

Effects of Korean Students' Contextual and Lexical Knowledge on L2 Text Comprehension

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This empirical study evaluates the factors that influence Korean students' reading comprehension of target culture-embedded texts in the US. These texts contain US socio-cultural facts and words that represent native speakers' beliefs, norms, and values in their daily lives. They also introduce diverse word meanings depending on each context. Through this study, I found that the most important factors influencing the Korean students' comprehension of a target culture-embedded text are their lack of US cultural knowledge and US culture-embedded lexical knowledge. These factors were linked to the students' poor meaning-making strategy in comprehending US culture-embedded texts appropriately. Contextual and lexical knowledge is a necessary factor for Korean students to make appropriate meaning and better comprehend US culture-embedded texts through diverse exposures in EFL reading classes.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the annual report of *Open Doors 2004* (2005), a total of 527,509 international students as second language speakers enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2004; this figure decreased by 2.4% from the previous year. Among them, the 52,484 Korean students attended U.S. institutions of higher learning in 2004 and the number increased by 2% from the previous year. This number shows that the Korean students are about 10% of the international students in the U.S., and they need to adjust to this new culture and to understand US culture-embedded language and texts.

When Korean students begin to study in the US, they are classified as international students or L2 readers because they use English as a second language which is essential in continuing their studies in English dominant environments. To some extent, it is likely that they have not been exposed fully to US culture and texts. While staying in the US, Korean students encounter US cultural norms, values, and rhetoric patterns significantly different from those in Korean. Hence, due to the culture differences, the Korean students appear to have problems in interpreting meanings of L2 and comprehending US culture-related new

genres.

Currently, in terms of reading, the majority of Korean students in the US are required to read course textbooks, class syllabi, articles, and journals as a part of their general education. On the other hand, outside the class, they read a variety of texts as a part of their everyday life that is essential to adjusting to their life and interacting with others in the U.S. In the U.S., Korean students have new reading experiences with the US academic and social context-based English expressions and meanings different from those in Korean.

In L2 reading comprehension, Korean students in the U.S. apply their language knowledge learned in EFL classes to all sorts of written texts in English. They tend to draw meanings from English texts without being concerned with cultural and lifestyle differences between Korea and the U.S. As examples, all sorts of letters, applications, notices, signs, ads, information papers, and school papers in the U.S. reflect the beliefs, norms, values, and thoughts of native English speakers. Korean students, at first, have comprehension problems in L2 texts because of their lack of cultural and reading experiences with these kinds of materials.

In order to better understand the relationship between reading comprehension and culturally embedded texts, I qualitatively investigated 1) how Korean students' L2 lexical knowledge is applied in reading the culture-embedded texts, 2) how their L2 reading problems are related to a lack of reading experiences with culture-embedded L2 texts in the U.S., and 3) how unfamiliar genres play a role in interpreting meanings of texts in the U.S.

In order to gain data from Korean students' inner voices about reading experiences with new texts, I interviewed eight Korean students who had been studying in a US university. I also provided implications on EFL reading in order to encourage the Korean students to develop US cultural and contextual knowledge through reading US culture-embedded texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Culture and Context Role in L2 Reading

L2 reading has been studied based on the relationship between L2 culture and L2 language (Brown, 1990; Hinkel, 1999; Kramsch, 1983, 1998; Nostrand, 1989; Prodromou, 1988; Watson-Gegeo, 2004). From a sociolinguistic perspective, culture is considered to be inseparable from language and communication in social contexts. The relationship between culture and language is "so problematic that language users need to think about how, in a particular culture, a language affects a cultural way of communicating within that culture" (Hymes, 1964, p. 167). In other words, language is viewed as "one of many forms of human interaction" (Smith, 1966, p. 3), and using language means the "ongoing exchange of meaning with others" (Halliday, 1978, p. 1).

Culture affects thought in different cognitive ways, and different patterns of language

affect thought and perceptions of reality in different ways for meaning-making (Lucy, 1992). Readers' first language comes to influence thoughts and meaning in reading a second language, causing different interpretations according to cultural contexts. Thus, L2 readers need to realize that understanding the target culture is the beginning step in understanding a new meaning system.

However, the meanings of L2 texts are affected by a variety of L2 language and social contexts, L2 students' comprehension in L2 may be "culturally based and culturally biased" (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983, p. 554). Thus, to prevent cultural miscomprehension culturally, it is necessary for L2 readers to become familiarized with L2 culture that attributes use of appropriate cultural knowledge (Carrell, 1987). The lack of cultural and social knowledge is regarded as an important factor in causing readers to misinterpret meanings in reading words or texts associated with L2 culture (Anderson & Barnitz, 1984; Kramsch, 1983; Obah, 1983; Rivers, 1983; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979; Swaffar, 1985). Carrell (1983, 1987) and Lee (1986) have found that a particular content schema that L2 readers bring to a text is often culturally specific and is part of the readers' cultural background. The differences between L1 and L2 cultures might influence the construction of different meanings in reading comprehension because L2 readers draw meanings based their cultural background in L1.

In other words, reading authentic texts (Allen, Bernhardt, Berry, & Demel, 1988; Carter, 1996; Gee, 1992; Hinkel, 2001) calls for application of cultural and linguistic background knowledge. It simultaneously encourages L2 learners to practice using language through interpreting meanings and interacting with native-speaking writers in L2 settings. Thus, it becomes more important for L2 readers to develop cultural knowledge related to texts because it helps them to achieve their academic, social, and personal goals and become more successful in their daily interactions with native speakers. Being familiarized with L2 cultural content helps readers to be involved in "intercultural communication in which the individual, as a result of the experience, becomes aware of his learning and changes" (Adler, 1987, p. 30). Experiences with L2 content where ESL readers are exposed to the target language culture is crucial because the experiences "lead to communicative confidence" (Canal & Swain, 1980, p. 38) for L2 readers.

Through reading the authentic texts, L2 students are able to develop "functional knowledge" (Reder, 1987). The functional knowledge can be helpful in interacting appropriately by interpreting "meaning variation with context" (Yule, 1996), and in developing "interactional aspects" (Rivers, 1987) of texts according to the contexts. L2 readers' functional knowledge not only helps learners to draw meanings from unfamiliar words but also enables them to interact with native speakers, and develop cultural knowledge.

Furthermore, integrating cultural knowledge into reading is an efficient way for L2 readers to overcome misinterpretation stemming from cultural barriers between L1 and L2 cultures. Thus, it is necessary for learners to develop "cultural competence" (Savignon,

1983), which provides L2 learners with the opportunity to understand the similarities and differences between cultures. By doing so, L2 readers may gain “cultural awareness” (Hinkel, 2001) while reading culture-embedded texts. L2 readers’ cultural awareness enable them to develop “intercultural competence” (Bryam, 1988, p. 142) within an L2 community. Intercultural competence will help them comprehend the texts and meanings of words depending on contexts.

In L2 reading and teaching, authentic texts (Carter, 1996; Gee, 1992; Hinkel, 2001; Kucer, 2001) relates to any printed materials written and shared by a certain language group member within a target language and culture. The authentic texts represent artifacts of the target culture and embody their beliefs, values, norms, and lifestyles. Language expressions and meanings from the texts are formed and influenced by the target language users’ shared social values, norms, and lifestyle. Thus, the texts serve to play a significant role in understanding English native speakers’ thoughts and concepts.

In this study, I used “CETs” as the acronym of “L2 culture-embedded texts” to identify the US culture-embedded language and reading materials. CETs are also used for referring all kinds of written English materials related to US everyday life in L2 academic and social contexts, such as letters from schools and banks, e-mails, applications, school newspapers, class syllabi, flyers, notices, directions, advertisements. These texts are written by native speakers and have communication purposes in each reading event in the US. In the US, Korean students obviously have a lack of experience on reading and comprehending meanings of the texts, and in turn these texts require Korean students’ cultural knowledge to succeed in comprehending the meanings.

In L2 surroundings, in terms of genre differences, the students meet new English genres that have communicative purposes according to situational contexts and already shared cultural and linguistic knowledge. US context-based genre is considered as a “communicative vehicle for the achievement of goals” (Swales, 1990, p. 46) for interaction within a community, and in turn a text is seen as a “vehicle of communication” (Johnson & Davies, 1983) through interacting with others. For example, a PennDot (Pennsylvania Transportation Department) letter for car registration is composed of fill-in the blank requests in terms of form. And the content of the letter requires specific information such as year of car, model of car, make of car, and odometer reading. To complete the letter, Korean students need to know the knowledge of form and content which are different from their L1 and EFL reading genres. Class syllabi, official letters from schools, flyers, and business letters in the US are also good sources to show different rhetorical patterns between EFL and L2 contexts. As a result, due to different rhetorical patterns, Korean students have problems in interpreting meanings of various culture-embedded texts in L2.

Practically, through reading culture-embedded L2 texts, L2 students are likely to accomplish “the diversity of literacy needs” that Carlo and Sylvester (1996) addressed in how important it is to have reading experiences with L2 texts to develop cultural background knowledge while comprehending L2 texts. Because L2 texts are “formed

according to culture and traditional expectations as required by specific purposes" (Conner, 1996, p. 11), genre differences between texts in EFL and L2 have an impact on L2 readers' comprehension of L2 texts. As one of the factors influencing L2 students' reading comprehension, class syllabi, research articles, and official letters, and flyers all represent different word use and meaning variances.

In L2 society, Korean students come to realize that reading is a frequent way of interacting with native speakers in their daily lives. Thus, target culture-embedded texts have the framework of contents and forms based on US communication patterns and have shared text knowledge among native speakers. Reading L2 texts, including variety of letters from schools and banks, flyers, class syllabi, and applications, have communicative purposes between a reader and a text and require a reader to respond according to each text's purpose.

III. METHODS

To gain qualitative data, I interviewed eight Korean students who were studying in a US university in 2004 fall semester. Four subjects were in undergraduate level and, the other four were at the M.A, graduate level (See Table 1). They reported their reading experiences with new genres they confronted in the US as they start to study in the US. The interview is helpful for me to gain concrete data from the subjects' voices to find what cultural and lexical factors influence their reading comprehension in L2.

TABLE 1
Subjects' Status and Time in the US

Group	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Subject	Park	Min	Jeong	Lee	Kim	Baek	Cho	Hoya
Status	UN	UN	UN	UN	G	G	G	G
Time in US	6 months	12 months	36 months	30 months	10 months	10 months	24 months	36 months
TOTEL score	520	540	530	600	570	580	580	560

UN refers to an undergraduate student.

G refers to a graduate student.

These groups were divided into two on the basis of the relationship between living experiences in the U.S. and TOEFL score. Kim, Cho, Hoya, Baek graduated from colleges in Korea, and Park, Lee, and Min transferred to US colleges after at most 2 years in colleges in Korea. Jeong has no college experiences in Korea.

IV. FINDINGS

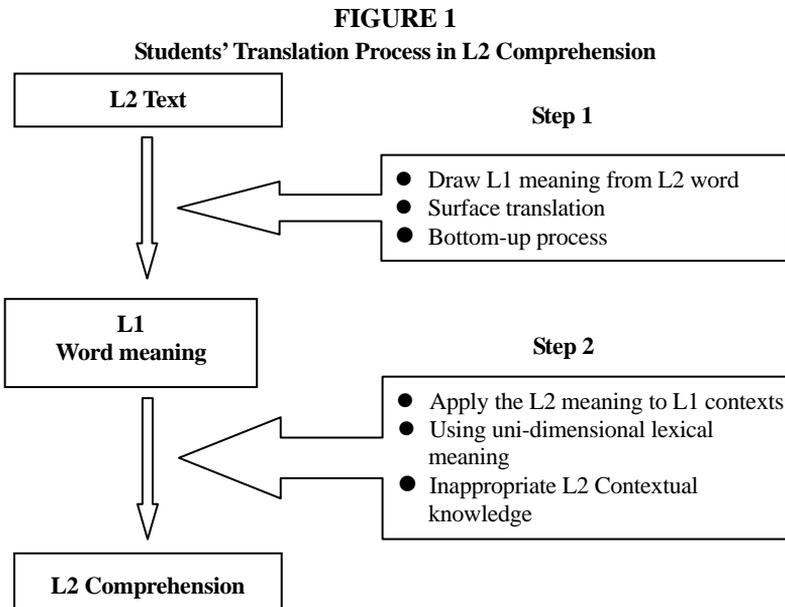
1. Contextual Knowledge and Meaning-Making Process

From the interview results, I found that several factors impacted comprehension in reading US culture-embedded texts. The main factor resulting in the subjects' inappropriate responses to the texts was that subjects lacked US cultural knowledge, which prevented them from deriving the correct meaning of the texts. So, subjects' cultural knowledge was primarily explained as a factor in influencing subjects' comprehension of the texts. L2 culture-embedded texts, in general, require subjects to apply diverse interpretations of words in order to make meaning. However, the subjects, at first, inappropriately interpreted them because they lacked US contextual knowledge.

As a way of meaning-making strategy, the translation process requires one-to-one meaning correspondence between English and Korean, by translating English words into Korean-based meanings, and then interpreting the meanings in L2 contexts. This meaning-translation process blocked some subjects from accessing various meanings in L2 texts and was one of the factors in explaining subjects' miscomprehension.

1) Surface Translation as Meaning-Making Process

Reading L2 culture-embedded texts was a new activity for Korean students because they lived in the US and they needed to make and comprehend meaning from these texts. Comprehending the texts requires the Korean students to draw meanings based on their



contextual and lexical knowledge. However, Korean students were likely to choose a way of translating L1 context and word into L2 context and words to make meanings (See Figure 1). Translation is a Korean students' unique meaning-making process while comprehending CETs. The process accompanies one-to-one meaning correspondences from English to Korean based on Korean contexts, and then the students apply the gained meaning into US contexts.

Unlike native speakers, they went through the reading process twice. First, they made Korean meanings from L2 texts and then they translated them. This translation process seems to cause some subjects to miscomprehend L2 texts. Translating English words into Korean meanings was a distinctive feature in explaining subjects' comprehension problem. In this study, the subjects in the US were adult students (the average age was 29). They first constructed meaning in Korean in their mind. I asked subjects the reason why they had problems reading the texts. The study participants reported that their reading problems were related to their former translation activities in EFL classes.

In Korea, we learn fixed meanings. In cases, for example, when we have English classes in Korea, usually teachers write English words and sentences on the board and **translate English words and sentences into Korean words**, then, we memorize it. That's it. We just assume that this word has this of kind meaning. We have fixed meaning models in our minds and thoughts. (Cho)

When I first came to America, I had a lot of trouble with reading problems; such as **translating** words [from] documents which consisted of really hard words even though they can use easy words to understand.... So, it's kind of hard to understand. (Jeong)

[In] EFL classes we just read, we just **transfer and translate** into Korean. (Park)

In classes, we directly read essays, letters, and texts, and we need to **translate**. (Hoya)

In education system in Korea, we have to learn about not speaking, writing, but reading and **translating** by our Korean. So, all I have to do is learning about vocabulary [through reading textbooks]. If I don't have any words meanings, I cannot translate it. It doesn't help me. (Lee)

After getting L1-based meaning of L2 words, as a second step, Korean students applied the meaning to L2 contexts. Based on the sentence context, they comprehended the text by inferring, and guessing meanings. In this process, the students tended to use a top-down sequence. In other words, these students used an interactive reading process in L2 reading.

Otherwise, they drew meanings based on language knowledge developed in EFL, and then applied it to the L2 contexts. Their success at interpreting words was affected by interaction, putting the meaning of words drawn from L1 contexts into the meaning in L2 contexts. In addition, a meaning from their own culture was supplied to make sense of culturally embedded language and texts in another culture. However, this meaning may be fundamentally different from the meaning intended by the writers of the texts. This caused these subjects to generate “elaborations” and “distortions” (Steffenson & Joag-Dev, 1984) of meaning in the L2 texts.

Kim said this of her experience with meaning distortion:

In classroom, [a] professor asked me to write a ‘journal’ in syllabus which can be showing my responses about articles [after reading them], but I got confused because I thought ‘journal’ means very special writing for journalist. So, it [has a] quite different meaning for me.

This meaning-translation process was adapted to reading L2 texts. In the process of L2 comprehension, these subjects guessed or assumed the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences based on their L1 lexical and contextual knowledge. Translating only required recognition of the L1 word and retrieval of the L2 word in order to draw meanings of L2 words. In this process, translation did not require access to the underlying meanings of L2 words.

In other words, the subjects first found the Korean meanings of L2 words, and then applied the meanings to L2 contexts. However, different contexts caused them to interpret words/phrases inappropriately. Their translation processes seemed to be natural steps in comprehension because their language and cultural schema were deeply rooted in EFL reading education in Korea.

2) Applying Uni-dimensional Meaning

During comprehension, the students draw a uni-dimensional meaning, and then apply the meaning into texts. Translating words from the texts with uni-dimensional meaning presents obstacles in making appropriate meanings while comprehending because words in the texts reflect distinctive semantic, culture-based concepts in the US.

When I learn English in Korea, I used to memorize one word and one meaning, like ‘school’ [in English] as ‘*Hakgyo*’ [in Korean]. In here, I don’t have any classes to learn English so far, when I listen and hear some sentences, I guess the meaning from sentences to one word. But, many words [have] meaning broader than one meaning to one meaning learned. That’s much more quite different. (Kim)

The other factor using the translation of English into Korean was the adaptability of meanings to specific contexts because each word could have a different meaning according to different contexts. The subjects were accustomed to memorizing one-to-one word meanings from English to Korean. In other words, they were likely to assign “uni-dimensional meaning” in Korean to an English word. Some interviewees said that one-to-one meaning correspondence between English and Korean in EFL classes in Korea was one of the factors that caused reading problems. Baek and Min reported their experiences with one-to-one meaning memorization in English learning.

I think, in Korea, for example, **I memorized one word meaning of one word**, and that's it. I just memorize [one] meaning [of one word], but in ESL, in US situation and US life, I have to use word in life, and I have to, sometimes, interpret meaning appropriately in the contexts. So, that's the difference, and that is a quite big difference, just leaning and using. (Baek)

When [I] come to US, English has not [fixed] models, it is very flexible. All words fixed into same categories in English classes in Korea, [but] it does not exist in US. It seems to me it cannot apply to this situation, like this, it will have some other meanings in that situation. So, it's very flexible in US. So, consequently, to develop and to increase more good English in Korea, I think, [we] have to focus on making some different situation, different models for some English words and meanings. (Cho)

In the case of using different words that have the same meaning, these subjects had problems interpreting meanings. ‘Dormitory’ and ‘Residence hall’ have the same meaning for describing a student residential building. The word ‘residence hall’ has a different meaning for these subjects. It refers to apartments off campus. So, when these subjects encountered new words in texts, they become confused because they first drew meaning from Korean contexts, not US contexts.

3) Inappropriateness of English-Korean Dictionary

Likewise, some subjects also confronted polysemous words that have at least two or more different meanings depending on contexts. In Korea, EFL classes generally demanded students to memorize lexical elements as they read and looked up words in dictionaries. Thus, the process of using English-Korean dictionaries was the other source for explaining my subjects' lack of L2 meaning acquisition. From the beginning of English learning, some subjects got used to looking up words in dictionaries to find their meanings. However, the meaning drawn from a dictionary is limited to just one or two definitions. In fact, English words can have several meanings depending on their contexts.

In the first individual interview, all subjects from Group A and three subjects from Group B reported that they often used dictionaries to find appropriate meanings of L2 words in L2 texts. However, in some cases, using dictionaries was not helpful for them if a certain word was interpreted differently according to context.

Sometimes, it could be fine. It depends on words. If [a] word has, like, **five different meanings**, it's very difficult for me [to] find what specific [meaning] this context, but if a word just has one or two meanings, it's very helpful. (Cho)

Language doesn't have just one meaning and dictionary shows a lot of meaning, but only one useful [widely used] meaning, and I can't find one-by-one, and it cannot be helpful for the time, and most of time. (Jeong)

I think [it is] a little helpful, but I think the other side, [it is] not helpful because some words have too many meanings. Which one I have to pick or adopt to Korean meaning. I confused. I was confused. (Park)

Basically, half and half, because English-Korean dictionary has some differences between English-English dictionary and English-Korean dictionary cannot cover all the meaning of American meaning. It has limitation. (Kim)

Sometimes it is helpful, but it has some problem[s] because English-Korean dictionary doesn't mention about meanings, specific meaning of an English word. Specific meaning [is] based on social context in American culture. Also, new words and compound words they don't have exact meaning on [a] dictionary. (Baek)

I use the bilingual dictionary to solve reading problems in my English class to find meanings. I think it's helpful for me, but sometimes there are a lot of different meanings, so the meaning was confused...[But] if a word has, like, five different meanings, it's very difficult for me [to] find what specific [on] this context. (Lee)

Sometimes it works.... But, when I don't understand whole sentence and I can't make it, I can't make it any words of meaning, it was so hard. It's really tough to figure out meaning in dictionary. When I read whole sentences, most of English-Korean dictionary [do] not show detail meaning related to each word meaning. (Min)

Subjects in both groups tended to find one-to-one semantic relationships between English and Korean using dictionaries. But, they also had problems in using dictionaries in solving reading problems, which produced negative effects. They translated English words into Korean in L2 texts, and then they interpreted the texts in Korean contexts. Thus, whenever most subjects drew meanings of words in L2 texts, they depended on making one meaning of a word in their L2 reading. This proved to be a strong factor in affecting these subjects' difficulties in comprehending the texts.

Jeong reported meaning variations of a word due to different culture.

Like "admission," I didn't know "admission" meaning as entrance fee like for movie and concert [around campus]. I only knew that "admission" is only for college application. When I came to America, I learn admission meaning of entrance of concerts. Contexts totally different in EFL admission more related to school admission, but in ESL context the word [is] more related to events.
(Jeong)

While reading, these subjects reported that using a dictionary was not helpful for them, and consequently, it was not easy for them to interpret words and comprehend texts. They needed to be able to draw multiple meanings from a word or phrase according to contexts. In addition, they used a translation process of L2 word to L1 meaning and then applied the meaning to US contexts. This reading process caused miscomprehension of L2 texts.

Above all, this study shows that there was no one-to-one correspondence between words in Korean and in English because some Korean words do not fit appropriate English meaning. Also, subjects had, at first, no differences in applying Korean-based meaning and uni-dimensional meaning into comprehension of the texts.

In addition, the students were accustomed to memorizing and inducing uni-dimensional meanings of words. They then had difficulty in making appropriate meanings of words depending on each US context. The subjects needed to take multiple meanings of a word into consideration in their meaning-making strategies while comprehending the texts.

In the process of L2 comprehension, these students guessed or assumed the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences based on their L1 lexical knowledge. Translating only required recognition of the L1 word and retrieval of the L2 word in order to draw meanings of L2 words. In this process, translation did not require access to the underlying meanings of L2 words.

It was obvious that culturally unfamiliar knowledge was an obstacle in introducing Korean students to new meanings and concepts. Their L2 cultural knowledge for facilitating adjustment to a new language and culture was reconsidered as an important factor in comprehending meanings successfully. In addition, in order to decrease misinterpretations, they need to develop their L2 cultural knowledge to assimilate and interpret information congruent with L2 culture.

Thus, the knowledge of cultural differences between US and Korea affects these students' ability to apply US cultural knowledge appropriately to make exact meanings and respond accurately while comprehending US culture-embedded texts. Unlike in Korea, reading is considered as a way of communicating and interacting with other members of a speech community in the US. Without prior cultural knowledge commonly shared by US people, it is difficult for Korean students in the US to interpret and comprehend the texts because the texts reflect US people's social and cultural life patterns, values, norms, and beliefs by confirming or conveying facts and information to a certain group and its members.

In terms of reading, EFL reading demands the Korean subjects to develop strategies for answering text-questions correctly. However, reading L2 texts demands the Korean subjects to develop strategies for making meaning and functioning appropriately depending on US contexts. Thus, the subjects need to develop functional knowledge of meaning variation for their interpretation and comprehension of the texts.

Finally, Korean students' US cultural knowledge obviously helped them develop content and formal schema which are necessary for comprehending L2 texts successfully. Korean students in my study had additional schema related to their native language, culture and rhetoric patterns. They therefore had more miscomprehension as they read L2 texts and so did not have ability for constructing multiple meanings consistently for culturally embedded words.

2. L2 Lexical Knowledge

Lexical knowledge was also one of the strong factors in determining success in comprehension of L2 culture-embedded texts. In this study, L2 knowledge refers to Korean students' lexical knowledge, especially new words commonly used in the US, but never learned in EFL classes. New words, acronyms, and nouns used as verbs are significant lexical components for explaining the Korean subjects' lexical problems in comprehending L2 texts.

The students' lack of L2 lexical knowledge caused them to have difficulty comprehending CETs because they frequently encountered new words, nouns as used verbs, and acronyms/abbreviations. They had read texts written in English in their EFL classes, which did not provide enough US culture-embedded words to facilitate meaning-making strategies. It was not easy for the students to interpret a number of culture-embedded words without having prior lexical knowledge in the US. It was clear that this lack of specific L2 lexical knowledge was related to problems the students had in comprehending CETs.

TABLE 2
Words affecting Korean Students' Miscomprehension

Words	How they used and interpreted in L2 texts
polysemous words	A word having different meanings based on context. For example, "journal" means a professional writing describing and addressing an incident in a media-context. However, it also means a student's response writing before and after class work in an academic context.
compound words	Compounds are two words combined to create a meaning which differs from that of each of its parts. In a US academic context, "flex money," for instance, refers to a way of purchasing food on campus like a check card. The word's meaning is different from that of each word's individual meaning when interpreted in this context.
nouns used as verbs	Words used grammatically different than they had learned in EFL classes.
acronyms	Like TBA, ISN, and SSN, each acronym is an abbreviation of a phrase that is pronounced as one word. Acronyms are created with the general process of forming new words in English and in certain fields.

US culture-embedded words they interpreted in their daily lives in the US were different from those they had encountered in their former EFL classes. The words represented diverse concepts and values of L2 speech communities. Unlike Korean culture, US culture is often defined as a diverse one, in which various nationalities, religions, and races interact and affect social norms, rules, and perceptions. In a sociolinguistic sense, words are constantly being created by members of specific communities. Once these words become common, they become everyday words. It was not easy for some students as ESL or international students to interpret meanings of these US culture-embedded words without US cultural knowledge.

First, nouns being used as verbs were unfamiliar to Korean students because EFL classes teach content words separately in categories such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Nouns are usually placed in the subject or object places, not in the verb position. Different uses of content words had a negative impact on subjects' interpretation of words.

Second, polysemous words are words that particular lexical features that share social meanings. Because the meanings of polysemous words were dependant on context, it was difficult for some students to understand them. L2 texts have distinctive language forms and meaning patterns depending on particular contexts. If the students are not experienced with each L2 context, they might have limitations in understanding the words and their meanings. Consequently, some subjects in both groups who were less proficient in US culture-embedded words had difficulty understanding the words.

Third, acronyms and compound words in L2 texts were interpreted differently depending on each student's prior language proficiency. Acronyms are used on the condition that writers and readers already know the meaning. For instance, in the title of an editorial of the school newspaper "PASSHE Performance begs bigger helps," there was no explanation of PASSHE in the content of the editorial because the author thought that

readers of the newspaper have already known the acronym PASSHE.

However, their US culture-embedded lexical knowledge was developed according to their attitudes toward reading L2 texts. When reading the texts, the Korean students had opportunities to gain lexical knowledge and become aware of L2 cultural norms and beliefs necessary for adjusting to a new culture and for interpreting words in L2 texts correctly. Students who preferred intensive reading to clarify information and lexical meanings in L2 texts gained lexical and cultural information by interacting with native speakers and tried to apply the gained lexical knowledge to their English usage in L2.

Based on the results of the interviews, all students had problems understanding US culture-embedded words in L2 texts. To succeed in comprehension, they needed to develop culture-embedded lexical knowledge to interpret the meanings of the words. Without knowing US culture-embedded words, such as new words and acronyms, the subjects became confused when trying to draw appropriate meanings. Because the students didn't have enough opportunities with acronyms and abbreviations in L2 texts, a L2 culture-embedded text might act as sources of showing US culture-embedded lexicon.

3. Contextual Factor

First of all, the Korean students said that letters from school and other institutes are the most difficult texts to comprehend, and flyers and class syllabi are followed. Letters are commonly used tools for interacting with an author and numerous readers and function as communication vehicles that give information to the readers and require them to respond accordingly. Upon studying in the US, the students start to have opportunities to read business letters from banks and other companies, such as, the electric and insurance companies. They usually ask the customer to provide some type of responses. Sometimes a customer is required to send back forms to the company.

Secondly, understanding L2 texts involved knowing more than the appropriate syntax and lexical items. It also was a matter of pragmatic awareness that involved recognizing contexts. Understanding the texts demanded that subjects apply and use contextual knowledge. Using a bottom-up process, a reader builds the meaning from a single word to a whole sentence in order to comprehend the given texts. However, the meaning of a word /phrase in L2 texts was interpreted differently according to specific contexts. That is, awareness of the context of a text played a key role in determining whether subjects understood the meaning of a word/phrase of a written document.

More clearly, some subjects drew on and interpreted meanings of words and texts using their own background knowledge. Reading comprehension of L2 texts required them to understand contextual differences. Jeong and Cho reported their experiences with reading problems caused by new US contexts.

Actually when first I saw 'rebate', I never could get the meaning because **it**

was kind of new notion for me in America, I need to get the information about what they say, so, if [I] could get some information about like rebate situation in America, like that, so it would be more easier to understand to rebate meaning at that time. (Jeong)

I have a lot of difficulty in understanding official letters. Especially, insurance letters and bank statements, a lot of official letters from schools because I never experienced in Korea. So, specially, in university letter, the use [the word] 'credit'. In Korea, 'credit' means like a belief, you know. In here, it's like a point, 'credit' meaning I give some points, but in Korea, there's no meaning like that we did not use 'credit' in [describing] that kinds of meaning. So that kind of thing compete me a lot. (Cho)

Likewise, Jeong and Cho misinterpreted some words, and their problems were related to their lack of contextual knowledge while interpreting a word/phrase. Thus, L2 texts highlight the US social, cultural, situational, and purposeful aspects in everyday communication and demand the subjects to assimilate these contextual aspects into their comprehension process in L2 settings. In other words, there is "no context-free" (Watson-Gegeo, 2004) language use and meaning.

Baek and Min reported that they were aware of meaning variations of words in L2 texts.

I think, in Korea, for example, I memorized one word meaning of one word, and that's it. I just memorize [one] meaning [of one word], but in ESL situation, in US situation and US life, I have to use different word meaning in life, and **I have to, sometimes, interpret meaning appropriately in [US] contexts**. So, that's the difference, [and] that is a quite big difference, just in learning and using. (Baek)

Just, um, I think, meaning of word is different between ESL and EFL situation, so, I agree with his opinion. [A certain word] we cannot use in Korea we have to use it in [the US]. That's kind of different thing, different situation. So, I want to say ESL [requires] getting more skill than EFL. (Min)

In general, letters dealing with events in the US are less familiar to the students because they never have encountered them in or out of EFL class in Korea. These students reported that they usually read English letters in textbooks in class because letters provide examples of text formats. In EFL settings, textbooks allot chapters to describe English letter formats. These letters contain minimal cultural information and examples of organization of English letters. However, the content of the letters is composed of some specific context-based words.

Especially, in the US, Korean students who have their own cars receive letters from each state's transportation office concerning ownership, car insurance, and annual inspection. These letters work as mandate document for them to respond correctly. To comprehend this kind of letter, students need to utilize prior contextual knowledge in order to respond appropriately to fill out forms, send a copy of the insurance, and so on. If the students fail to catch the intentions of the letters, they consequently get a fine related to their wrong responses. This letter is one of the primary important documents to verify car ownership, so reading and responding the letter are mandatory jobs for all car owners. Since the letter reflects American life, Korean students need to have prior contextual knowledge to read and respond appropriately.

Hence, while reading in the US, the students' interpretation may be dependent on their L1 and L2 genre knowledge. However, their genre knowledge of L2 is not sufficient for interpreting meanings and catching purposes of US daily-life reading materials without their knowing the genre differences between EFL and ESL. First, US culture-embedded texts in this study have the organization of the content of text around academic communicative purposes and require contextual clues to comprehend. Without knowing the specific contextual situation, it is not easy for them to understand the texts because they do not have enough clues for full comprehension. In terms of contrastive rhetoric, texts used in L2 environments have different contents influenced by communicative and situational purposes, which set the overall correlations of lexical feature to the L2 context. Register, as "the predominance particular lexical and grammatical feature" (Johns, 1997, p. 33) in L2 texts, is one example for explaining the meaning variations and different interpretations between EFL and L2 genres.

L2 texts reflect American people's conventional patterns and vocabulary usage. Letters from schools and companies, flyers, and class syllabi show totally different genres to Korean students. These differences along with their lack of reading experience and content schema cause Korean students' miscomprehension.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrated that cultural and lexical background knowledge and contextual information are inseparable in the comprehension process. Korean students as international students or L2 readers in the US need to develop the knowledge of US culture and to know its multiple meanings as well. With respect to implications, it is necessary for L2 teachers to inquire about Korean students' prior knowledge both in terms of content-matter knowledge as well as cultural knowledge. There might be benefits in providing direct instruction on the use of text structure knowledge in order to facilitate comprehension of culturally embedded texts. Also, Korean students need to read diverse texts based on culturally familiar topics so that they become familiarized with the topic of CETs. This could help them understand what they read and what they need to do as a result of the reading.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The results of this study indicated that Korean students applied poor contextual knowledge to L2 texts with same reading strategy used in EFL classes, which led them to make problem in comprehending the L2 culture-embedded texts. The student' lack of L2 contextual knowledge caused them to misunderstand concepts and values and to interpret meaning of words differently. Also, lack of US culture-embedded lexical knowledge prevented the students from drawing multiple-meanings of words depending on contexts. And, meaning differences and specific contextual vocabulary words are major factors in explaining Korean students' reading problems in comprehending US culture-embedded texts. Finally, they lack experiences in reading English documents or texts outside the classroom in Korea.

1. Diverse Reading Activities

To some extent, Korean students' reading problems are due to a lack of content and context with different genres of reading materials. In Korea, materials, such as textbooks, English-language newspapers, and internet sites can provide them with access to US cultural content and writing form. However, these texts contain fewer "culture-bound" contents (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) because they are oriented for just Korean students' grammar and vocabulary learning. Thus, EFL teachers need to prepare target culture and context-based reading materials with Korean student so that Korean student can develop cultural and lexical background knowledge.

When reading a variety of texts, it is necessary for Korean students to acquire L2 culture knowledge and activate it in comprehension. Making successful meaning from L2 contexts depends on utilizing a series of schema and interpretation coping with a variety of L2 contexts. However, English in Korea is classified as a foreign language, which creates a limitation in using L2 within L1 contexts. That is, learning English in Korea provides few opportunities to encounter different genres outside the classroom. A lack of this opportunity prevents the students from reinforcing L2 knowledge to meaningful interpretation of different English reading genres.

Because L2 texts are highly reflective of the L2 social context of the language, Korean students need to develop the nature of L2 cultural and social contexts. Thus, in L2 genres, developing L2 content knowledge is of primary importance. Through reading diverse genres, Korean students can develop cross-cultural schema by realizing similarities and differences between their L1 culture and target culture. Cross-cultural schema can enable them to "embody background knowledge about the content of a discourse exert a profound influence on how well the discourse will be comprehended, learned, and remembered" (Steffesen et al., 1979, p. 19). So L2 reading demands the students to develop culture-specific schema that includes culture-awareness defined by L2 culture.

Culture-awareness through reading diverse genres can help them to adjust to a new culture and its concept underlined native speakers' daily lives. Through exposure to diverse L2 genres, Korean students can develop ways of interacting with socially and culturally shared meanings, values, and concepts influence their life in the L2 community. Through interacting with the shared meanings of the L2 texts and L2 contexts, the students are able to bridge the gap between L1 and L2 contexts. As an example, reading school newspapers in L2 contexts provides them with ways to adjust to a new L2 academic culture.

Therefore, Korean students need to become more aware that reading L2 texts is a very interactive process requiring the students' cultural knowledge of the L2 culture because comprehension of every L2 texts can present an opportunity to build new cross-cultural understanding which would then be available to facilitate comprehension of new culture-embedded texts.

Stressing well-organized diverse reading implies to Korean students what knowledge they require, how they acquire culturally appropriate new knowledge, and how they apply the accumulated knowledge they have to L2 texts.

2. Applying Practical Meaning-Making Strategy

Meaningful reading comprehension depends crucially on the Korean students' being able to relate information from texts to already existing background knowledge. In classroom, the topics are likely to center on a particular area of reading activity. Reading about these topics is likely to include certain kinds of information that is valued by native speakers. US culture-embedded reading comprehension occurs when the total meaning of a passage reflects information that is organized in ways meaningful to L2 society.

As there are meaning variations according to context, it would be useful to identify language use and meaning associated with a specific L2 context. L2 contextual knowledge concerning academic English or business English along with areas of language use should go together with teaching.

To facilitate reading instruction, L2 teachers in Korea should be aware of and select appropriate and diverse reading materials for providing Korean students' familiarity of L2 content and context. Of course, there is problem in using authentic texts in an EFL context like in Korea due to the difficulty in obtaining authentic materials (Sung-Ae Kim, 2000). However, text selection is the biggest job of teachers. L2 teachers should place the students' familiarity of L2 content and context on their reading activities. Reading diverse genres in L2 can provide multiple exposures for the students to become contextualized with socially and occupationally different texts.

Each L2 texts in L2 daily life has communicative purposes and subsequent responses such as answering questions, completing a form, paying some fees, and the like after reading. In this reading approach, the students' cultural knowledge can be compared and contrasted so that the students can expand their cross-cultural background knowledge. No

matter what L2 texts are read, L2 teachers must provide meaningful contexts for comprehension and require the students to use different schema to bridge the gap between the text and contexts. Given the L2 contextual schema in L2 reading comprehension, it is an obvious pedagogical theme for the Korean students to integrate their L2 knowledge into the L2 communicative success. By using L2 texts, L2 teachers also should provide ways of developing communicative effectiveness by asking responses or feedbacks after reading. Students' responses will be effective as a following-up L2 reading activity.

In conclusion, Korean students' development of L2 reading comprehension is inseparable from meaningful meaning-making strategies, which require Korean students to relate L2 contextual and lexical knowledge. By reading the texts, the students can develop sensitivity to cultural aspects and functional knowledge of words in US culture-embedded texts that are required to interact with native speakers in English-dominant surroundings.

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