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Language, Culture, and Literacy  
**A Report from the ASHA Schools Conference**  
*by Carol Westby*

## References

The years 2003-2012 are the United Nations' Literacy Decade. The theme for the decade is "Literacy as Freedom." In the 21st century, persons without literacy cannot be truly free. In the world, there are 875 million people without access to literacy and 113 million children who have no access to schooling.

The United States has the highest number of functionally illiterate persons in the world—that is, persons who have some degree of literacy but not sufficient literacy to function on the job and in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential. Without literacy, children cannot grow up to realize the dream they dream; they cannot achieve all that they could be; and they will be resigned to take a job, not make a job.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandates that by the year 2014, all children be proficient in literacy. Funds under the Reading First component of NCLB are designated for low performing schools—most of which serve children from low-income, culturally/linguistically diverse backgrounds. In a culture where written language is prominent and readily available, basic literacy should be a natural extension of an individual's linguistic development (Fillion & Brause, 1987).

Unlike oral language, however, literacy seldom develops without explicit instruction. Explicit instruction must include how to decode the text (associate script symbols with speech sounds) and how to build mental models to represent the content of the texts. Just what is taught and how it is taught is not universal—it varies depending on the nature of the orthography used to write a language, the nature of the language structure, and the cultural values and beliefs of those who use the language.

## Decoding

Cultures have taken varying approaches to coding language sounds onto symbols (Sampson, 1998). These systems can be categorized as logographic, which are based on meaning units (either words or morphemes), and phonographic, which are based on phonological units. Phonographic systems may be syllabic, segmental (alphabetic with individual phonemes), or featural (alphabetic/phonemic with marks for manner of production). Chinese uses a logographic script based on words. Alphabetic or phonological scripts vary in a number of ways. Some, such as Hebrew and Arabic, are consonant alphabets, with vowels being unwritten. Others, such as English and scripts of European languages, are phonemic, representing both consonants and vowels. Still others are syllabaries, with a symbol for each syllable in the language; or alphasyllabaries with symbols for consonants and vowels, but with some consonants having inherent vowels.

There are two routes for processing scripts: a lexical word route in which the symbol is visually recognized or a grapheme-phoneme correspondence where letters are converted to phonemes for pronunciation (Coltheart, 1984). Although readers of all languages make use of both routes, readers of logographic scripts are more likely to use a whole-word lexical representation and readers of syllabic and alphabetic systems are more likely to use phonological processes of pronouncing letter strings.

Phonemic awareness is especially essential for reading alphabetic texts. Cross-linguistic studies indicate that the rate of phonemic development depends on the nature of the orthography used (Goswami, 2002; Muller & Brady, 2001). Orthographies can be put on an orthographic depth continuum from transparent, or shallow orthographies with an almost perfect mapping of phonemes onto graphemes, to deep orthographies where the same letter can represent different phonemes and the same phoneme can be represented by different letters/graphemes (Frost, Katz, & Bentin, 1987).

Some languages such as Finnish or Spanish have shallow orthographies that are highly transparent, that is, there is a regular, consistent relationship between the sounds of the language and their graphemes. In contrast, some languages such as English have deep orthographies that are not transparent. Reading a deep orthography is markedly more difficult than reading a transparent orthography. The rate of learning to read in English has been found to be twice as slow as reading a transparent orthography (Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003).

In addition to phonemic awareness, decoding requires that students have good rapid automatic naming (RAN; Denckla, 1999). Performance on RAN tasks is related to development of orthographic knowledge—the reading and spelling of words that are not phonetically regular (Manis, Seidenberg, & Doi, 1999). Children who learn to read in less transparent orthographies such as English or French are more dependent on good RAN skills to process large irregular orthographic units than children who learn to read highly transparent orthographies such as Spanish. English requires that children possess both good phonological awareness skills and RAN and that they be able to switch back and forth between two processing systems.

### **Comprehension**

Comprehension requires that readers make mental representations or mental models of texts and their content. These mental models are influenced by students' experiences with discourse and their cultural values and beliefs. To build a mental model, readers must recognize the organizational structure of a text and determine its gist. Cultures tend to have developed different logical systems and, consequently, different organizational formats for texts.

Although all cultures use a variety of text organizations, particular text structures tend to predominate in a culture (Kaplan, 1986). English texts are direct and straightforward, with one point following logically from the preceding, and with minimal digressions. Arabic and Hebrew texts are based on a series of parallel constructions and tend to rely on coordinate constructions (use of and, therefore, but), whereas maturity in English texts is measured by increasing subordination (use of when, that, because, if).

This lack of subordination in these texts makes it difficult for English speakers to realize the interrelationships among the elements of the text. Asian texts are indirect, with the topic not being made explicit. In the romance languages, for example, Italian, French, and Spanish, it is permissible to introduce what to English speakers appears to be extraneous or superfluous material. For readers unfamiliar with this style, the digressions lead them away from the main point of the story, and they have difficulty following the story line. To the writer, however, these apparent digressions are a means to elaborate on aspects of the text and to provide greater contextualization for the reader/listener.

Because of these structural differences, second language readers are at a disadvantage when reading a text written using an unfamiliar structure. Chinese and Korean students who were given expository texts using English or Korean/Chinese organization comprehended and better remembered texts with the Asian organizational structure than the English organizational structure, even though when interviewed, they exhibited no conscious awareness of the structural differences (Chu, Swaffer, & Charney, 2002; Eggington, 1987).

All cultures have stories with episodic structures, but the stories vary in terms of the favored number of episodes, actions, or repetitions of behavior. Western cultures prefer their narratives in three parts or three episodes. Many Native American cultures prefer four-part stories. Northwest Coast Indians and some Chinese make use of series of five episodes, while some other Asian cultures prefer repetitions of two (Dundes, 1980; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). When an expected narrative structure is violated, listeners and readers may unconsciously reorganize the story to fit their expectations.

Variation in episode structure extends to the emphasis placed upon the components of stories as reflected in their story grammars. Spanish-speaking American children may emphasize settings and de-emphasize the sequence of events (Machecha, 2003). Matsuyama (1983) reported that 80% of Japanese folktales studied did not have a goal structure for the main character. Soter (1988) reported differences in the ways that English, Arabic, and Vietnamese students in the sixth and eleventh grades in Australia wrote a bedtime story for a child. English students immediately began the story and focused on the plot, producing a series of actions carried out by the characters. Vietnamese students never got to the actual task, but instead produced a lengthy introductory description (a story within a story) and did not complete the actual story, that is, they spent time discussing putting the child to bed or the parents' choice of a story before beginning the actual story. They appeared intent on providing a contextual framework for their stories. Arabic writers emphasized detailed description of the settings for their stories.

In building mental models, readers use schemas to interpret the content or theme of texts. Text content is a reflection of a culture's values and beliefs. Schemas are hierarchically organized conceptual units that describe general knowledge (Mandler, 1984) and that guide the text comprehension process. If the schemas a person uses to comprehend the text do not approximate the schemas used by the producer of the text, the reader will likely misinterpret the text or not be able to determine its point. Memory for text becomes distorted when texts contain unfamiliar schemas. Readers take more time to read the unfamiliar schemas. They recall more of a familiar schema passage, add more culturally appropriate information to the familiar passages, and produce more culturally-based distortions when recalling unfamiliar texts (Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979).

Students bring their cultural and linguistic experiences to the processes of decoding and comprehending text. When the language and expectations of schools match the experiences of students, reading is facilitated. When students' cultural and linguistic experiences differ from the expectations of the school, educators must understand the nature of these differences if they are to assist children in bridging from the language of the home culture to the language and literacy of the school culture. The functions and structures of students' home languages can significantly affect their reading comprehension, even when the student's first language is English.

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