# Potential Reading Strategy Transfer Problems Chinese EFL Readers May Confront

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### Abstract

Thanks to the dynamic development in psycholinguistics in the past few decades, one of the most significant revolutions in language instruction was thus born. Language instruction has since shifted from its once focus upon language per se to a deep concern about the learning process. "Strategic approach" has hence substituted for "translation" and "structure-based approach" in reading instruction.

Notwithstanding the majority of reading strategies, particularly those linguo-cognitive ones, seem to be universal, a few do seem ethnocentric (cf. Huang, 1991; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Royer & Carlo, 1990). Moreover, each language does possess certain unique features despite the fact that reading across all languages is composed of three elements: linguistic, discourse and content schemata. We can thereby speculate that L2/FL readers may not automatically transfer their already possessed strategies.

Based on massive research literature and certain generally acknowledged facts, this article tended to explore those potential reading strategy transfer problems Chinese EFL readers may confront by examining the considerable distinctions between Chinese and English at all of the three levels: linguistics, discourse, and content. Pedagogical suggestions were further made on the basis of the findings.

### 摘 要

近十數年來，由於心理語言學方面的蓬勃發展，帶動了近代語言教學上最重要的一項革命——語言教學突破了語言表象，深入學習的過程。閱讀教學因此亦隨之由最初以「翻譯」、「文法結構」爲主的教學，步上以「閱讀技巧」爲軸心的教學。

儘管多數的閱讀技巧，尤其是語言認知（linguo-cognitive）技巧有其世界共通性，仍有少數閱讀技巧有其地域性（參見 Huang, 1991; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Royer & Carlo, 1991）。此外，雖然任何語言的閱讀皆由三項要素組成：語言、形式及內容，卻由於每一種語言都有不少其獨具之特質，因此我們可以推斷在學習第二語／外語時，讀者可能無法自然無阻地移轉他原有的閱讀技巧。

鑑於中、英文在語言及其文化背景方面相當可觀之差異，本文分別針對言些因中、英文在語言、形式及內容上之差異所可能引發之閱讀技巧轉移問題，一一討論，並根據討論結果，提出教學上之建言。

As schema theory has gained momentum over the past two decades, reading instruction has also shifted its emphasis from the traditional "translation" or "structure-based" approach to "strategic" approach. A student reader is no longer instructed to be a passive, accurate decoding machine, but encouraged to predict, test, confirm or revise whatever he/she can comprehend from all sources of cues inherent in the text on the basis of his already existent "linguistic schema, content schema, and formal schema" (James, 1987, p. 178) so that a most

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plausible meaning may be hereby attained. Namely, a proficient reader, in this perspective, is believed to be the one who can regulate a large variety of effective strategies at all levels, especially at the higher level, to tackle a comprehension breakdown. Despite of the fact that mounting research in both L1 and L2 (see Abraham & Vann, 1987; Cziko, 1980; Ellinger, 1985; Garner, 1981; Kletzien, 1991; Steinberg, Bohning, & Chowning, 1991; among others) has verified this assumption, L2/FL studies have particularly revealed an interesting finding--not all NL reading strategies are automatically transferrable to L2/FL reading context.

In contrast to "universality theory" (see Cziko, 1980; Goodman, 1975, reprinted in 1988; Rigg, 1977, reprinted in 1988), which suggests that readers across all languages undergo similar reading processing, the findings of a considerable number of more recent studies (see Huang, 1991; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Royer & Carlo, 1991) indicate that certain language learning behaviors may be ethnocentric. These language-specific behaviors, if absent, or present but regarded as poor rather than effective ones in the target language reading may naturally be either entirely absent from the learner's strategy repertoire, or present but hinder instead of facilitating the target language learning. Furthermore, the L2/FL reader's previous L1 knowledge at all levels--linguistic, content and discourse--may also interfere with their employment of certain appropriate strategies. In short, while general linguo-cognitive processing, such as hypothesizing, predicting, inferring, may be universal, specific strategies may crosslingually differ.

In view of the fact that Chinese and English are two very distinct languages, it is fairly predictable that Chinese EFL student readers may confront considerable strategy transfer problems attributable to either sharp or subtle distinctions inherent in the two languages at the three levels: linguistic, discourse and content. On the basis of massive research literature, this author attempted to explore those potential problems at the three levels respectively as following:

## 1. At the Linguistic Level

## A. At the Orthographical Level

The first problem Chinese EFL readers may confront at the linguistic level is likely to be attributable to orthographic discrepancies. While the majority of classroom teachers simply attribute this problem to the reader's poor perception of a very distinct orthographic system, specialists such as Trenman, Baron, and Luk (1981, cited in Koda, 1987, p. 130); Saito (1981, cited in Koda, 1987, p. 130) argue that different orthographic systems may entail entirely different reading strategic approaches. For instance, Trenman et al., on the basis of their finding that English readers spent more reaction time and made more mistakes when judging homophone sentences than Chinese readers did while reading Chinese, came to a conclusion that more phonological recoding undergoes in sound-base than in meaning-base orthographic systems. Namely, a Chinese reader, while reading Chinese, a meaning-base system--logography, may directly proceed from the perception of a formal representation to

meaning, whereas a native English reader, while reading English, a sound-base system--the alphabet, may usually undergo a phonological recoding process first before probing for meaning.

Nevertheless, an almost equal number of researchers (see Clarke, 1979; Hayes, 1988; Rigg, 1977, reprinted in 1988; Tang, 1989), on the basis of their studies, suggest that readers all over the world, regardless of which writing system is in question, seem to rely heavily upon acoustically oriented strategies at the beginning stage or for the registration of "...what [is] comprehended into short-term memory" (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1978, cited in Koda, 1987, p. 136). Furthermore, there are a variety of other alternatives than the acoustic approach available to discern the meaning of a word across all languages; moreover, countless factors besides orthographic differences may determine a reader's learning mode--meaning-centered vs. sound-centered[1].

To sum up, the effect upon word-recognition processing generated by the orthographic discrepancy, whether facilitative or detrimental, shall not be taken into serious consideration, particularly when a Chinese EFL comprehender is involved, since a reader as such has seldom been exposed to sufficient target spoken language to be able to make the best use of the acoustic asset to attack a word. In other words, EFL reading teachers had better not put so much emphasis on phonic skills as those native ones usually do, although certain general skills are indispensable, if not for word recognition, at least for the storage of a recognized word into memory.

## B. At the Lexical Level

Next to the potential impediment from the orthographic discrepancy is the possible hindrance hidden at the lexical level. Notwithstanding vocabulary is generally acknowledged as the most crucial factor for success in reading comprehension, lexical accessiblility is not automatically available to an ESL/EFL reader. Words, once in text, take on many properties beyond the denotative meanings the dictionary provides, such as grammatical, social and affective meanings, each of which may form a problem to the ESL/EFL comprehender.

Firstly, for instance, although there are both content words and function words in all languages, their impact upon comprehension in one language may be fairly different from that in another. Chinese, as an illustration, is a heavily context-dependent language and permits extensive ellipsis, which may in turn make Chinese readers pay equal attention to each word, including function words while reading English, unlike L1 readers of English, who seem to attend to function words only thirty-eight percent or at least less than half of the time (see Carpenter & Just, 1977, cited in Swaffar, 1988, p. 133). Nor may they make good use of English redundancies to speculate a plausible meaning. The worst scenario that might happen is that these redundancies may cause unnecessary confusions.

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[1]A detailed discussion on the transfer proboem at the orthographical level is referrable in this author's article forthcoming in <u>Enhlish Teaching & Learning</u>.

Secondly, English is both a derivational and inflectional language. When an ESL/EFL reader's native language, e.g., Chinese, lacks this characteristic, he/she may miss deploying this precious asset to unravel a supposedly known word. More serious is that his/her ignorance of this asset may lead him/her to the wrong interpretation of the context when the context is not clearly marked otherwise. For instance, in many English literary works, change of time is often embedded in the inflected verbs rather than explicitly stated in adverbials. Quite often than not my Chinese students missed this subtle change and thus misinterpreted the whole message.

Thirdly, words in text can also be divided into micro-level ones and macro-level ones. Words with macro-level features such as "therefore," "however," etc. are often utilized to help build the typical explicit, linear structure of English text. Chinese, an oriental language, on the other hand, is considered by some researchers such as Kaplan (1966) a language with the implicit written discourse; consequently, Chinese EFL readers might fail in noticing those macrostructural words and hence miss implementing an optimal information processing strategy.

Fourthly, words in text are culturally, socially and affectively bounded. A typical example can be found in Highwater's (an American Indian)[2] experience of learning the English word, "wilderness." He said that he could never figure out what this word really meant until he want to New York City. Highwater concluded his English learning experience by saying that "languages are not just different words for the same things but totally different concepts, totally different ways of experiencing and looking at the world" (p. 6). In view of the sharp contrast between Chinese culture and American or British culture, it seems inevitable that Chinese EFL readers may more often than not go through the same experience as Highwater did.

Besides, that the majority of words take more than one meaning with some of which the Chinese correspondent words do not share will also construct stumbling blocks on the way to vocabulary recognition.

Furthermore, context, the most facilitative way open to the untangling of most puzzles, is, unfortunately, not readily accessible to ESL/EFL readers, if their background channels their attention to words rather than context while reading. For example, some cultures are believed to focus on respect for authority, which refers to "print" here. Both Mikulecky (1990, p. 8) and Tsao (1991, p. 5), from Hinds's view, inferred that Japanese, Korean, or Chinese readers may feel obliged to read word by word of a text so as to figure out the author's intended meaning, but unfortunately, many often fail to understand the meaning instead owing to their lack of additional attention to the more helpful, integral element--context. Yao (1993, p. 11), based on the analysis of 429 Chinese graduate students' quentionnaires, concluded that to

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[2]This article, "Native Americans" written by Jamake Highwater, was selected by B. Wegmann, N. P. Knezevic and M. Bernstein for inclusion in their ESL reading text, *Mosaic II: A Reading Skills book.* Highwater stated the clear shock he had undergone when he first learned certain English words at school.

Chinese students, who pay equal attention to almost every word, L2 reading is definitely not what Goodman referred to as "a psycholinguistic guessing game."

Certainly, this cursory reading habit may result from L2/FL learners' linguistic deficiency (see Clarke, 1979), or from an affective factor--L2 readers' lack of confidence in their judging the familiarity of a word (see Haynes, 1983). This inconfidence, Haynes believed, would in turn detract L2 readers from contextual processing and restrict them to word unit processing rather than help them pass words by from time to time as most native readers would do.

Another possibility comes from the training effect. For instance, Fan (1991, p. 624), Hudson-Ross and Dong (1990, pp. 118-22), Ts'ao (1991, pp. 8-11), Yue (1989, p. 14) all believed that it was the oral recitation, rote memorization and/or emphasis upon dictionary checking which are constantly practiced in the Chinese classroom that made Chinese readers form the habit of word-by-word reading.

The last factor can be a cultural or a person variable. Some cultures or persons may hold the belief that reading is to decode the meaning of each word and that reading a L2/FL means to translate each word. Horwitz (1988, p. 292) claimed that readers with this belief were not likely to employ holistic strategies. They may resort to local, discrete strategies. Consequently, readers as such may see only isolated trees, but never the forest.

In conclusion, to a Chinese EFL reader, intrinsic in combination with external transfer effects may make vocabulary accessibility much more problematic than we imagine. A reading instructor, before encouraging Chinese EFL readers to tackle unknown words, may therefore as well discuss those linguistic, cultural, and/or training discrepancies with them first, so that student readers may be better aware of their own problems and consequently be better able to deploy strategies effectively and regulatorily.

## C. Transfer at the Syntactic Level

Inseparable from those lexical problems are those at the syntactic level. As mentioned previously, whenever we acquire a word, we also obtain considerable knowledge about its grammatical properties. The significant, parallel impact both snytax and vocabulary exert upon reading comprehension is well evidenced by Barnet (1986).

Syntactically, although human beings more or less share a basic universal prelinguistic level of thought, as psycholinguists assert, which may in turn be framed into a limited number of structures, every language does find distinct ways to mark a slightly different subset of bits of thought. Considerable contrastive studies in linguistics have corroborated this point. As many of those studies demonstrate, Chinese is syntactically distinct from English in many ways, such as in organization--whereas English is organized by clauses, Chinese, by theme; in voice--passive voice is much more often used in English than in Chinese; in mood--subjunctive mood in Enlgish is mainly expressed in verb inflections other than conjunctions while in Chinese, besides in conjunctions, mainly in contexts and/or adverbials.

Furthermore, as Garrett (1986) argued, the grammatical forms which represented the same semantic relation were not parallel across languages and that the same grammatical

terminology used in different languages might denote entirely different meanings, or, conversely, that different grammatical categories in different languages might convey considerably similar meanings (pp. 140-41). But the most extraordinary point Garrett contended was that what was difficult to L2/FL learners was neither to acquire grammatical knowledge nor to express the knowledge but to understand how the natives went from what they intended to say to how they actually said, which she referred to as "processing grammar." Garrett believed that this process could be fairly foreign to non-natives, as the levels of processing are not universally the same (pp. 138-39). According to Garrett's theory, a Chinese EFL reader, for instance, should be aware of not only the distinctions between coordinate and subordinate clauses, but also the reasons (in processing terms) why Englsih has subordinate or relative clauses.

To sum up, both the discrepancy in the linguistically theoretic grammar across languages and the actual complexity in processing grammar may impede Chinese EFL readers from exploiting certain helpful syntactic cues. However, while it does not seem difficult to assist student readers in realizing those linguistic contrasts, it does not seem an easy task to familiarize them with the target processing grammar. Regardless of the fact that Garret has proposed several topics for discussions on processing grammar with students (p. 144), in view of the complexity and limited knowledge so far we have of our minds, we cannot help wondering when processing grammar instruction can ever be satisfactorily realized.

## 2. At the Discourse Level

In addition to those abovementioned linguistic problems, a Chinese EFL learner's reading processing may also be obstructed when he/she tends to transfer strategies by resorting to his/her discourse knowledge. Studies have demonstrated that various discourse structures have a differential impact upon the reading recall and that readers who can recognize the overall text type's macrosyntax and use it to organize their own recall protocol are able to recall more information from the text or comprehend at a higher level. Unfortunately, discourse is generally ignored by L2/FL readers. For instance, Connor (1984) noticed that her ESL readers seemed to fail in fully utilizing text discourse to elaborate on the main idea, consequently, recalling fewer propositions from the original text than native counterparts. Similarly, Yao (1993), although never attempting to draw a conclusion like this after analyzing 429 Chinese graduate students' questionnaires, did infer that discourse was the last item those readers noticed while reading English text, when Yao found that discourse what the subjects least agreed to have difficulty with of the four items questioned (p. 11). Carrell (1984) not only found that only about one-fourth of her ESL subjects used the discourse structure of the original text in their immediate recall protocols, but based on the same study, further contended that regardless of the fact that metacognitive logic might not be language-specific, different cultures seemed to choose different aspects of logic in their discourse.

This view of language-specific thought pattern is certainly not new. As far back as the 1960s, Kaplan (1966) already delivered his ever-since contentious view: Texts of different cul-

tures reflect different patterns of rhetorical thinking. He particularly pointed out the linear English thought pattern in contrast to the circular oriental one in essay writing. Despite the fact that this issue is still under discussion, no scholar has denied that recognition of textual organization is a significant independent contributor to higher reading ability and that ESL/ EFL readers do not seem to utilize this formal knowledge as often as and as well as their native counterparts, no matter whether this is due to an absence of the knowledge or linguistic constraints.

Furthermore, Connor (1984) argued that whether the same details would be categorized as subordinate or superordinate ones sometimes depended on what discourse readers chose to approach text information. Connor further illustrated this view by pointing out that certain subordinate details in a descriptive text may be promoted to superordinate cause or effect if the reader chooses to approach the text by cause/effect, and the resultant recall effect will certainly be different.

Therefore, in order to promote Chinese EFL readers' reading proficiency, instructors should design various tasks to help student readers alert to English discourse so that they may fully practice using those higher and more holistic discourse-related strategies.

## 3. At the Content Level

The last problems Chinese EFL readers may confront are those at the content level. Numerous studies have repeatedly demonstrated that rich prior knowledge compatible with a text to be read can minimize the effect of linguistic deficiency; facilitate vocabulary recognition; help understanding the message carried in unfamiliar syntax; cause readers to select what new information to process, to make accurate inference, and to generate correct anticipation, whereas incompatible prior knowledge can cause distortions or misinterpretations. When L2/FL readers are involved, their L1 background knowledge will accordingly prompt either facilitative or detrimental force in their probing for comprehension.

The strong impact of cultural knowledge upon reading comprehension has been verified by researchers who requested their subjects to read about both the target culture and their native culture, and found that students comprehended better texts about their native culture (see Carrell, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Lee, 1987; Pritchard, 1990). Meanwhile, a considerable amount of L2/FL research (see Carrell, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Lee, 1987) has demonstrated the dominant, superior role this kind of knowledge plays over linguistic and/or discourse knowledge in reading.

On the other hand, more and more researchers have noticed that the roles these three elements play seem to be much more complicated. For instance, Birkmire (1985, reported in Roller, 1990, p. 84), who manipulated both content and structure, found that readers did seem to process high-level information of a familiar passage much more quickly than low-level information. Carrell (1987), besides finding the generally dominant effect of content knowledge, also reported that rhetorical form might contribute more to comprehension than content when the text was organized in the sequential or chronological order. Levine and Haus (1985) no-

ticed that background knowledge could overrule language level in comprehending texts only at the "instructional" reading level. Another more elaborate study was Pritchard's study (1990), the result of which revealed that reading strategies for developing awareness and establishing intrasentenial ties were significantly more often correlated with the unfamliar passage, whereas the culturally familiar passage often elicited strategy use in establishing intersentenial ties and using background knowledge.

To sum up, no levels of schemata seem to have more of an absolute effect on reading comprehension than others. Each level of schema is likely to play the leading role in reading processing, depending on the reader's age; reading level; learning style; sociocultural background; and the lexical, syntactic, and structural difficulty, and familiarity of the text. In other words, even though Chinese EFL readers will apparently encounter various problems at the content level since their native culture and the target culture greatly differ from each other, it is important to bear in mind that induced content schemata may not take effect in case that other factors such as text discourse, text difficulty, or types of strategies intended to elicit are not taken into consideration.

## Conclusion

It seems undeniable that interlingual transfer may exert an impact to a certain degree upon Chinese EFL reading across all of the three reading components: linguistics, discourse, content, and that the force from the three sources is interactively activated in information processing. The problem is that the interactive process seems to be considerably complicated. Numerous factors might collaborate to determine which source of force might override another in its influential effect, such as the reader's age, language proficiency, learning mode, sociocultural background, and text difficulty and familiarity.

Most probably, beginners or poor readers, constrained by linguistic deficiency, will focus more on text-bound information rather than resort to higher-level processing, and will thus be more strongly affected by their native linguistic knowledge. Likewise, a text too difficult, at the frustration level, might also require all of its readers' attention to the language in and of itself, and leave its readers no surplus energy to activate their content and/or discourse knowledge. Even when beginners or incompetent readers tend to resort to their background knowledge, they tend to follow the "reflexive" mode (see Block, 1986) rather than the "extensive" mode and hence often go astray.

On the contrary, advanced or proficient readers might have already achieved automaticity in the application of their basic, required linguistic knowledge, and are hence more likely to draw on higher-level knowledge to anticipate what might plausibly come. As a result, interlingual transfer might exert a negligible effect upon their reading processing; even if it does, it does more at the content and discourse level. When advanced readers use their background knowledge, they are also likely to be differentiated from the beginners or unskilled readers by adopting the "extensive" mode.

It is important to caution that when it is said that one source of transfer is being activated, it does not mean that other sources of transfer are completely dormant. The only difference is in the proportion each source of transfer takes in the interactive processing at different times and/or in different situations.

In conclusion, notwithstanding reading is universally a linguo-cognitive information processing activity, consisting of three major elements: linguistics, discourse and content, L2/FL reading can mean a stumbling journey, with a considerable quantity of gravel or even rocks on the road as the reading elements in each language are possessive of their own unique features. Hence, only when both teacher and student reader are fully aware of those road blocks, can the blocks be either noticed or further removed in advance and a pleasant, skillful journey be guaranteed.

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