Cultural Schemata and Poetry Reading

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Though a person's reading practices involve the psychological activities of his or her mind, it is axiomatic in the view that it involves both pre-existing linguistic and cultural knowledge, which form one's linguistic and cultural schemata. Since readers in different cultural communities receive different education, the knowledge they have acquired is different. Moreover, they have been greatly influenced by their social customs, their social behavior and their social ideology.

The purpose of the research centers on the cognitive reading process of subjects from different cultures. With the feedback from the subjects being presented and discussed, this study aims to explain how different readers in English and Chinese cultures read, engage with and interpret poems and how they respond to the culturally loaded texts by writers with same cultural schemata and with different cultural schemata. It attempts to exemplify how the subjects read and respond in their communications in terms of their different schemata which result in the differences and similarities in their interpretations and responses when they read poems and the culturally loaded discourses. It aims to present different ways in which these subjects form and utilize images in their reading process.

"The term 'schema' is used to refer to well-integrated chunks of knowledge about the world, about events, about people, and about actions" (Eysenck & Keane, 1995, p. 320). The crucial function of schemata is to enable people to form expectations. However, because of the existence of cultural differences, the expectations that emerge from schemata are bound to be culturally different.

There are many kinds of schemata. Cultural schemata, which offer for the reading process the existent cultural knowledge that one has obtained, are formed with all related cultural knowledge within one's reach, from schools, families, and communities (Chang, 2004). They broadly "portray not only the world of physical objects and events, but also more abstract worlds of social interaction, discourse, and even word meaning" (D'Andrade 1990, cited in Kern, 2000, p. 94). People within cultural communities use these schemata in their intra-cultural communication (Gudykunst, 1983). It is easier for them to read works written from the same cultural background because they share similar frameworks of cultural schemata.

As different languages possess disparate culture-specific inventories of linguistic items for expressing universal concepts, the consequent diversity of these expressions often disrupts the comprehension of culturally underlying meanings as far as a non-native reader is concerned. Reading a text in their native language and culture and one in their target language and culture, they are more responsive to the former than the latter. Sometimes, different interpretations of the same linguistic item or the same interpretation of different linguistic items might appear among readers from different cultures (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

In the case of EFL readers, they have to get English cultural schemata, if they want to have a full understanding of English culture-targeted discourses. The prerequisite for their

understanding is that the English texts they read should conform to their English cultural schemata.

Methods

To get the data for the qualitative analysis, four subjects were interviewed and their recordings were transcribed respectively and analyzed to reveal how subjects from Chinese culture and English culture were affected by their cultural schemata in their poetry reading processes and to find out the similarity and difference in their interpretation of poems.

Questionnaires, Test Materials and Subjects

For this research, a questionnaire has been designed to investigate how advanced educated readers from different cultures read selected Chinese and English poems and how different cultural schemata influence their cognitive reading processes.

A criterion for material selection has been set up on the basis of relevant investigation and empirical evidence in a pilot study. With such a criterion, four poems have been selected as the test materials. Two of them are Chinese poems. Two of them are English poems. They are all culturally loaded and full of images, and the words used in them are within the limit of the core vocabulary of the subjects.

In order to avoid reciprocal influences, all of the subjects were interviewed one at a time and some irrelevant questions were added in the questionnaire for the interview.

The two selected Chinese poems are *Remember Younger Brothers* by Du Fu and *An Untitled Poem* by Li Shang-yin (Zhou, Zhou, Huo, 1987) The two selected English poems are *Meeting at Night* by Robert Browning and *Metaphors* by Sylvia Plath (Butscher, 1979). Though some of the poems might seem to be familiar to some subjects, their familiarity with the poems could make their acts in their reading processes more explicit.

Two Chinese subjects (Subject A and B) are young teachers of English. The other two (Subject C and D) are English MA students of English study.

Procedures

Each interview was started first with some warm-up questions in the questionnaire to make the subjects (interviewees) feel at ease. Then he/she was asked to read the selected poem one after another. He/she was shown two lines at a time to get his/her interpretation. When the interpretation of each poem was finished, he/she was asked a set of questions in the questionnaire. The Chinese subjects were interviewed twice separately in order to avoid the language difficulties they might have in expressing themselves. One interview was conducted in Chinese with those two Chinese poems in their original versions. Another was done in English.

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards by the researcher, who also translated the Chinese versions of the interviews into English.

English Subjects   **Chinese Subjects**
Words and phrases   *Words and phrases*
          ↓   ↓
Line interpretation   *Images*
                                                     ↓
                                            Line interpretation

Figure 1. Subject's Line Interpretations

Results

Though in this research much of the evidence suggested that in some cases subjects shared common procedures and interpretations, some distinctions did occur. Most of the distinctions had their origins in different cultural orientations.

Different Line Interpretation Schemata in their Reading of Poems

According to the theory articulated by contemporary researchers, readers' schemata provide much of the basis for their comprehending and learning the ideas in the discourses (Bower & Cirilo, 1985; Rubin, 1995). Various schemata of existent knowledge are stored at different levels in people's mind. They form building bricks of cognitive competence or knowledge structure of various kinds of things. When people are confronted with new things or when they come across new knowledge in their reading, they will refer back to their existent knowledge and present in their mind schemata, which are relevant to the new knowledge (Rumelhart, 1977). When people read something, they consult a mental representation of typical situations. When key words or phrases in the text come into their eyes, their stimulated mind activates their linguistic and cultural schemata and cuts and fits them in order to get a satisfactory interpretation of the message (Chang, 2004).

As the transcripts indicate, what the Chinese subjects and English subjects have in their minds are different when they are shown two lines at a time. The English subjects interpret each line as a whole while the Chinese subjects catch hold of individual images first and then make necessary logical connections before they arrive at their interpretation of the whole line.

Their ways of line interpretations are different as illustrated in Figure 1.

The Chinese subjects grasp images for their understanding while the English subjects did not appear to seek images. This can be clearly illustrated in the following table.

The Chinese subjects form more images with the textual clues before they come to their understanding. The English subjects do not show an obvious tendency to look for images in their interpretations.

Different Poetry Reading Schemata

Unlike the previous line interpretation schemata, this difference does not lie between the Chinese and the English, but among individuals. Though they have been asked to read two lines at a time, which, to some extent, has kept them from showing their usual way of reading, their responses still show that they diverged into two main directions in their poetry reading schemata. For instance:

Table 1. Subject's Image Seeking Status in Reading the Poem
REMEMBER YOUNGER BROTHERS

Subjects Lines / Categories		A	B	C	D
1&2	Textual Clues	The boundary, the beating of drums, the army for a battle, the far-away place in autumn, the cry of a swan.	A funeral procession is going on with the drums beating. The scene of the autumn, a cry of a swan.	Swan.	Sentries beating drums.
1&2	**Impressions**	Misery and sadness.	Somebody has died. That kind of sad cry of the swan. Feeling very sad.	The two lines, they sound lonely, because no one is around. The swan is lonely. There is the word *remember* in the title. The swan is the symbol of sadness. It seemed very lonely. It might be a funeral scene.	The war or armies, the tragedy of war maybe.

Subjects A, B and D
(To read the whole poem to get) *the general* (impressions)
↓
Individual details
↓
Understanding of the poems

Subject C
(To get hold of the meanings of) *individual details*
↓
The general
↓
Understanding of the poem

These subjects have either a background primarily in literary study or a background primarily in language study. The different ways in which they read the poems might originate from their fostered reading schemata, which are related to the way in which they have been previously educated. The modules that students of literary studies take are different from those taken by students of language. Besides, the approaches and strategies recommended for reading in modules of these two specialities are different too. Whether their different text-processing directions in reading poetry are a result of the ways they have been taught has to be further researched but such processing is unlikely to affect local interpretations of the language used or the application of particular cultural schemata (Chang, 2004).

Textual and Cultural Context

"Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). When a person reads a text, his/her emotions, attitudes, and motivations in relation to the target language of the text itself, to its addresser and to the target culture will affect how they respond to the text. Similarly, words in different syntactic, semantic and cultural contexts become different entities for readers. This is especially the case when the readers are from different cultures. An illustrative example can be found in the following different, culture-bound expression used for the same functional concept (of doing something in a very efficient and beneficial way).

Kill two birds with one stone. (English)
yi jian shuang diao. (Chinese)
(= Shoot two hawks with one arrow.)

Hawks and arrow are used in Chinese while birds and stone are used in English.
As different languages possess disparate culture-specific inventories of linguistic items for expressing universal concepts, the consequent diversity of these expressions often disrupts the comprehension of culturally underlying meanings as far as a non-native reader is concerned. Reading a text in their native language and culture and one in their target language and culture, they are more responsive to the former than the latter. Sometimes, different interpretations of the same linguistic item or the same interpretation of different linguistic items might appear among readers from different cultures (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).
Readers from distinctly different national cultures tend to give different interpretations to culturally sensitive materials if their cultural schemata are divergent. The same words or expressions may not mean the same thing to people from different cultures. If, however, their cultural schemata are convergent on these words or expressions, their interpretations share the commonality. If their cultural schemata do not exist for these items, they cannot come to any interpretation at all.
Since full understanding of a poem requires the activation of their relevant cultural schemata (Chang, 2004) suitable for the cultural context of the poems, all of the subjects face some difficulties in their interpretation of their non-native poems. The different status of cultural schemata results in their different interpretations. The examples given below will present such evidence.

Table 2. Subjects' Schemata and Interpretations
(**S** means the same or almost the same interpretation. **D** means different interpretation. **M** means that they did not interpret. **I** means that they interpreted.)

Examples	Chinese subjects	English subjects	Schemata
Swan	S	S	Convergence
Bright moon at home	S	S	Convergence
Easterly wind	I	M	Absence (English subjects)
Spring silk-worm … productions	D	D	Divergence
A candle… dries up.	D	D	Divergence
Mount Penglai	I	M	Absence (English subjects)
Two heart beating	S	S	Convergence
Red fruit	M	I	Absence (Chinese subjects)
Money's new- ..purse	D	D	Divergence
I've eaten a bag… apples	D	D	Divergence
Boarded …getting off	M	I	Absence (Chinese subjects)

Among these examples, both *easterly wind* and *Mount Penglai* are culturally marked expressions. They have very strong cultural connotations. In Chinese culture, easterly wind means the spring wind, which brings life to everything. Mount Penglai is imagined to be the ultimate paradise of the Taoists, the home of the Eight Immortals.

Without such background knowledge in their cultural schemata, it is natural for the English subjects to fail in obtaining the appropriate meanings. They are not likely to form relevant images in their mind. The same is true of the Chinese subjects in their failure to grasp the meanings of exotic culture-specific English items as shown above.

Fostered Schemata and the Linguistic Education

The other findings from the analysis of the data are the different steps in Subject B's gradual understanding of the poem *Meeting at Night.*

Understanding a poem involves a cognitive process in which one has to activate, match or restructure (if necessary) his or her relevant schema, which is done by building a central causal chain and reorganizing information from the poem and from one's pre-existing

Table 3. Subject B's Application of Schemata in her Reading Process

No.	Textual clues	Subject B's reaction	Comments
1	The grey sea and the long black land.	Why is the sea not a blue sea but a grey sea instead?	The confrontation of her native cultural schema about the sea with English cultural schemata. The sea described in the poem brings her questions.
2	The yellow moon hung in the sky.	1) There are three colour words: grey, black and yellow. 2) We Chinese do not say yellow moon. But here in England I did see yellow moon. The so-called yellow moon is a moon with a yellow halo, which is typical in Britain and which I didn't see in China. 3) The colour of the moon, the sea and the sand are helpful in your understanding of the poem.	1) The activation of her English linguistic (semantic) schema of colours. 2) The interference of her native cultural schemata about the moon and the arousal of her relevant English cultural schemata. The selection and renewal of her schemata. The combination of her native and English cultural schemata. 3) The fitting of intertexual schemata.
3	The startled little waves.	Why are they startled? It might express that they have been startled by something and woken up from their sleep. I am not quite sure.	Her struggling with the possible interpretation through her native linguistic and English schemata of personification. Convergence of schemata.
4	Sand.	1) The 'land' again? Oh no not 'land' but 'sand'. Maybe for its rhyme. 2) On the beach? Because it is sand, there might be a beach.	1) Her use of English linguistic schemata (rhyme schemata). 2) The word *sand* activates her beach schema, because it has great diagnostic value as a component in the schema. Convergence of both native and English cultural schemata.
5	I.	What is the person doing there?	Raising questions. Looking for clues.
6	Warn sea-scented beach.	Here comes the beach.	Confirmation of her beach schema.
7	Till a farm appears.	On the seaside there is a farm, isn't there?	Formation of the settings.
8	And blue spurt of a lighted match.	Maybe it's too dark. He/she used a match. When it is lit, the blue spurt comes out.	The use of schema of lighting a match. Convergence of both native and English cultural schemata.
9	A tap at the pane.	1) What is the pane? 2) Oh, yeah. Someone is tapping the window.	1) Trying to figure out the meaning of the word 'pane'. Lacking sufficient ELS. 2) Realization of its meaning with its semantic context.
10	The quick scratch.	A very quick… Ah, this scratch is the lighting of the match.	Repetition of phrase leading to interpretation of meaning within its context. The application of her general schemata.
11	Two hearts beating each to each.	1) It seems that there is a room on the farm, in which sit two people. 2) Maybe there are two lovers sitting there.	1) The 'chewing' of the phrase. The application of her native and English linguistic schemata. 2) The 'digestion' of the phrase with her lovers' meeting schema. Convergence of the native and English cultural schemata.

schemata with respect to that chain. Many schemata are activated and instantiated in this reading process in order to correlate and decode the information in the poem. The process of choosing and matching with schemata to be related to the gist of the poem gradually leads the way to final understanding.

This can be seen in Subject B's reading process as shown in Table 3.

When she finished reading the last line of the poem, her lovers' meeting schema, and the convergence of her native and English cultural schemata, correlated with her other schemata and made her realize that it was a love poem:

> My general impression is that the poet 'I' is a ... a kind of... The first stanza gives me a not very good collocation of being unhappy because of the colour words grey and black. But the second stanza gives me a kind of sweet and warm feeling. For instance the blue spurt of the lighted match, and then two hearts beating each to each. There is a kind of tenderness and romance in it. I just make nonsense. I don't know exactly what it really means. This might be a love poem.

During the whole process, she met with only one difficulty, which was caused by her lack of relevant English language schemata (see No. 9 above). She solved the problem herself by guessing its meaning according to its context. Most of the difficulties she had been struggling with however were related with her English cultural schemata. The whole process of her reading was saturated with confrontation (see No. 1), activation, interference, selection, renewal, combination (see No. 2) and convergence (see No. 8 & 11) of her native and English cultural schemata.

After her reading, she was offered some follow-up questions. It was by checking points from these questions that she was led into comparatively further understanding.

When Subject B started to read the poem, she was puzzled by the colour words. She repeated these words several times. It suggested that she was grappling with the incongruity between the description in the poem and her colour schemata (see Table 3). The use of the words to describe the sea and the land, as she acknowledged, was against her usual schema about them. She had been wrestling with her puzzlement until she found the hint in the title.

In her search for meaning and her interaction with the text, she continued to apply her schemata to develop strategies in order to solve those complex problems. For instance, she used rhyme schema to explain the use of the word 'sand' in the poem. She used her cultural schema about colors in her analysis of the color words when she answered Question Two.

But Table 4 shows that she was not quite sure of her interpretation of the poem until she came to the follow-up questions. It is quite obvious that she could understand the poem better then than in the line-by-line interpretation. One reason could be that in the line-by-line interpretation she could only see two sentences out of the textual context. Another more important reason is that the following-up questions were like a checklist, which served as stimuli to arouse her relevant schemata.

The objective effects of her reading in a certain way has indicated that the linguistic education will enable students to build their awareness of how to process texts (Carter & Long, 1991; McRae 1991).

Table 4. Subject B's Activations of Relevant Schemata in her Reading

N o.	Questions	Subject B's response	Comment
1	What do you think of the language used in this poem?	The language is good. It sounds beautiful and musical. There is a lot of alliteration. It sounds rhythmical.	The question arouses her English cultural schemata for language appreciation.
2	Are there any cultural references in this poem which makes it easier for you to understand the poem? What are they?	I just get hold of the use of the colour words. Neither the colour *grey* nor the word *black* gives people good association. They all have negative connotation.	The use of her cultural schema about colours for her analysis of the colour words.
3	What associations have you made in understanding the poem?	1) Why does the sea become grey? When can you find that the sea looks grey? The black land looks black, either because of his mood or because of time. 2) The title here is *Meeting at Night,* because the night falls, everything looks black and grey. Besides, the sea arouses one's romantic and spacious imagination. 3) We Chinese do not say yellow moon. The so-called yellow moon is a moon with a yellow halo, which is typical in Britain and which I didn't see in China. The colour of the moon, the sea and the sand are helpful in your understanding.	1) She is trying to get the answers for the previous questions in her mind aroused by her sea schema (**No.1** of the above table). 2) She finds out the answer at the hint of the word 'night,' which activates her night schema 3) She correlates her moon schema with the information about the moon in the poem, trying to compare and revise her moon schema.
4	What visual impressions have you got from the poem?	That is the sea. And also the colours.	The result of the confrontation between her schemata and the information of the poem.
5	What images have you got from the poem?	The pictures I have in my mind are that of the seaside with a moon and waves and sand and that of a room on a farm, in which there is a dim light and two hearts also, ha... this kind.	Her rearrangement of images in her mind as a result of her use of image forming schemata.
6	Are there any metaphors in the poem? What are they? How do you understand them?	I think 'the blue spurt of lighted match' can be a kind of metaphor. It stands for a kind of hope or tenderness.	Her schema of spatial sequence. And her interpretation of the specific expression with her metaphor schemata.
7	From whose point of view is this poem narrated? What is its narrative sequence?	It seems that it's narrated according to space. The first thing one sees is the sea and the land. From what the poet sees to the beach, then the farm.	She is conscious of the spatial sequence and the views from the poet.
8	What is the usual schema in your poem reading?	I felt uncomfortable when you showed me two lines at a time just now, because I didn't know what's going on in the rest of the poem. It affected my understanding of these two lines. So the reading of the whole poem is very helpful in your understanding of the poem.	Her stated usual reading schema --- from the general to the individual.

If Subject B could read the poem for the different cultural perspectives, she would have felt more confident of what to do in her reading and would have found the embedded cues in the written discourse for the activation of her appropriate schemata. However, the precondition for this transaction to proceed properly requires that she should possess such kinds of schemata.

Summary

The reading of culturally sensitive discourse is often culture-oriented. That means the understanding of such poems requires the correlation of cultural schemata. The understanding of the same targeted discourse with different schemata correlation results in different interpretations of the discourse.

When the subjects read the poems, they made evaluations of the poems by resorting to their past knowledge. When either an unexpected linguistic item or an unfamiliar cultural item occurred, they would use their schemata to make at least a seemingly sound explanation for the item.

Chinese subjects showed an obvious feature—the image-making activity —when the lines of a poem appeared before their eyes. While they read, they kept constructing images before they came to a fuller understanding of each line. Once an image was produced, it was seldom modified and reconstituted or adapted to its cultural context (Chang, 2004).

The English subjects did not show any obvious evidence that they are image-dependent. They tend to think more logically and analytically by using their linguistic and cultural schemata. Though they can come to their final interpretations of the poems from Chinese culture, they face difficulties in figuring out their meanings when they meet with the culture-loaded expressions.

As the study shows, there exists another reading schema difference. Three of them read from the general to the specific and one of them from the specific to the general. However such a difference is not seemingly culture-specific.

Finally, the researches on reading in different cultural contexts require not only the means of cognitive study but also those of language and culture studies.

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Appendixes

1

REMEMBER YOUNGER BROTHERS
by Du Fu
Not a single soul around while sentries beat drums,
A lone swan cries somewhere at the autumn boundary;
Commencing tonight dews are supposed to turn white,
The moon at home must be very much brighter by now;
All my younger brothers thus far are still missing,
After homeless I can't tell they are dead or alive;
All the letters I sent home were found undelivered,
What else can I do when no truce is still in sight?

2

AN UNTITLED POEM
by Li Shang Yin
'Tis excitedly unbearable to meet as well as to depart,
Easterly wind weakens while all kinds of flowers faded;
Spring silk worm died after it ended fibre productions,
A candle turns to ashes when shedding of tears dries up;
Looking at morning mirror I worry my temple is changed,
Humming verse at night moonlight appeared to be chilly;
As the legendary Mount Penglai isn't far from my place,
I asked the blue bird to convey you my kindest regards.

3

MEETING AT NIGHT
by Robert Browning
The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

4
METAPHORS
by Sylvia Plath
I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded a train there's no getting off.