the initial stages of reading lessons, students should be provided the chance to engage the text via skimming or scanning activities. This first pass of the text can take the form of finding discrete information within the

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text (scanning) or attempting to create a general impression of the text via a quick skimming of paragraphs, titles/subtitles, and other information than stands out. At the completion of this stage, students can quickly answer questions that test their ability to anticipate facts, notions, and ideas that will appear in the text. After responding to this set of questions, students read the text, determine whether their guesses were correct, and modify any answers that were incorrect. At this point, students are provided another set of questions, more detailed in nature, and are asked to reread the text and complete this new activity. Students may, within the framework of this exercise, be asked to use context to provide the definition to new vocabulary words, compare the information in the text to their current knowledge, contemplate the author's purpose, and answer other questions aimed at determining comprehension of the text. Finally, students should be asked to use the cultural information provided in pre-reading activities as well as their understanding of the target culture to discuss various ways to conceptualize the meaning of the text. This task allows students to working from different points of view and offers the chance to realize that perspective and culture influence textual meaning.

While it is the teacher's role to draw attention to the meaning of the text and the nuances that lie hidden behind the cultural curtain, teachers must remain aware of the need for students to engage learning on their own and to be responsible for information that they encounter. In many significant ways, the role of the teacher is hyphenated between the texts and the students. Teachers often adopt an "Atlas stance," thereby becoming responsible for all activities and learning, good or bad, that occurs in the classroom. Teachers and learners assume, in essence, that teaching is telling and learning is listening. Given this conceptualization of teaching and learning, students and instructors enter the classroom with taken-for-granted notions about their roles and responsibilities. Instructors are assumed to be all-knowing individuals who possess

wisdom beyond the natural, and students become simple receptors of information who are passive rather than active in the learning process. Yet, we know that teaching and learning are far more complex than simply telling and listening. Learning is a coconstructed act that assumes equal responsibility on the part of instructor and learner. L2 instructors should work to help students understand their own roles in learning and should actively help students engage learning in a self-directed manner. With regard to reading, this means that students should not rely on the teacher to supply interpretations of the text. Rather, they should use their own knowledge of the culture, history, and social values of the author to explore the text and determine meaning for themselves. Although engaging texts in such an exhaustive manner might require additional readings that shed light on the TL culture, this diligence will be rewarded by CTC and a sense of achievement often lacking in foreign language classrooms.

Reading is a far more difficult task than once imagined. Far from being a passive act, reading requires an engagement at cognitive and cultural levels. Without an understanding of the reading process and the complications that hidden cultural elements can cause, the L2 reader is often condemned to half-understandings and misinterpretations of assigned texts. With this in mind, it cannot be overly repeated that textual comprehension is mediated by cultural understanding and cognitive processes. Students need the abilities to decode the structure of the language and create meaning from lexical items while simultaneously recognizing the cultural code in which the text is written. Without the capacity to engage in this multilevel processing, students may comprehend the words of the text without truly understanding the meaning of the words. It is, therefore, the role of the foreign language teacher to ensure that students understand all the elements needed for successful reading and meaningful interpretation of L2 texts.

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