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Literacy as Sociocultural Practice: Comparing Chinese and Korean Readers

■ **This paper reports on a study investigating the literacy practices, attitudes, and uses of two groups of subjects: Chinese (n=35) and Korean (n=26); it examines the relationship between each group's practices, attitudes, and uses and success in reading in a second language (English). Results of the research suggest: (a) literacy attitudes, practices, and uses can be seen to vary cross-culturally; (b) that cultural group appears to be a factor in determining attitudes about reading and reading behaviors; (c) differences in attitude, practice, and use in the first language have implications for literacy behavior in the second language; and (d) that second language reading success may be related to certain first language attitudes and behaviors that seem to be characteristic of the groups under study.**

Introduction

The research reported on in this paper is best understood in relation to a sociocultural approach to literacy. This approach assumes that reading and writing are not simply skills that learners can be taught but rather are forms of social/cultural practice that naturally vary from context to context and to which individual learners must be acculturated.

There is a growing body of work in this vein, a sampling of which is discussed below, which should be seen as complementary to the much larger body of work devoted to a psycholinguistic approach to literacy. This extensive literature focusing on reading and writing acquisition and processes and on related skills and strategies includes studies of both first and second language literacy—see, for example, Elbow (1983); Flower (1988); Goodman (1975); and Stanovich (1992) on first language literacy; and Anderson (1991); Block (1992); Carrell (1988); Carrell, Devine, and Eskey, (1988); Grabe (1991); Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002); Raimes (1991); and Zamel (1987) on second language literacy.

In "Discourse and Sociocultural Studies in Reading" (2000), Gee explores the implications of literacy in a sociocultural context, arguing that literacy (first or second language) cannot be understood solely in terms of cognitive processes. Rather, a fuller understanding must also include consideration of the social and cultural practices and experiences of readers (and by extension, writers). A "sociocultural" framework of literacy thus has as its starting point an understanding of the mind as "social, cultural and embedded in the world" (p.195).

Earlier work by Reder (1994) provides an excellent introduction to the sociocultural approach to literacy, or, in his terms, the "cultural practices" paradigm, which he contrasts with an "individual skills" paradigm. This contrast parallels the distinction Gee (2000) and others have made between psycholinguistic and sociocultural approaches to the study of literacy. Reder details the variation found in literacy practices across a range of social and cultural groups and develops a theory of literacy acquisition that highlights the role of cultural practices and personal engagement with these literacy practices: literacy is conceived as a set of social or cultural practices and its participants as a community of practice. As a set of socially patterned activities, literacy develops and spreads through a process of socialization, the means of which may include but are not necessarily limited to formal instruction.

Reder's theory of literacy, and of course Gee's as well, owes much to earlier work by Heath, Street, Vygotsky, and Smith. Heath (1985) proposed a critical distinction between literacy skills and literate behavior; that is, between merely having literacy skills and actually engaging in what can be called "literate behaviors" in a particular culture. Street (1984) contrasted what he called the "autonomous" model of literacy—literacy as a fixed set of skills that may be transferred from one context to another without fundamental disruption—to an "ideological" model, within which what it means to be literate will vary from social context to social context, from culture to culture. Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1987) formulated the by-now-widely accepted notion of "the zone of proximal development," which very broadly elucidates the social nature of all human learning, including learning about how, when, and why to engage in literate behavior. Smith (1988) conceptualized literacy attainment in terms of membership in "the literacy club," to which newcomers must be acculturated (in a kind of apprenticeship) to become literate, thereby highlighting the social nature of both definitions of literacy and the acquisition of literacy within a particular culture. Other thinkers who have further explored these issues include Swales (1990), whose extended discussion of the concept of "discourse community" has helped to clarify this crucial, if ephemeral, notion, and Hill and Parry (1992), who have adapted much of the above work to a second-language context.

Taken together, these authors provide a theoretical perspective for considering both literacy development and practice generally and literacy development and practice in a second language more specifically, where issues of differing attitudes and practices are especially evident and critical. The collec-

tion *Literacy Across Languages and Cultures,* edited by Ferdman, Weber, and Ramirez (1994), provides an excellent overview of research on literacy across languages and cultures within a sociocultural framework, wherein "reading and writing are viewed as practices occurring in a social context, guided by intention, laden with values, and taking on forms and functions that differ according to time and place" (Ferdman & Weber, 1994, p. 14). Also see more recent work in this area by Taylor and Taylor (1995); Abu-Rabia and Feuerverger (1996); Abu-Rabia (1998); and Florio-Ruane and McVee (2000). Ferdman and Weber suggest that unlike the cognitivist position "which seeks, if not assumes, a universal view of reading and writing," (p. 15) a sociocultural perspective helps researchers and teachers to formulate significant questions about literacy across languages and cultures, such as:

- How do readers [and writers] from different cultures value the knowledge of one or more written languages?
- To what ends do they choose one [language] over another?
- To what extent do they take pleasure and take pains in learning and using the [written languages]? What kinds of resistance are possible?
- In what ways do they give meaning to texts and to the activities of reading and writing themselves? (p. 18)

These are important questions for reading and writing specialists to ask, questions the answers to which would provide a better understanding of second language literacy, not merely as a set of acquired skills, but as a form of sociocultural practice that members of a cultural group adopt in accordance with the specific conventions of their particular discourse community. Answers to questions of this type could provide insight into key factors, both in the learner's L1 and L2, which might influence or determine the nature, practice, and success of literacy behavior in a second language. Among others, these factors will undoubtedly include such things as: the attitudes toward reading and writing held by members of a culture; the specific literacy practices that they regularly engage in; the uses that they make of information acquired and produced in written form; and literacy pedagogy that reflects these practices, attitudes, and uses within a culture.

Researchers have amassed an extensive body of information about, and have at least begun to attain a critical understanding of, the cognitive dimensions of second language literacy; there is, additionally, a body of work that deals with social and cultural variables on L2 reading (e.g., Steffensen, 1988), but this research focuses primarily on problems of knowledge—for example, the kinds of problems in reading comprehension that arise when readers and writers from dissimilar cultures approach the same text with poorly matched knowledge bases. In contrast, there has been little research to date that deals with the sociocultural questions of what constitutes successful literate behavior for learners moving from one literacy tradition to another. The current research was designed to begin this type of inquiry by focusing on attitudes, practices, and success in second language reading.

In earlier work (Devine & Eskey, 1991) exploring the relationship between reading attitudes and practices, we studied 56 foreign students from eight countries enrolled in advanced proficiency classes in an ESL program at the University of Southern California. Using a 1-5 Likert scale, subjects responded to 25 questions about reading in their native languages and in English. The questions addressed two major areas of concern: subjects' reading behaviors and their attitudes toward reading. We hypothesized that there would be a significant positive correlation between what might be termed "desirable" reading behaviors and positive attitudes toward reading. We discovered that (a) in both the native language and in English, the strength of agreement with the statements indicating a positive regard for reading correlated significantly with what could be considered positive reading behaviors (such behaviors as frequent, voluntary reading); and (b) in both the native language and in English, the strength of agreement with the statements expressing a positive assessment of reading proficiency correlated significantly with positive reading behaviors (see above). In addition, for reading in English, there was a significant correlation between positive reading behaviors and the amount of interest subjects take in reading. Thus, as expected, we found significant correlations between positive attitudes toward reading and positive reading behaviors.

The Present Study

There is little research that deals with the question of what constitutes successful literate behavior for students attempting to make the transition from one literacy tradition to another—students attempting to become literate in a second language and a second culture. In this study, we attempt to address the question of the impact on L2 reading of sociocultural factors such as attitudes about reading held by members of a culture, the specific reading/writing practices regularly engaged in by members of a cultural group, and so forth; we do this through an examination of the attitudes and behaviors of two groups of L2 readers—Chinese and Korean—and the impact on second language reading performance of these factors. Given the results of our earlier study (summarized briefly above) we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1. Reading attitudes, practices, and uses will vary cross-culturally; that is, language/cultural background will be a significant factor in determining these attitudes and practices.

Hypothesis 2. The differences noted in attitude and practice concerning reading in the first language have implications for reading performance in the L2.

The Method

Subjects

The 35 Chinese and 26 Korean subjects were part of a larger group of 96 subjects, all of whom were enrolled in classes at the University of Southern California; each of these students had achieved advanced proficiency levels in English. In the original group, there were 34 females and 62 males from 13

different language backgrounds (Indonesian, Armenian, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Bengali, Korean, Portuguese, Turkish, Thai, Spanish, and Arabic). Of these subjects, 14 were undergraduates and the other 82 were graduate students. These subjects were majoring in 28 different fields. At the time of data collection, each of the subjects was enrolled in an advanced ESL class that met four hours a week.

Data Collection

To investigate the above hypotheses, two types of information were gathered for each of the subjects: an attitude/behavior questionnaire and a reading performance score.

Questionnaire. For use in this study, we further refined the questionnaire we had developed for our earlier research. The current questionnaire contained a total of 22 items—10 concerning attitudes toward reading and 12 that dealt with reading behavior. (Sample questions appear in the appendix.)

Using a 1-5 Likert scale (1=*strongly agree*; 5=*strongly disagree*), subjects were asked to respond to each of the 22 questions as they applied to their reading attitudes and behaviors in their native languages and then as these same items applied to their reading attitudes and behaviors in English. Since one of the larger concerns in our ongoing research into social factors and L2 reading is in refining our research instrument, we performed analyses on the questionnaire data from the first study and the current research. The Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient for our Attitude and Behavior questionnaire items (Attitude=.7195; Behavior=.8297) suggests that these items were, in fact, eliciting responses that represented the subjects' reading attitudes and behaviors.

A factor analysis was done on each of the revised scales used in the current research. The analysis determined that each scale had questions that were loaded on three dimensions:

For *attitude*
1. Self-evaluation;
2. Positive attitude;
3. Negative regard for reading.

For *behavior*
1. Reading for pleasure;
2. What was read;
3. Time spent reading.

Reading Performance. The second set of data gathered for each subject was a reading performance score. The instrument used was the British Council/Cambridge ELTS test; reading form. This test consists of short reading passages followed by a series of text-based and inferential questions. Both the questionnaire and the reading test were administered in class sessions.

Analysis

To test our two hypotheses, the following statistical analyses were performed:

1. An ANOVA, with "native language" as the independent variable and reader performance and responses to items on the attitude and behavior scales (both in the L1 and in English) as the dependent variables;
2. A *t*-test for significant differences for the two L1 groups in the subject pool—Chinese (n=35) and Korean (n=26);
3. A correlation analysis to assess the strength of the relationship between the reading attitude and behavior responses in the L1 and in English and the subjects' scores on the reading test instrument. (Tables 1-3 contain the results of these analyses.)

Results

Table 1 summarizes the result of the ANOVA analysis with native language as the independent variable; this table shows that native language accounts for the variance in responses to questions about the subjects':

1. Positive attitude toward reading in the L1 (p<.01);
2. Negative regard for reading in both the L1 and in English (p<.05 and .02 respectively); and
3. Reading behavior (all three dimensions, see above) both in the L1 and in English.

Table 1
ANOVA: Impact of Native Language

Dependent variable	D	Mean square	F value	p
Reader performance	13	21.90648166	0.99	N
Attitude (composite)				
L1	12	9.69456595	0.87	N
English	11	12.12967268	1.03	N
Self-evaluation				
L1	12	3.03346989	0.52	N
English	12	3.19733874	0.78	N
Positive attitude				
L1	13	8.18997494	2.17	.01
English	13	5.57709030	1.60	N
Negative regard				
L1	12	7.27596316	1.84	.05
English	12	11.09224395	2.16	.02

Dependent variable	D	Mean square	F value	p
Behavior (composite)				
L1	12	114.62836394	2.66	.004
English	13	115.20081270	2.94	.001
Read for pleasure				
L1	13	12.08408707	2.38	.009
English	13	7.96682488	2.99	.001
What was read				
L1	13	17.9546420	2.05	.02
English	13	20.15710117	2.22	.01
Time reading				
L1	12	20.50047974	2.04	.03
English	13	19.86407557	2.37	.009

These results suggests that variation in some attitudes toward reading (as measured by our instrument) and all behaviors (again as measured by our instrument) can be accounted for by differences in language/cultural background.

Based on these results, testing for significant differences was conducted on the responses of the two largest language/culture groups represented in the subject pool (Chinese and Korean; see Table 2). As the table shows, the Chinese and Korean subjects as groups differed significantly in their responses to five (of a possible 17) items:

1. In the *L1,* positive attitude toward reading;
2. In the *L1,* negative regard for reading;
3. In the *L1,* amount of time spent reading;
4. In *English,* positive attitude for reading; and
5. In *English,* negative regard for reading.

Table 2
T-Test for Reader Performance,
Attitude and Behavior Scales:
Chinese (n=35) and Korean (n=26)

	Mean	SD	DOFF	d	t
Reader performance					
Chinese	19.735	4.060			
Korean	20.269	4.887			
			-.534	58	-.45
Native language					
	Mean	SD	DOFF	d	t
Attitude (composite)					
Chinese	25.828	3.347			
Korean	25.961	3.549			
			-.133	59	-.147

	Mean	SD	DOFF	d	t
Self-evaluation					
Chinese	6.000	2.543			
Korean	5.807	2.383			
			193	59	.30
Positive attitude					
Chinese	6.171	1.653			
Korean	7.500	2.387			
			-1.32	59	- 2.46*
Negative regard					
Chinese	13.657	1.814			
Korean	12.653	1.809			
			1.00	59	2.13*
Behavior (composite)					
Chinese	24.5588	5.852			
Korean	25.1600	6.9802			
			-.06	57	-.35
Read for pleasure					
Chinese	6.1714	2.175			
Korean	6.9230	2.415			
			-.75	59	-1.25
What was read					
Chinese	8.1470	2.652			
Korean	7.9615	2.821			
			1.85	58	.63
Time reading					
Chinese	10.2000	2.741			
Korean	10.4400	3.416			
			-.24	58	-2.49*
English					
	Mean	SD	DOFF	d	t
Attitude (composite)					
Chinese	23.7647	3.774			
Korean	23.1304	3.416			
			.634	55	.63
Self-evaluation					
Chinese	5.1142	2.206			
Korean	4.5600	1.733			
			.554	57	1.08
Positive attitude					
Chinese	7.3428	1.696			
Korean	8.3333	2.119			
			-.99	57	-3.68*
Negative regard					
Chinese	11.2941	2.195			
Korean	10.2500	2.151			
			1.04	56	2.49*

	Mean	SD	DOFF	d	t
Behavior (composite)					
Chinese	31.4117	6.150			
Korean	30.9565	5.896			
			.455	55	.28
Read for pleasure					
Chinese	8.9142	1.291			
Korean	8.2400	1.963			
			.674	58	1.49
What was read					
Chinese	10.7058	3.010			
Korean	10.3333	3.185			
			.372	56	.44
Time reading					
Chinese	11.2285	2.850			
Korean	11.8400	2.779			
			-.61	58	-.83

* p < .05

Table 3 displays the results of the correlation analysis of reading performance (as measured by the ELTS instrument) and attitudes and behaviors. This analysis shows that the subjects' reading performance in English is significantly correlated with certain dimensions of attitude and behavior in the native language:

1. Composite attitude;
2. Negative regard for reading—a negative correlation; and
3. Time spent reading.

Table 3
Correlations Between Reading Attitudes and Behaviors and Reading Performance in English for L2 Readers

	Reading Performance	p
Attitudes (composite)		
L1	.21	.04
English	.07	N
Self-evaluation		
L1	.11	N
English	-.01	N
Positive attitude		
L1	-.12	N
English	-.08	N
Negative regard		
L1	.36	.0004
English	.19	.05

	Reading Performance	p
Behavior (composite)		
L1	-.16	N
English	-.03	N
Reading for pleasure		
L1	-.11	N
English	-.01	N
What was read		
L1	-.04	N
English	.01	N
Time reading		
L1	.19	.05
English	-.11	N

Reading in English also significantly correlated with only one of the second language (English) behavior dimensions, that of negative regard for reading; this is a negative correlation—that is, as this score went up (as "negative regard for reading" went up) reading scores went down. There were no correlations (positive or negative) with reading performance in English and scores of attitudes expressed about reading in English for the group as a whole.

Discussion

The finding of our earlier research, that second language readers have very different attitudes toward reading in their native language and reading in English and engage in very different patterns of reading behavior in the L1 and the L2, raises the crucial, and, to the best of our knowledge, largely unexplored questions of what kinds and what degrees of literacy in English we can, or should, expect particular groups of L2 learners to achieve—that is, what the goals of literacy instruction should be. Advocates for extensive reading (Krashen, 1993; Robb & Susser, 1989) have, for example, argued against an emphasis on teaching skills and strategies for academic reading and English (and, by extension, literacy) for Academic Purposes (EAP) approaches to L2 university students, promoting instead large amounts of pleasure reading on the grounds that more reading results in better reading and general language proficiency. Can (or should) international students be induced to become avid readers of English for pleasure, or should L2 reading instructors instead focus on assisting students to become more skillful readers of academic discourse?

Hypothesis 1

The analysis suggests that this hypothesis is partially confirmed; as measured by our questionnaire, some dimensions of attitude and all dimensions of behavior vary as a function of language/culture group. This suggests that for the subjects of the current study, cultural group is a factor in determining whether readers hold positive attitudes toward reading and/or negative regard for certain aspects of reading; the language/culture group also appears to be a factor in determining a wide range of reading behaviors,

including the amount of time spent reading, the type of reading engaged in (that is, what is actually read), and the extent to which reading is part of routine leisure-time activity. This finding does not mean, of course, that individual variations in attitude and behavior are negligible but rather, as Reder (1994) suggests, that "the social meanings associated with literacy shape individuals' engagement—and nonengagement—in literacy practices…[and] the social meanings involved are often deeply rooted in cultural history and resistant to change" (pp. 56-57).

The analysis of Chinese and Korean groups suggests that there are some significant differences between the two groups in attitudes about reading and reading behavior. These differing attitudes and behaviors might be said to represent "characteristic responses" or cultural attitudes and practices of the groups under study. Specifically, in both their native languages and in English, these two groups differ with respect to their general attitude toward reading (with Chinese subjects holding more favorable attitudes) and in the extent to which they have negative regard for reading (with Korean subjects holding more negative attitudes). Furthermore, the Chinese subjects spend significantly more time reading in their native language than do the Korean. It is worth noting that both negative regard for reading and the amount of time spent reading in the L1 have implications for reading performance in English (Table 3—discussed below) and thus, in addition to characterizing the groups, they are of interest for their potential impact on readers' ability to perform certain reading tasks in English.

Hypothesis 2

The data appear to partially confirm the second hypothesis, which suggests that the attitudes that L2 readers have about reading in their native language and in the second language and the actual reading behavior they engage in (in L1 and L2) will have a significant impact on their ability to read successfully in the L2. Partial confirmation for the hypothesis comes with native language attitudes and behaviors. It appears that if a reader has a generally favorable attitude about reading in the native language and regularly spends time reading (again in the L1), that reader will be successful at reading in English; at the same time, if readers hold negative regard for reading in their native language, the L2 reading performance will be correspondingly negative.

Regarding attitudes and behaviors in English, for the group under study, the only significant correlation to emerge was between negative regard for reading and lower reading scores—not a surprising finding. This suggests that a positive attitude toward reading in the L1 and sustained reading in the L1 may be more predictive of reading success in English than the actual reading behavior in the second language, even when that behavior is regarded as positive.

In addition, attitudes about reading in the first language, which perhaps develop earlier as a result of frequent exposure to cultural norms and sus-

tained engagement with practices based on these cultural norms (Reder, l994), may be stable; hence they may exercise an impact on reading both in the L1 and in the L2. Behavior, on the other hand, will tend to vary considerably with circumstance and hence may not transfer across L1 and L2 reading. Attitude, then, may become part of the general approach to reading, developed and internalized by the readers as part of a learner's general acculturation; as such, both and negative and positive attitudes in the L1 may be expected to affect performance, both in the L1 and the L2. Frequent reading in the native language, although on one level clearly a feature of reading behavior, may perhaps be more appropriately considered as a "habit of mind," that is, as part of a reader's socially constructed network of attitudes about appropriate reading behavior. As Robinson (1988) reminds us, "Practice is always rooted in concepts even when the concepts are unstated or even unstatable; and what we practice most energetically is that which we value most highly" (p. 245). The general pattern of sustained reading in the L1, which may be regarded as practice based on prescribed cultural values, bodes well for the L2 reading performance for subjects of the current study.

In the case of the subjects of the current research, the type of reading behavior that they engage in—which, while frequent, is most often tied to their coursework—may of itself have no special consequences for their ability to read in the L2. These subjects may have, in a sense, "cracked the code" for the particular type of reading demanded by their highly specialized coursework (recall that they are mainly graduate students) and this type of reading may have little to do with other types of reading they may be asked or may choose to do. Hence the type of reading performance measured by the typical standardized test (if indeed there is such a thing: see Abraham, l993) may, for most foreign students studying in this country, be unrelated to the type of highly specialized reading behavior that they typically engage in. This atypical reading behavior, then, may have little or nothing to do with their cultural attitudes about reading or with the sorts of literacy behavior that they typically engage in.

Conclusion

The current study provides empirical support for a sociocultural view of literacy as conventional practices based on cultural attitudes and values. For the subjects under study, the language/cultural group accounts for important differences in attitudes toward reading and for variation in the types of reading behavior regularly engaged in. In addition, reading performance in English (the L2) correlates significantly with certain dimensions of attitude and behavior in the native language, suggesting that culturally constructed values and practices may have critical implications for literacy performance. Although it would be premature to recommend explicit pedagogical practice based on this research, this study does highlight the importance of focusing on social context in the teaching of literacy. As Jay L. Robinson (1998) summarizes:

> …the teaching of literacy is especially sensitive to the pressures of social context. Language in all its uses is an intimate part of human experience: language is expressive of identity and personality, but it is also socially binding and expressive of collective values. (p. 243)

Further analysis of these and other data might profitably focus on a number of interrelated questions.

- What kind of L2 literacy can or should particular populations of L2 learners be expected to acquire?
- What is the relationship between attitudes and behavior in the L1 and L1 reading?
- Will homogeneous populations of L2 readers (Arabic-speaking subjects, for example) show similar patterns of attitudes/behavior and performance? And patterns that differ from other homogeneous groups?
- What other factors might be considered sociocultural (for example, cultural literacy practices such as a tradition of oral reading) and how will these factors affect performance?

Inquiries into these and related questions promise to provide a fuller understanding of the sociocultural dimensions of literacy.

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Appendix
Questionnaire—Sample Questions

Subjects asked to indicate appropriate response on 1-5 scale:
1 = *strongly agree;* 5 = *strongly disagree*

Attitude

I enjoy reading.
I envy people who are good readers.
I don't read unless I absolutely have to.

Behavior
I frequently read for pleasure.
I often read newspapers.
I spend at least an hour a day reading.