

The Cultural Literacy Concept and Foreign Language Learning

David Clay Dycus

Introduction

This paper will examine the theory behind E.D. Hirsch's (1988) controversial book, *Cultural Literacy*. Cultural literacy is background knowledge specific to the literate members of a given culture. This knowledge is needed to fully understand the text¹⁾ and images produced in or used by that culture. Hirsch argues that cultural literacy is relatively stable, and has attempted to define and systematically organize its content in American culture. He urges that it be made a required part of the general curriculum in American schools. He believes that the present American curriculum and the ideology behind it have failed to produce properly educated students, a condition which endangers the welfare and security of the nation. To remedy the situation Hirsch puts forth a reform plan that reinstates a more Traditionalist educational ideology, with the teaching of cultural literacy as one of its main components (pp. 125-133). *Cultural Literacy* has been roundly criticized mostly for its attack on American education, its support for Traditionalist versus Pragmatist ideology, and its perceived "hidden agenda" of imposing the values of dominant white middle-class American society on minorities (e.g. Booth, 1988; Christenbury, 1989; Li, 1989).

Although Hirsch's reform proposals are open to question, the *research* in schema theory and reading that guides his proposals is sound (Booth, 1988). It is this theoretical basis for cultural literacy, and the core concept of cultural literacy itself, that are the main focus of this paper. First, the general ideas behind schema theory, which is the theoretical basis for Hirsch's work, will be examined, followed by a discussion of research in schema theory relevant to Hirsch's core concept of cultural literacy. Next, the strengths and weaknesses of Hirsch's conception of cultural literacy will be addressed. The goal here is to narrow its focus and render it more useful to EFL researchers and teachers. Finally, reasons why background knowledge may not be accessed, even when it is shared, will be presented. These are mostly related to difference between Japanese and English pronunciation and writing conventions. Examples of these problems as experienced by Japanese students of EFL will be discussed.

The Theoretical Background of Cultural Literacy

When Hirsch speaks of cultural literacy, he is concerned with what schema theorists refer to as *background knowledge* or *world knowledge*. This knowledge is stored and arranged in mental structures variously termed schemata, scripts, and frames, which "...match the elements in the situation with the generic characterizations in the schematic knowledge structure" (Anderson, et al., 1978). According to Anderson (1978), schemata incorporate general knowledge which "...summarize that which is common to a large number of things or situations" (p. 434). Psycholinguistic studies show that background knowledge plays an important role in language learning and comprehension. Research in reading in a foreign language, for example, indicates comprehension is more affected by cultural background knowledge than the lexical complexity of a text (Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984). Background information has also been shown to affect listening comprehension (Markam and Latham, 1987). An overriding implication of this research is that when background knowledge is insufficient, comprehension is impaired. This is true even when people are otherwise competent in a language, be it their native tongue or a second/foreign language.

Schemata work by matching incoming information with the generic elements of one or more schemata. Incoming information is "inserted" and "tested for fit" in "slots" on the schematic scaffold. When input is matched with a slot, the slot is "instantiated", and the information this activated slot contains is now considered significant. If enough slots are filled, a schema is activated and is then used as the basis for interpreting the input. Several schemata may be tested and discarded before one is finally selected (Anderson et al., 1978; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988).

Schemata do not contain every bit of knowledge about the particular part of human experience to which they relate. Instead, they work by making *default inferences*, where the mind infers what does and does not apply to the information at hand (Anderson and Pearson, 1988). Dycus (1993) gives the following example of how default inferences work.

[I]f one were to read or hear the sentence, "We took the elevator to the ninety-fifth floor", it would be taken for granted that doors automatically opened and closed and buttons were pushed. Higher level abstraction would allow a person to infer that this took place in an office building and not a house (since houses normally do not have elevators and are rarely more than three stories tall), in a large city and not a country town (since such tall buildings are not commonly found in smaller cities and towns). (p. 38)

Schemata are organized hierarchically, overlapping with other schemata vertically

as well as horizontally, forming a more tightly connected organization than is found in a simple hierarchical system (Mandler, 1984). Higher levels on the vertical axis become increasingly specific, while lower levels become increasingly general. Depending on which direction one moves on the horizontal axis, schemata become more strongly or weakly associated with a given subject. If a schema is activated, it will open paths to other connected schemata. This process can continue for as long as necessary until a "good fit" is found. A selected schema that later proves unsuitable may be discarded and others tested in its place until a suitable match is found. The process is interactive, combining both *top-down* (conceptually driven) and *bottom-up* (data driven) procedures (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1987; Samuels and Kamil, 1988).

Schema Development and Change

According to Anderson and Pearson (1988), "[a] primary source of data for schema change is experience with particular cases" (p. 48). New and unique information can be matched to an appropriate schema if a slot can be found for it; a near match is all that is needed. Unique input is compared with existing information, and inferences and interpretations are made. The process may involve movement through several schemata as well as a number of revisions before the mind reaches an acceptable interpretation. (Cohen, 1989; Hirsch, 1988). Input that "fits" may be selected for inclusion in an existing schema, which means that the schema will be modified. Alternatively, a new schema may be established for the unique input and placed in the hierarchy. It can be expanded, changed, or even discarded, as more input is encountered that the individual determines is related to it.

The discussion so far has been of schemata at the level of the individual. However, schemata serve important social functions, especially in communication, *when they are shared* (Hirsch, 1987; Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984; Winterowd, 1989). This means that they must have, at least at a minimally acceptable level, similar or identical content (Hirsch, 1987). When schemata are poorly developed or absent, people experience varying degrees of non-comprehension (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1987). Researchers studying how cultural background information affects reading comprehension have shown that when cultural background knowledge is insufficient, as is usually the case when someone encounters a L₂ text rich in cultural references, distortions and elaborations will occur (Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984). This is one reason why Hirsch, in effect, argues that a primary goal of education should be producing similarly developed schemata among a nation's students.

Non-comprehension does not necessarily mean that input has not been interpreted. Instead it often means that the receiver has applied a meaning other than that which the sender intended. Findings of schema theory indicate that people do not simply "mine out" the meaning of a text, they impose meaning upon it (Bransford et al., 1984;

Carrell and Eisterhold, 1987; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988; Widdowson, 1984). As Kitao (1989) puts it, "what a reader knows is as important as what is on the page" (p. 10). When background knowledge is insufficient, omissions, distortions, and elaborations can result as readers are forced to fill "gaps" in their knowledge using whatever information is available to them. This is clearly true when L₁ readers, for example, encounter texts filled with L₂ cultural references (Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1989). There appears to be a strong tendency to draw upon one's own cultural background information to interpret input when other schemata are lacking. This can result in the interpretation of a second culture text in first culture terms, an interpretation that members of the first culture would likely consider "wrong".

It is this communication breakdown caused by inadequate background information that is one of Hirsch's major concerns. He argues (based on different research but similar premises as those discussed above) that people impose mutually compatible interpretations on input, and as a result communicate quickly and effectively, only when they share similarly developed schemata (Hirsch, 1987, p. 59-60, 68-69).

Culturally Specific Schemata and Associations

Of the many types of schemata, the one most relevant to cultural literacy is the *content* schemata. Content schemata are made up of background knowledge of a content area. *Culturally specific schemata*, a sub-type of content schemata, are collections of background knowledge about the activities, expectations, and values of a given culture or ethnic group. Because much of culture is implicit, writers will not bother to state certain information because they assume that readers have sufficient cultural background knowledge to interpret the text properly (Hirsch, 1987; Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984). However, when text crosses cultures, and even sub-cultures within a dominant culture, readers often lack the cultural background information that the writer believes the reader "naturally" possesses, and comprehension suffers. This can be true even when the text is lexically and structurally accessible to the reader.

Culturally specific content schemata can themselves be divided into types and subtypes based on the *associations* they contain. Associations are analogous to labels, symbols, or key words that represent a much wider group of concepts. Associations function as a sort of shorthand, "used by a writer to encode a concept without having to explain the concept entirely. The reader, if she or he is to decode the concept correctly, must use the same associations to fill in information that the writer did not include specifically" (Kitao and Kitao, 1989: 177). Because non-native readers are often unable to draw on the proper associations to gain adequate understanding of a text, associations become a problem for L₂ learners.

Associations, just as the schemata they are a part of, can be divided into different types. According to Kitao and Kitao (1989), Kunihiro proposes two main types of

associations, *word association* and *cultural association*. Word association links stimulus-response words while cultural association links a word with its cultural connotation. Cultural association is further divided into two types, *sentence association* and *indicative association*. The first includes those aspects of text that give clues to the writer and her or his background. The second includes the associations related to custom, history, myth and legend, arts and literature, and so on. With the mention of an indicative association a writer or speaker (or an artist) expects the members of the intended audience to tap into a storehouse of relevant information and apply it to the task of interpreting the message. As mentioned above, for this to happen, schemata must be shared and be identical, at least at a threshold level.

E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy

A close reading indicates that Hirsch is mainly concerned with the importance of background knowledge, particularly cultural associations, in the formation and maintenance of literacy in the United States. He believes that there is a literacy crisis in the United States (Hirsch, 1987, p. 4-9), due in large part to a growing lack of shared cultural and other background knowledge among the youth of the country. This crisis is so great that it threatens, he believes, the very well-being of the nation itself. Drawing on the findings of schema theory, he argues that a core of nationally shared associations is essential for the well being of any literate nation, since fast and efficient communication greatly depends on having access to shared associations and having a sense of what is widely shared by members of a culture. He calls this body of information *cultural literacy*, and defines it as "the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (Hirsch, 1988: xii). This definition is exceedingly vague. To clarify it, it is useful to consider the key points about cultural literacy, listed below, that Hirsch raises in his book.

1. Literate knowledge is wide in scope and is not restricted to a specific social class (p. xiii, 11).
2. Cultural literacy is not confined to "culture" in the sense of being acquainted with the fine arts (p. xiii).
3. The body of a culture's literate knowledge can be viewed as a "national vocabulary" through which members communicate with each other (p. 26, 75-76).
4. This national vocabulary is found at a "middle level" which lies above the level of everyday knowledge and below that of expert knowledge (p. 103).

5. Knowledge of a given item need only be general for a person to adequately use it in communication. (p. 49, 58-59).
6. Although changes occur in the national vocabulary, a basic quality of cultural literacy is stability. (p. xii, 102, 107).

Having articulated the concept of cultural literacy, he goes on to attempt to define the actual contents of American cultural literacy. The first attempt is found in a 5000 item appendix to *Cultural Literacy*, entitled "What Literate Americans Know" (Hirsch, 1987, p. 152-215). This appendix is simply an alphabetical listing of words, titles, axioms, idioms and expressions, names and dates. His later efforts, *A First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, et al., 1989) written for elementary school children, and *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, et al., 1988) are more comprehensive, with items arranged in categories and given brief explanations.

Hirsch's work has not been well received by many intellectuals and educators. His list and dictionaries are part of an impassioned criticism of what he calls America's "fragmented curriculum" (1987, p. 110-25). He advocates a return to a more Traditionalist curriculum, which emphasizes the learning of facts, although he would leave the techniques of teaching up to instructors. He wishes to see less reliance on the current Pragmatist ideology, in which the learning of general skills in critical thinking and problem solving are emphasized over the learning of specific content (Hirsch, 1987, p. xv, 59).

Predictably, defenders of the Pragmatist educational philosophy accuse Hirsch of advocating a return to an outmoded "static container/contained model of education" (Booth, 1988, p. 15). They feel that requiring the teaching of specific content in the classroom would lead to a curriculum merely geared to the memorization of facts, and decry what they see as an attempt to impose the values and literacy of a dominant culture on the subcultures of the United States (e.g. Booth, 1988; Christenbury, 1989; Li, 1989). The intellectual climate in educational circles at the time *Cultural Literacy* was published may have intensified the criticism against the book. Allan Bloom (1987) raised a storm of controversy with *The Closing of the American Mind*, a lament about how higher education has failed both the nation and its students. At the same time, William Bennett, then secretary of education under Ronald Reagan, was urging Stanford University's students to keep a course in Western Studies instead of abandoning it for a new course in non-western texts and ideologies (Bennett, 1988). Both advocated a eurocentric curriculum and "back-to-basics" reforms in education, and both received a hostile reception from liberal academics.

One other area of criticism at the time *Cultural Literacy* was published was the

5000 item list, both for what it included and what it did not. Referring to the list, Booth (1988) asks, "...why "andante" and not "vivace" or "presto," why "syphilis" and not "AIDS," why "atheism" and not "theism," why "archipelago" and not "archbishop?" (p. 18). Still, some of Hirsch's proposals and his list have found qualified support in academic circles (e.g. Lazere, 1989; Winterowd, 1989), from working teachers below the college level (Hirsch, 1988; Kerewesky, 1989) and conservative educators, business people, and government officials.

The Cultural Literacy Concept in the EFL Context

It is now widely accepted that learning a second language also involves learning a second culture (i.e. Damen, 1987; Winterowd, 1989). The concept of culture, however, includes the sum of human activity and so, in ESL/EFL, needs to be reduced and refocused on areas of direct concern to researchers and teachers. Defining certain aspects of culture, namely cultural associations, as cultural literacy, is one step towards that goal.

Since Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy includes mere lexical items as well as associations, it needs to be reformulated by reducing its content to only items with cultural associations. This requires looking at the criteria Hirsch used to compile his list, and the techniques he used, as well as the proposed uses of cultural literacy as he defines it.

A major problem is that the cultural literacy concept, as Hirsch conceives it, is so extensive that it lacks focus. His list and subsequent dictionaries gather both items rich in cultural associations and what are basically lexical items with little associational content. The listing of "chosen people" and "Civil War" make perfect sense, considering the complex of people, ideas, and events associated with them. But why should "clarinet" appear on the same list? For the notion of cultural literacy to be useful to language teachers, it must be focussed on what is truly cultural, and should be narrowed to exclude items that are merely lexical.

Another problem is with his list itself. Complaints such as Booth's about what is and is not on the list are well-founded. Hirsch's statement that "cultural literacy lies *above* the everyday levels of knowledge that everyone possesses and *below* the expert level known to specialists (1987, p. 19) is extremely vague. The standards for determining what knowledge should and should not be considered a part of cultural literacy are not rigorous. The original list was made through the simple collaboration of Hirsch and two colleagues from different academic fields, who criticized each other's lists and then combined them to make the final product. A later edition of *Cultural Literacy* included revisions based on submissions by 200 readers, and, through the Cultural Literacy Foundation, Hirsch continues to solicit comments and criticism from interested members of the public.

Although Hirsch claims that the list and the dictionaries that are based on it are *descriptive* of what literate Americans know (Hirsch, 1987, p. 137), the arguments of the book (and its subtitle, "what every American needs to know") indicate that it is also intended to be *prescriptive*. To be truly descriptive of what literate Americans know, the list and dictionaries should be based on much larger and better controlled samples than have been used to date. Adequate description should come before prescription.

Despite these weaknesses, the concept of cultural literacy, if narrowed down to include only items with cultural associations, appears to be a useful one to apply in EFL. Winterowd summarizes Hirsch in this way: "If we want to communicate, we must have a body of shared knowledge" (1989, p. 97). Both EFL and ESL students need to develop cultural background schemata that roughly match those of native speakers if they are to deal with texts (both written and spoken) at a level higher than that of functional literacy.

One final criticism levelled at Hirsch needs to be addressed in regards to reformulating the concept of cultural literacy for EFL. That is the claim that cultural literacy will result in the imposition of W.A.S.P. culture and values on minorities (e.g. Booth, 1988; Christenbury, 1989; Li, 1989). It is true that, to learn a new language, a person has to, in effect, take on a new culture (Winterowd, 1989). When people feel that this new culture threatens or diminishes their first culture, as often happens among minorities, they may resent and resist the presence of the second culture. Thus, the "cultural politics" of language and literacy naturally become a source of friction in multicultural societies such as the United States and in former colonial nations. However, in a virtually monocultural nation like Japan, the indigenous culture is not threatened by the study of a foreign language and culture. The study of a foreign language has the effect of *augmenting*, not undermining, a student's experience. In the Japanese context, then, the issues of cultural oppression that arise in the American context of the cultural literacy debate do not apply.

The Cultural Literacy Pyramid

By revising the content of cultural literacy described above by removing simple lexical items, what remains are items with cultural associations. The associational content of this list can be roughly divided into four categories: written/spoken (language), visual (such as art and symbols), musical, and geographical (including famous places and landmarks). Another way of looking at the contents of American cultural literacy is in terms of a pyramid (Fig. 1). The lower levels comprise the Western Tradition of associations inherited from the outside world, most notably from Europe and the Middle East. The upper tiers make up the American Tradition of associations which developed in the United States. The width of each level is inversely related to the num-

ber of items it contains; width is a result of the wide applicability of relatively small number of associations. In terms of *content*, the higher one goes in the pyramid, the greater the number of associations, although they become increasingly more limited in applicability, and probably shorter-lived. The arrangement of levels, starting from the bottom, reflects the order in which types of associations might best be taught. Because it has the widest applications for all varieties of English as well as other European languages, the content of the Western Tradition should be dealt with first.

The Cultural Literacy Pyramid

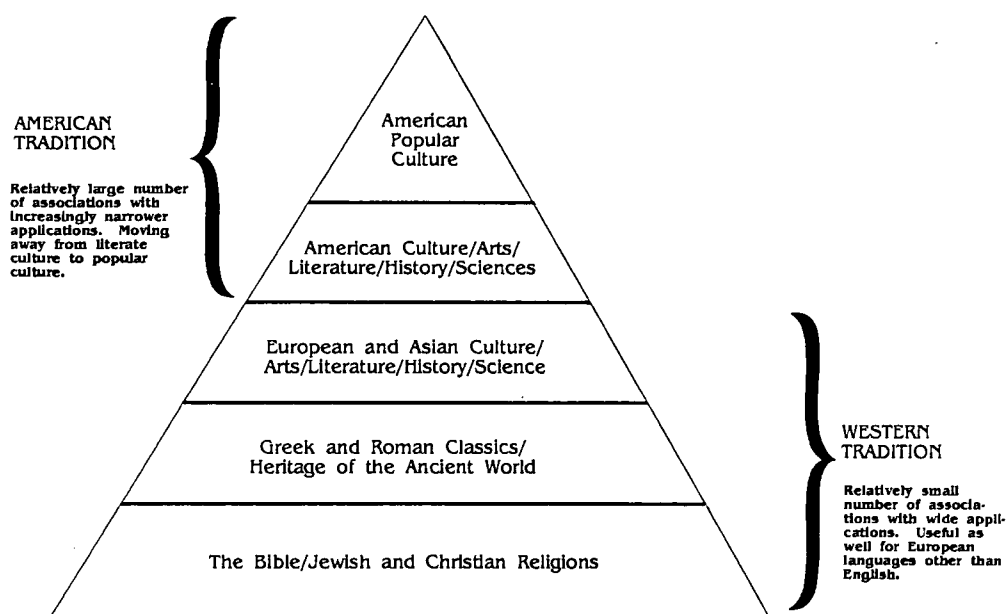


Figure 1

Moving from Cultural to Intercultural Literacy

An advantage EFL teachers have in Japan is that students already have useful background knowledge about the United States and the history and cultural traditions of the Western world. From a practical viewpoint, it would be useful to determine what cultural background knowledge is known and not known by students. Dycus (1991) has made an initial attempt to determine the extent that such knowledge is held by Japanese junior college students and Americans qualified to teach in Japan. He distributed questionnaires in Japanese and English to 16 Japanese junior college students on a two-week visit to an American college, and English questionnaires to group of 10 American graduate students. The questionnaire was based on a revised version of Hirsch's list in which simple lexical items were not included, leaving mostly items with cultural associations. The results showed better recognition by Japanese students of

Western art, literature, and mythology than of similar categories in the American tradition section of the survey. In both cases, politico-historical figures were generally poorly recognized. Japanese students were quite familiar with the major works of Shakespeare (by title and by name of characters) and fairy tales.

Although tentative, this study indicates useful areas of overlap in the culturally literate content schemata of Americans and Japanese. This realm of knowledge can be called *intercultural literacy*, and represents an area of knowledge that teachers and materials designers can put to use for educational purposes. If the content of intercultural literacy is as stable as Hirsch claims cultural literacy is, then we can build on it with more confidence than we can with the fleeting knowledge people have of contemporary popular culture. Building a list of L₁ and L₂ background knowledge overlap through studies similar to the one above is a logical step. Areas where knowledge is insufficient can be targeted for remedial instruction, while shared knowledge can be put to use and time saved by not teaching what is already known.

Problems in Activating Existing Background Knowledge

In Japan, certain stumbling blocks exist that may make it difficult for an instructor to get students to activate existing background knowledge. Most are related to differences between Japanese and English in pronunciation and stress. For example, the last name of the famous actress, Marilyn Monroe is stressed on the second syllable in English but on the first syllable in Japanese. This one small difference is enough to confuse many students. Often, information that is known may be pronounced or stressed so differently in Japanese that learners do not recognize the term when spoken in English. Also, the Japanese language has a very strict correspondence between the written symbols of its hiragana and katakana writing systems and pronunciation. There is a tendency to apply the same rigid expectation of symbol-sound correlation to English letters representing vowels. Thus, the letter "a" is often invariably attributed with the pronunciation [a] of the Japanese katakana symbol [ア]. For example, the names in the Bible story of Cain [kein] and Abel [eibl], then, are pronounced [kai:n] and [abel]. In cases like this, students generally do not recognize the English pronunciation even when they do know the story.

A second source of misunderstanding is the result of translations of names, titles, and so on. In many cases, translation from the original language into the second language results in confusion, either because words or concepts do not directly correspond or because of a lack of familiarity with second language vocabulary. Japanese often learn the names of biblical and mythological figures and stories according to Latin pronunciation and do not recognize the English versions of these names and titles. Also, pronunciations that Japanese believe are English are often actually from other languages. A good example of this is, again, from the names of biblical charac-

ters. This is also true of place names in European nations. Japanese call most Italian cities by their Italian names and not their English equivalents, for example.

These problems must be taken into account in any study of Japanese EFL learners' knowledge of cultural literacy, as they can give the indication that an item is not known when, in fact, it is.

Conclusion

Cultural background knowledge is an important consideration for ESL/EFL instructors because it guides, and misguides, the language comprehension and interpretation processes and supplies default values when background knowledge is insufficient. All schemata are to some degree personally variable and culturally influenced, so the greater the social and cultural distance between people, the greater the chance of problems in processing and interpreting text and messages. An assessment of what actually comprises essential cultural background knowledge in a given culture, then, potentially has great practical value to language teachers and students. E.D. Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy, when revised, offers a useful tool for making such an assessment, both of the cultural associations of a single culture, and of the knowledge shared between members of different cultures. In practical terms, explicit knowledge of the nature of the cultural background knowledge that learners bring to tasks can help instructors make informed and personalized decisions about the materials and activities they select. Systematically determining levels of background knowledge overlap can provide useful information to guide teaching practices and materials development as well. Cultural literacy is a promising concept, and one that bears further investigation and refinement.

Notes

- 1) For the purposes of this paper, *text* refers to both written and spoken messages.

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