0. Introduction

When you pick up a paper or a novel and begin to read, two minds or worlds meet and begin to dialogue with each other. The two minds are of course yours and that of the writer. Unlike oral communication where your interlocutor is normally in front of you, with the writer the dialogue is rather one way – he talks but you cannot talk back. This situation of the reader and the writer takes on an added dimension if they do not share the same native language or the same cultural background. In this case the possibilities of misunderstandings or complete incomprehension increase considerably.\(^1\)

In this paper I shall be concentrating on the reading problems of foreign language (FL) readers arising out of the nature of the background knowledge they bring to the task. My attention will not be with that background knowledge which is general or «universal» in nature but rather with that which is culture-specific (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988:73-81, in Carrell et al.). After discussing the nature of this type of background knowledge, its possible effects on foreign language reading comprehension are examined and teaching proposals made. These last refer in general to types of techniques and procedures possible but wish to highlight especially the need that cultural knowledge in language teaching and learning need not be divorced from the actual language learning process itself.

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\(^1\) Nuttall (1982) p. 6-10 talks of differently shared assumptions and of the need to identify presuppositions on the part of the writer in order to identify problems of comprehension on the part of the reader. Cf. also Carrell (1988) for an interesting and exhaustive discussion of the problems of background knowledge and schemas in reading comprehension.
1. Models of reading: two opposing views

Background knowledge – also referred to as knowledge of the world or encyclopaedia – is that store of information that we build up in memory with experience and over time and which we draw on to interpret events, facts, behaviours, etc., that exist and occur around us. Interpretation in turn further enriches and refines this store.

According to schema theory – the science that looks into the role of background knowledge in language comprehension – our knowledge of the world is stored in memory as abstract and stereotyped knowledge structures or schemata each of which is made up of a certain number of slots which are to be filled in by the reader on the basis of the indications he receives from what is actually written on the paper or, even more importantly, presupposed by it. The process, called instantiation, is the result of an interactive operation of bottom-up (data driven) and top-down (concept- or knowledge-driven) processing (cf. Anderson and Pearson, 1988, in Carrell et al. for an account of schema theory and the two interacting processes).

This idea of comprehension being the result of an interaction between background knowledge and language data (the written word on the page) is best portrayed in Eskey’s approach to reading as an interactive process and is considered a more balanced view than the model proposed by Goodman who defined reading a «psycho linguistic guessing game» as far back as 1967. Goodman’s model – that describes what a proficient reader does – is top-down oriented. In other words, for Goodman a good reader minimises «dependence on visual detail». He does not in other words use all the textual clues to understand the text.

...the reader does not use all the information available to him. Reading is a process in which the reader picks and chooses from the available information only enough (our emphasis) to select and predict a language structure which is decodable. (Goodman, 1973:64, in Goodman, 1988)

Eskey’s model is rooted in schema theory and characterises the less proficient reader (typically the case of a foreign language learner). He seeks to redress the imbalance of Goodman’s model by affording not only importance to the knowledge of the world schemata but also to the bottom-up processes which consist in the recognition of the graphic symbols on
the page. His model is important as it has been shown that an overuse of schemata to compensate for bad word recognition skills can lead to comprehension problems. He is of the opinion that the misuse of background knowledge is a characteristic of a bad reader. Goodman, on the other hand, postulates that less attention to the page and more attention to «guessing» is typical of the good reader. In Eskey’s view the schemata must be used for higher-level interpretation of the text rather than as a tool for facilitating the recognition of words.

Background knowledge can be divided into linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. This division recalls the distinction made in schema theory between formal schemata, i.e., knowledge related to the formal rhetorical organisation of a text, e.g., a fairy tale, a newspaper article, a report, a joke, etc.; and content schemata, namely, knowledge related to the topic/contents of the text, e.g., a baptism, a degree ceremony, at a restaurant, etc.

Linguistic knowledge concerns the store of information that the reader has about language in general, his own native tongue in particular and any other language he might know. The other, non-linguistic, knowledge consists of schemata related to life and the world in general. Some of these schemata can be called «universal» in that they refer to events, facts, etc., common to all cultures. For example the fact that a thieving magpie is a bird, that it is black and white, has wings and feathers and can fly and belongs to the animal world cannot change from culture to culture. It is a fact of nature. (Of course, it may be that in some areas of the world thieving magpies do not exist. Consequently the inhabitants of the area might not have the «thieving magpie» schemata. The availability in fact of schemata plays an important role in the comprehension process — see below).

As already mentioned, some schemata are culture specific, that is they are either totally unique to one culture and absent in others (e.g., the Spanish Corrida) or may, as a general cultural phenomenon be present in two cultures in contact but which may exhibit certain features which, in the other culture, are absent (e.g., university education; school exam systems; the working day; Easter, etc).
2. **Language and cultural specificity**

Man has needs – the need to dress, feed and shelter himself; the need to dominate the environment and the outside elements; the need to relate with his fellow men; and the need to satisfy his mind and soul. All the responses he (or rather the community at large) elaborates to meet these needs are facts of culture and are therefore culture-specific in nature (cf. Freddi, 1979:86-89).

Languages too are culture-specific. They reflect in themselves the culture of the people who speak them as it is the people (or rather the linguistic community) who elaborate their language precisely to fit the demands of their culture and its continuing evolution (cf. Freddi, 1979a; 1979b; and Zuanelli Sonino, 1984 for chapters that deal with this dimension of language. Cf. also Cardona, 1976). We can find socio-cultural information at all four levels of language: the phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and discoursal/textual.

*sound* e.g., accents indicate geographical provenance as well as socio-cultural status.

*sentences* e.g., certain structures are subject to socio-cultural constraints or norms. Depending on the situation – role relationship, topic, place and time of the communication (Fishman, 1972) – certain forms (or registers) are allowed or sanctioned. etc.

*words* e.g., words can contain information about the community’s past history (e.g., the words of Norman French origin in English recall the invasion by the Normans and their cultural dominance, even then in things culinary: *cow/beef* (Fr. boeuf), *calf/veal* (Fr. veau), *pig/pork* (Fr. porc), *sheep/mutton* (Fr. mouton).

Words can represent behaviour, e.g., the word «breakfast» hides behind it a culturally structured behaviour pattern as does the word «morning assembly».

Words can indicate cultural change, e.g., new words are coined or borrowed from other languages to deal with cultural innovation, e.g. all the words of American-English origin related to the telematic field that are now part of the Italian language.

*discourse* e.g., the arrangement of sentences into higher-order chunks of language varies from culture to culture (Kaplan,
1972, reported in Mohan, 1985); certain genres and/or communicative events are specific to certain places and are the responsibility of certain people and this distribution differs from culture to culture (cf. Hymes, 1980, for an ethnographic discussion of communication).

It is clear therefore that, when we read a text, there is meaning – both denotative and connotative – inherent in the language that reflects the society’s socio-cultural network and its values and attitudes. These levels of meaning we must grasp if we wish to fully understand what the writer’s intended meaning is.

According the schema theory texts do not in themselves carry meaning:

$schema\ theory$ has as one of its fundamental tenets that text, any text, either spoken or written, does not by itself carry meaning. Rather, according to schema theory, a text only provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge (Carrel and Eisterhold, 1988:76).

Whilst accepting this psycho linguistic view of reading comprehension which highlights the interactive nature of reading comprehension by assigning an active role in the reading process to the reader himself, it is difficult to deny that language itself also plays a major role in the construction of meaning. A speaker (or writer) cannot decide independently what meanings to assign to words. That has been decided for him by the linguistic community². Sounds are associated with meanings/concepts through a semantic pact or conventional agreement. This is true both of denotative or base meaning as it is of a major part of connotative (affective, ideological, cultural) meaning³. If a reader is not aware of the distinction between common, shared meaning and personal idiosyncratic meaning then he could run the risk of «filling in the text with details that are not motivated by the text or by general conventional knowledge» (Carrell, 1988:103).

² There are of course cases where this is not the case, e.g. Joyce and his linguistic experimentation.
³ Some connotative meaning however is personal due to our own personal experiences. This additional meaning is not common to all the community so cannot be considered «social».
We take the view therefore that language does contain and express meaning – a meaning intentionally elaborated by the writer – which the reader may or may not be in a position to interpret adequately or correctly.  

3. When two «minds» meet

Language in the form of a text therefore is one of the two «minds» previously referred to – a mind-text that expresses linguistically (some of) the writer's knowledge of the world and reflects the socio-cultural network he is embedded in and of which his text is an expression.

The other mind is that of the reader. He has his own idiosyncratic baggage of knowledge of the world which he draws on, relating what he reads to it. By doing this he is able to understand and, at the same time, to extend and refine his already existing knowledge store.

A foreign language reader however brings to the foreign language text a store of knowledge most of which is rooted in his own language and culture.

What can happen when the two minds – the reader and the writer (text) of different cultural extraction – meet?

In abstract there can be three possibilities:
1) there can be partial overlap of schemata;
2) there can be no overlap;
3) there can be total overlap.

Of the three however it is the first two that interest us as it is doubtful – although not absolutely impossible if the «distance» between the two cultures in contact is not great – that, in a foreign language learning context, the third option could come about.

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4 The question of adequate or correct comprehension is one of degree. Comprehension cannot be considered always an absolute value for, even though on occasions it is possible to say that an interpretation is incorrect or inadequate, normally it is a question of deciding how in depth or superficial an interpretation has to be to be acceptable.

5 As the FL learner develops his knowledge of the new language so he acquires more schemata connected with the new culture and which he will draw on whenever necessary.
1. **Partial overlap**

A partial overlap of schemata can come about when an event, fact, behaviour, etc., resembles only in part an equivalent event, fact, behaviour, etc., in the other culture. The resemblance can be in terms of form but not in terms of distribution or meaning \(^6\) (Lado, 1957), e.g., it could be that in a part of Anglophone Africa the formal structure of British university education has been adopted but that other features like number and type of students attending, entrance conditions, the value assigned to education at that level by society, etc., render it quite distinct from the original. Alternatively, resemblance can be in terms of distribution and meaning but not in terms of form, e.g., Christmas and related festivities celebrated by the different Christian communities throughout Europe which have elaborated diverse forms of celebration.

2. **No overlap**

This means that an event or behaviour, that exists in one culture, is absent in another. A consequence is that the foreign language learner will lack the necessary schemata to adequately comprehend the event.

4. **Misuse of schemata: effects**

An FL learner will always interpret what is new on the basis of what he already knows. This is true of cultural knowledge acquisition as it is of foreign language acquisition where the learner uses his first language to help him learn the foreign one. The result will be that, *for want of knowing any better and as an aid to comprehension*, the learner will view the new information through the eyes of his pre-existing knowledge. By so doing the learner could incur in error. In other words, there will be cultural interference.

Several studies have been conducted to ascertain the effect that (the lack of) cultural knowledge and different values and attitudes have on reading comprehension. One such study was conducted by Gatbonton and Tucker 1971 (in Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984: 52-53). The experiment was designed to find

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\(^6\) Form, distribution and meaning are the three elements of Lado’s contrastive analysis model.
out whether the prior teaching of cultural information had a positive effect on comprehension. The results were very positive even when the cultural treatment was quite brief. Another study (Yousef, 1968 in Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984: 53-60) indicated that intensive direct cultural instruction was needed to get students to respond adequately to the cultural assumptions of the text. Steffensen and Joag-Dev themselves (1984) conducted an experiment with American and Asian Indian subjects who had to recall what they had read concerning an Indian wedding and an American wedding. The results showed that the connotative dimension of terms were not grasped thus disturbing correct comprehension and that distortions in understanding were also due to lack of knowledge and intrusion of knowledge concerning native customs and beliefs.

Schemata therefore would seem to play both a positive and a negative role in reading comprehension. Positive because existing schemas can be activated in order to interpret a text. Negative because the schemas, by constraining the reader’s expectations about the content area of the text, in a sense prevent him from being «open» to new information. Let us see what could happen therefore.

In the case of no overlap the FL reader can try one of two things: a) try to understand by resorting to a compensatory use of bottom-up processing or b) assimilate the new information to the nearest «similar» schema that he has.

...[the reader] will substitute the closest schema they possess and will try to relate the incoming textual information to that schema, resulting in schema interference. (Carrell, 1988:105)

In the case of partial overlap the problem could arise that, if the text does not signal otherwise (i.e., by being more explicit than usual and verbalising what, in authentic texts, is usually left as covert, presupposed common knowledge), the learner will not be aware that the overlap is only partial. In other words he will assume that it is total and therefore interpret the event, etc., in terms of his own culture, values and attitudes, etc.

A potential source of reading difficulties may be that the reader has a consistent interpretation of the text, but it may not be the one intended by the writer. (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988:79)
In both cases there will be problems of comprehension resulting in distortions and intrusions.

Cross cultural experimentation demonstrates that reading comprehension is a function of cultural background knowledge. If readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer they understand what is stated and effortlessly make the inferences intended. If they do not, they distort meaning as they attempt to accommodate even explicitly stated propositions to their own pre-existing knowledge structures. (Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984:61).

The reader’s problem therefore is one of lack of knowledge or insufficient knowledge which lead him to use what knowledge he has ineffectively.

It must be pointed out however that the discussion so far on the adequacy of background (cultural) knowledge for successful comprehension should not lead us to believe that the presence of the correct knowledge is a guarantee of successful reading comprehension. First because not all readers suitably activate the knowledge they have. Second, in contrast with this underusage, there can be an overuse of background knowledge.

It has been found that readers who have difficulty in, or are slow at, word recognition tend to resort to overuse of background knowledge in order to guess at the word meanings (Eskey, 1988). This could quite well represent a pressing problem for the FL reader who needs time and practice before the necessary automaticity in the graphic symbol/concept link can be established. An FL reader who has not yet acquired the automaticity in recognition may well resort to prior knowledge as a compensatory strategy for his inadequate linguistic skills. The effect will be that the meanings of single words will be thought out at the cost of getting a good grasp of the overall meaning of the text.

... it is important to distinguish between use of prior knowledge ... to facilitate the simple recognition of words, and the use of such knowledge to facilitate higher-level interpretations of texts (our emphasis). The latter is characteristic of good readers. (Eskey, 1988:95)

FL readers therefore could have a tendency to use their background knowledge in one (or two) ways: underusage and overusage (Carrell, 1988: 103).
5. The teaching task

The teacher’s task therefore concerning the FL reader and his background knowledge in reading comprehension requires essentially that:
i) he encourage the acquisition of new knowledge in order to overcome the dangers of cross cultural interference;
ii) help learners to activate and use efficiently existing background knowledge.

5.1. Increasing knowledge

Proposals have been put forward for the actual explicit teaching of culture. This is seen as the only means whereby FL readers’ reading comprehension can be facilitated. In fact, in many course books, students find descriptive and expository texts alongside their exercises that inform them of various aspects of the culture whose language they are learning, e.g., the Monarchy, the Houses of Parliament, English Pub Life, The School System etc. Through them the learner builds up new knowledge that will later help him to interpret other texts he will read.

This is a solution but it raises questions like: Are we teaching language or culture? Which culture are we to teach? Which «parts» of culture are to be treated?

An alternative procedure for increasing the students’ background knowledge could consist in procedures that link cultural exploration and discovery to the texts that the students are reading for reasons other than acquiring cultural information. In other words, texts that do not serve to explicitly provide cultural information but which contain, all the same, implicit or covert cultural information worth exploring. This would ensure a tighter relationship between language and culture. As a consequence also the question of whether we are teaching

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7 Explicit teaching of culture is preferred to its being left implicit as:
- it is time saving. The student would take too much time to acquire the knowledge needed.
- it can function as a substitute for the vital context that is always present in oral communication and which is rich in cultural information.
- it focuses the attention of the reader on to subtle but important cultural distinctions that he might otherwise not even notice.
culture or language will not arise. The question also of what culture and parts of culture to teach would not be faced in abstract for the culture that will be explored will be that which is «hidden» in the text being read. If anything, the choice of which culture to teach (although this is a wrong way of putting it – culture is not being taught as such. Language must be better understood and this entails exploring its hidden depths of cultural meaning) will be faced when texts to be read have to be chosen. In addition, it also responds to a formative need – that the students realise that language and culture are intimately entwined. Learning a language automatically means that its underlying culture is also presented. Learning a language therefore is not a simple question of swapping labels but of learning new concepts and new ways of dissecting, organising and viewing reality:

Teachers [and we would add the students too, n.d.r.] must become aware of the cross-cultural differences in vocabulary and how meaning may be represented differently in the lexicons of various languages. (Carrell, 1988: 243)

Procedures directly related to language and texts therefore could consist of:
a. Exploration of the cultural topic/a theme of the text. This would lead to a presentation of vocabulary items which, taken together, constitute a verbal representation/characterisation of the topic/theme (cf. Zuanelli Sonino, 1984). Exploration of the topic is a way of coming to terms with «the absence of appropriate generalised information assumed by the writer and possessed by a reader sharing that writer’s cultural background» (Rivers and Temperly, 1978, quoted in Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988:83). In this way, in other words, the all-pervasive nature of the culture in a text can more easily be brought to light.
b. Exploration of the genre not only in terms of its rhetorical organisation but also, and especially, from the point of view of those external variables that concurred to produce and «shape» it the way it is. The components in Hymes’ acronym SPEAKING (setting/scene, participants, ends, aims, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre) (Hymes, 1980) can provide the coordinates for exploration and, as a result, help reveal the cultural background to the text in question.
c. Exploration of single language items present in the text
using, if necessary, Lado’s model of cultural analysis (form, distribution, meaning) to single out their cultural depth and possible sources of cross cultural interference.

5.2. Activating knowledge

As already pointed out, having the relevant background knowledge does not automatically imply that it is accessed. Studies by Bransford and Johnson (1972) and Stern and Albridge (1978) both reported in Bransford et al. (1984) have highlighted the necessity that some kind of contextualisation (e.g., in the form of a title or a picture) be used so that necessary knowledge can be called up.

The availability of potential information is (…) not sufficient for comprehension; potential knowledge must be activated in order to facilitate people’s abilities to understand and learn. (Bransford, 1984: 33)

Access to potential knowledge can be facilitated by
i) working on the readers’ linguistic skills so that word recognition difficulties do not lead to an unsuitable use of existing knowledge;
ii) presenting topics that are familiar to the learner or by simplifying the texts linguistically (Paulston and Bruder, 1976, reported in Carrell and Esterhold, 1988).
iii) essentially however the main procedures suggested for the activation of knowledge consists in pre-reading activities (cf. Grellet, 1981, Nuttall, 1982, and Carrell, 1988: 245-255, for a wealth of interesting suggestions for pre-reading activities). These activities carry out the basic function of Ausubel’s «advance organiser». Information is elicited from the reader through the use of titles or subtitles in the text, pictures, the name of the author (which may provide expectations as to what and how he writes), the text type and genre (is it an encyclopaedia entry of the expository text type or is it an editorial of the argumentative text type?), etc., and he is asked to make predictions as to the topic, development of the topic, themes dealt with, etc. In this way already existing knowledge is called up (activated) to provide a framework for the text to be read in and a series of hooks upon which to hang new information.

The pre-reading activities can take the form of open-ended questions, focus questions, discussions, descriptions, paraphras-
es, etc., backed up where necessary by visual aids (cf. Hudson, 1988, for studies revealing the effective use of pictures in presenting cultural information). The important point to make about pre-reading activities is that they are done before the text is read. In fact studies have shown that some form of prior cultural instruction results in better comprehension and attitude towards culture as well as «a new awareness of certain signals in the text» (cf. above, par. 4).

Background knowledge therefore serves an important function in reading comprehension. The nature of the knowledge however that an FL learner brings to the reading task is such that certain problems of use might arise. It is the teacher’s task therefore to create those conditions that will neutralise the dangers and nurture the benefits all the time not losing sight of the fact that it is language and not culture that he is teaching.

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ABSTRACT

The article intends to highlight the importance of cultural background information for successful reading comprehension by indicating the problems connected with the lack of suitable knowledge and with the incorrect use of such knowledge. On the basis of the discussion indications for teaching procedures are provided.

KEY WORDS
Reading; Background Knowledge; Teaching.