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# Intelligibility Analysis and Cultural Linguistics*

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The global spread of English has resulted in an increasing number of cultures becoming associated with English (Smith, 1992). In the course of the development of new varieties of English, speakers associate their use of English with their own cultural schema. Therefore, world Englishes need to be examined from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics in order to gain a better understanding of how English is used by different communities of speakers around the world. This study investigates this concern, focusing on the English literature from different varieties of English. The study aims to get some insights into how intelligible it is to English speakers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and what factors are involved in the intelligibility of these English literatures from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics. The result shows that achieving a full understanding of the literary texts depends more on the readers' familiarity with the cultural context and cultural schema within which the texts are embedded. The educational and theoretical implications of the findings are then discussed.

**[textual intelligibility/Cultural Linguistics/world Englishes/cultural schema]**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since Kachru (1988) classified the English-using countries into three groups or circles, it is repeatedly observed that the global spread of English has resulted in an increasing number of cultures becoming associated with English (McArthur, 1992; Mesthrie, 2008; Nelson, 1992, 2008; Sharifian, 2011, 2015; Smith, 1992; Wolf, 2008; Wolf &

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Polzenhagen, 2009). It is repeatedly voiced that the acculturation or localization of English into a of variety of South Asian and African contexts where English is an official or major language has made features of these varieties culturally encoded, ultimately making successful communication difficult in international contexts (see Smith, 1992). The growing body of English literatures from these various cultural contexts, as well as spoken and other written forms of communication has been the object of this concern.

Cultural Linguistics is a multidisciplinary field of research that explores the relationship between language and cultural conceptualization (Sharifian, 2011, 2015). Thus far, a variety of African Englishes (Wolf, 2008; Wolf & Polzenhagen, 2009) and Aboriginal English (Sharifian, 2001, 2002, 2005) have been explored from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics. These strands of research have revealed how Cultural Linguistics can account for the localization and acculturation of English as certain cultural conceptualizations are encoded in various features of the English language. The global spread of English has resulted in an increasing number of cultures becoming associated with English (Smith, 1983; Smith & Nelson, 1985), thus giving rise to the development of more and more of varieties of English. In the course of the development of new varieties of English, speakers associate their use of English with cultural schemas that were not originally associated with English. Therefore, world Englishes need to be examined from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics in order to gain a better understanding of how English is used by communities of speakers and how they communicate with different communities of speakers around the world.

Focusing on the English literature from different varieties of English, therefore, this study aims to get some insights into how intelligible it is to English speakers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and what factors are involved in the intelligibility of these English literatures from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics.

The data comprise six short stories, three written by Singaporean writers and three by American writers, and twelve readers who are graduate students pursuing a Master's or a Doctoral degree at a state university in the United States. The twelve readers involved are six native speakers of American English, three Koreans, and three Japanese. The readers identified aspects of each story that presented difficulty in understanding, employing Smith's (1992) broad framework of understanding, which considers understanding to consist of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability. The analysis revealed that the understandability of the stories depends on the readers' familiarity with the cultural conceptualization and cultural schema within which the stories are embedded.

## II. CULTURAL LINGUISTICS AND INTELLIGIBILITY

### 1. Cultural Linguistics

This study is conducted within the framework of Cultural Linguistics and world Englishes. Cultural Linguistics is an interdisciplinary field of linguistics that explores the relationship between language and cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2011, 2015). It emphasizes the role of culture in conceptualization and interrelationship between language, culture, and conceptualization. Cultural Linguistics explores how features of human language and language varieties are entrenched in cultural conceptualization such as cultural schemas and cultural metaphors (Sharifian, 2015).

Cultural schemas are a class of schemas that are culturally constructed and serve as a basis for interpreting cultural meanings (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). As Sharifian (2015) mentions, a typical example provided for a cultural schema is that of the restaurant schema. Though the restaurant schema is common to many cultures, the content of restaurant schema is different culture to culture. As such, cultural schemas also provide a basis for socio-pragmatic meaning, in the sense that our perception of world and language use are culturally constructed and therefore captured in our cultural schemas.

Cultural metaphor is also essential to Cultural Linguistics, in that the way we think and what we do and experience in everyday life is a matter of metaphor assumed to be shared and consequently culturally conceptualized in our mind. Recent research (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Yu, 2009) demonstrates the significance of conceptual metaphors on which our language use is based. What is considered as conceptual metaphor is to be grounded in cultural belief systems and the underlying conceptualization provides a frame of thought and is based on what the speakers of the language believes to be real (Sharifian, 2015).

In the past, research in the field of world Englishes and global spread of English has mainly paid its attention to the distinctive linguistic features of each variety of English or how they have been codified. However, a variety of English is also unique in terms of its underlying system of cultural conceptualization and it also provides a basis for socio-pragmatic meanings as well as semantic meanings. Cultural Linguistics, therefore, provides a significant resource for a new approach to the studies of world Englishes and applies its criteria to the study of interaction between language, culture, and conceptualization.

### 2. Textual Intelligibility

The concept of intelligibility is central to much of the research on world Englishes and

English as a lingua franca. The attention has been generating considerable academic discussion on the use and teaching of English for international communication. Smith's (1992) proposal for the intelligibility framework paved the ground for extensive research on the varieties of English (Arua, 1998; Bambose, 1998; Munro, Derwing, & Morton, 2006; Nihalani, 1995; Pakir, 1993; Smith & Christopher, 2001) that investigate the degrees of intelligibility and factors that affect the achievement of understanding in cross-varietal interactions. The factors include familiarity with the prosodic features of the variety (Nelson, 1981), the strength of the speaker's accent (Munro, 1995), nuclear stress (Barrera-Pardo, 2008), punctuation and transition (Jun & Jung, 2011) vowel and consonant substitution or deletion (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and some cultural factors (Nelson, 1995, 2008). The majority of the intelligibility studies have focused on linguistic factors, particularly Jenkins's (2000) Lingua Franca Core of phonological features because the studies of cross-varietal intelligibility in English have paid most attention to speech production. There has been much less research on the factors of intelligibility involved in understanding English literature from different varieties of English using countries.

After Smith (1992) elucidates the notion of intelligibility by introducing three conceptual layers that understanding operates on, intelligibility, or word and utterance recognition; comprehensibility, word, and utterance meaning; and interpretability, or the meaning behind a word or utterance, examinations of the forms and functions of world Englishes could be much more usefully carried forward. Nelson (2008) also recommends this tripartite framework of intelligibility, using intelligibility as an item of terminology and Sewell (2010) argues that the explanatory power of the concept of intelligibility increases in both world English and ELF research. What is generally referred to as intelligibility, Smith (1992) argues, is more accurately investigated as a matter of understanding on these three distinct levels. Employing Smith's paradigm, Van der Walt (2000) uses intelligibility and comprehensibility in the meanings when he analyzes South African variety of English. In Smith's (1992) study the speakers of English from Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles appraised how well they could understand the speech of English speakers with high fluency from each Circle. The results show that intelligibility is more easily acquired than comprehensibility or interpretability in the speakers from all three Circles. Subjects with more exposure to different varieties of English show better interpretability than did those without such experience. Smith (1992) concludes that variation in English need not be an obstacle to successful communication in cross-cultural or cross-varietal contexts. In their study on misunderstanding between an Australian speaker and a Turkish in conversational interaction, Smith and Christopher (2001) note that the advantages of superior cultural and social knowledge and some hindsight can fill in necessary information in cross-cultural communication. In an Asian

context, Matsuura (2007) and Orikasa (2016) investigate the extent to which Japanese speakers of English found different varieties of English to be intelligible. Both studies identify possible factors that may affect intelligibility such as speech rate and accent. Employing an intelligibility test and a short questionnaire, she measures intelligibility and comprehensibility and identifies possible factors such as speech rate. Nelson (2001) explores the notions of intelligibility and creativity in world English literatures and concludes that writers around the world are maintaining identities that reflect cultural and social norms.

## III. METHOD

### 1. Data

Based on Smith's (1992) framework of understanding with the three conceptual layers intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability, this study assesses how well the readers understand the Singaporean and American stories, and what factors are involved in their understanding.

The status and use of English in literature written within the area of South Asia is still somewhat controversial, an ever increasing number of Singapore writers have chosen English over other languages such as Chinese, Malay and Tamil primarily after the 1970s (Talib, 1994). Outer Circle where English is used as an official language also includes India and other parts of the world like Nigeria in Africa and these countries have large bodies of English literature. However, one group of readers in this study consists in Koreans and Japanese and have relatively significant exposure to East Asian culture, this study selected literary texts from Singapore. As will be discussed in following sections, the results of the study show that cultural experiences and the familiarity with cultural schema are indeed significant in understanding the literary texts. American literary texts were chosen because they represent one of the main bodies of Inner Circle English. Consequently, American English speakers form the other group of readers. Because both group of readers have extensive experiences with American culture, using American literary texts allowed this study to gain some insight into how cultural experience and familiarity with cultural schema affects the understandability of those texts.

The literary texts were selected from award winning authors in each country, so they could be assured that the literary texts have been recognized as representing the country's best work. The literary texts from Singapore were taken from short story collections by Philip Jeyaretnam, Catherine Lim, and Toh Hsien Min. The American literary texts were

selected from the annually published O. Henry Award Winner collections. All the literary texts were published in about four to seven-year periods: 1996-2008. To prevent the readers from being biased by differences in genre, theme, and time period, the selection of the texts was limited to the theme of contemporary family life and domestic issues. The literary texts were selected after the researcher consulted with a professor from English department in the same university to ensure that the stories are of the same theme and their length was roughly equal. The researcher did not read the stories before the readers completed their reading to avoid biasing the analysis by knowing the content of the stories in advance. And the researcher did not discuss the stories with the readers until the analysis was completed.

(1) The literary texts

Singaporean:

*Means to an End* by Toh Hsien Min (2008)
*The Song of Golden Fond* by Catherine Lim (2001)
*Father* by Philip Jeyaretnam (1996)

American:

*The Room* William Trevor (2007)
*The Deep* by Mary Swan (2001)
*City Life* by Mary Gordon (1997)

## 2. The Readers

The twelve readers involved in this study consist in six native speakers of American English, three Koreans and three Japanese. They are all graduate students pursuing a Master's or a Doctoral degree at a state university in the United States. Although American readers have some experience with different cultures, they report that they have limited experience with Asian culture. Korean and Japanese readers are studying in the US for over 5 years and have had adequate exposure to American culture. The readers identify aspects of each story that presented difficulties in understanding, employing Smith's (1992) and Bauman's (2004) broad framework of understanding with three conceptual layers of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability.

After reading through each story, readers reported anything that gave them difficulty in understanding the story and explained what level of the problem it was. That is, for any part that that presented a problem, the readers explained why it is problematic in their interpretation of meaning in detail. After they reported and explained the source

and level of understanding problem, the readers assessed their understanding overall, and discussed with the researcher the results and some other problems remained, if any.

## IV. RESULTS

After reading, both group of readers reported that they had no significant trouble understanding the stories, although there are some aspects of understanding problem in both group of stories. They could understand all the stories overall without serious understanding difficulty. The difficulties the readers had were outlined in the following at each of the three layers of understanding, and the source of these difficulties, wherever this was possible to determine.

### 1. Intelligibility

Because intelligibility is a matter of word and utterance recognition, the source of the intelligibility problem was non-English words which have localized uses in Singapore English and non-English words which readers didn't recognize. But overall both groups of readers reported few problems in understanding at the intelligibility level in all of the six stories. In the Singaporean story *Father*, for example, the group of American readers reported being unable to recognize the words, 'Chap Goh Meh' ('the eve of Chinese New Year's Day'), 'sinseh' ('groceries'), and in the American story *City Life*, neither group recognized many of the Italian words used by the main character and his wife, including 'essere' ('to be'), 'eravamo' (first person plural, imperfect tense of 'essere'), and 'forse che si forse che no' ('perhaps, probably').

Overall intelligibility for the stories was so high that only two, *Father* and *City Life*, caused any such problems at all, and the problems were very few in number. One thing to be noticed is the fact that the Singaporean stories were not more problematic to either group of readers than the American stories. The reason for this high intelligibility might be in the relatively small number of non-English words or phrases in the stories. Also, as Smith (1992) clearly points out, intelligibility is more at issue in spoken language because to recognize a word or phrase in utterance is critical task and various phonological features involved in speech production can affect intelligibility particularly in cross-cultural and cross-varietal communication. However, written text does not present this kind of problem at this level of understanding even for the cross-varietial English users.

## 2. Comprehensibility

In contrast to understanding level of intelligibility, there were significant differences between two groups of readers in their understanding at the comprehensibility level. The group of Korean and Japanese readers had more difficulty than the American group in the two groups of stories, although they had more trouble in the American stories than the Singaporean ones. The American readers' understanding problems were on the whole equal for the two groups of stories, but they had slightly more trouble with the Singaporean ones. The data below shows the total number of problems each group reported in each story. If the same problem was reported by more than one reader in each group, it was counted as once.

**TABLE 1**
**Total number of reported problems in comprehensibility**

| | | Readers | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stories | | American | K & J |
| Singaporean | *Means to an End* | 6 | 7 |
| | *The Song of Golden Fond* | 4 | 7 |
| | *Father* | 5 | 4 |
| American | *The Room* | 2 | 14 |
| | *The Deep* | 4 | 10 |
| | *City Life* | 4 | 9 |

Two types of understanding problem at the level of comprehensibility were reported by both groups of readers: one linguistic and the other cultural in nature. The first type can be illustrated in word ‘inchoation’ in *The Deep*, ‘ulcerate’ in *Father*, and ‘pink excelsior’ and ‘tribality’ in *City Life*, where the words belong to the current American English and widely used as well, yet the readers lack knowledge of the word's meaning. The second problem, as illustrated by words such as ‘temple paper water’ and ‘hamper’ in *Father* and ‘grouse feedback’ and ‘hawker center’ in *Means to an End*, comes from the cultural difference. That is, the word or phrase is English but is either not an American English word, as in ‘grouse feedback’ or ‘hawker center’, or is an American English word used in a different sense in the stories, as in ‘hamper’ or ‘temple paper water’.

The nature of the problems reported by the group of Korean and Japanese readers are mainly linguistic in nature. The readers simply lack the knowledge of some English words like ‘schizophrenia’. So they could remedy the problems by consulting a dictionary. But it’s different in the case of the American readers. Their problems could

not be solved by consulting a dictionary, mainly because their trouble had its basis in cultural difference. The words that gave the readers trouble are English words but not used in the way they would be among the current American English speakers or not part of American English at all. Either is not a critical issue, however, because the American readers reported few problems in their comprehensibility.

## 3. Interpretability

Considering the matter of interpretability, Cultural Linguistics offers an innovative approach, revealing that the varieties of English may be distinct from each other at the level of cultural conceptualization. The responses given by the two groups of readers demonstrated that they found the American stories to be highly interpretable. All the readers were also in full accord about what the authors' motives and intentions in their stories appeared to be. On the contrary, the interpretability level of understanding for the Singaporean stories was quite different between the two groups of readers. While the group of Korean and Japanese readers reported a high level of interpretability, this was not the case with the American readers. The responses from Korean and Japanese readers instantiate the Asian cultural schema. Although the American readers reported they could interpret each story to some extent overall, they found several parts of each story to give them some understanding trouble.

Interpretability is keenly at issue in the very kind of cross-cultural understanding in literary texts. However, measuring interpretability is not easy, particularly when the author’s intentions in their writing are not made available through the meaning negotiations between the reader, the text, and the author. Here the share of cultural conceptualization or cultural schema has a crucial role. Because of the potential difficulty in measuring interpretability, the level of interpretability was analyzed based on the readers' reported ease and confidence in interpreting the stories. While there is still the possibility of misinterpretation of the stories, it was found that the framework of Cultural Linguistics was quite meaningful in determining the extent to which the readers felt they understood what the author was trying to tell or convey and how the author succeeded in communicating with the reader in the text. The readers’ confidence on this matter had its root in the degree to which the readers could infer the meanings of the events, the context, the plot, the characters, and the general message of the story based on their cultural schema or cultural metaphor. The understanding of these factors is demonstrated in the examples below.

When the readers found any trouble in interpreting each story, that is, the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the story were not easily inferred or shared by the readers, they reported that it was hard to understand why the sequence of events was the way it

was, what were the motives of the characters' behavior, what the author tried to tell in the story as he or she did. The readers reported any part in each story that gave them this kind of understanding trouble. When the readers did report there was little or no trouble in understanding the story, they could easily respond to the story and understand the characters, the sequence of events, and the message based on their cultural conceptualization or cultural metaphor. The readers could explain easily what they thought the author tried to tell through the story. The researcher determined the interpretability level of understanding based on this line of reporting.

The difference in interpretability for the two groups of readers is clearly demonstrated by the story *Father*. *Father* is about a happening in one day for a Chinese family in Singapore. The family receives a package from Australia, which includes an unlabeled gray porcelain pot containing a gray powder. After some argument among the family about what the gray powder, they come to a conclusion that the power might be a herb powder from Australia and it is edible at all. So they add the powder to their soup like a seasoning for a couple of days. Unfortunately later they learn that the gray powder was one of their neighbor's dead father's ashes. But there is nothing they can do. The father in the family knows that the neighbor will be broken-hearted if he tells the neighbor what really happened to the gray powder. So the father lies and tells the package was missing to spare the neighbor's feelings

After reading *Father*, the group of American readers reported that they could not understand the whole story, that is, how the family in the story could determine that the unknown gray powder was eatable without any doubt, so they add it into their soup. The sequence of events or happenings didn't make a sense at all for the American readers. In contrast, the Korean and Japanese readers reported that what happened for the family is probable - it is not unusual that relatives or friends from abroad often send valuable and healthy herbs from their home country, especially on holidays like Thanksgiving Day, as was the case in this story. For the Korean and Japanese readers, the gray power might resemble a common herb powder or salt in bamboo, which is broadly used and known in Asian countries. So when they read the story, they can respond the flow of story and understand the sequence of events and the behavior of the family in the story was totally understandable based on their Asian cultural schema or cultural metaphor. On the contrary, for the group of American readers in this study, the mysterious gray power did not resemble any eatable substance they were aware of. In the American readers' cultural experiences and cultural conceptualizations eating unlabeled powder would be taking a substantial risk. Just one exception in the group of American readers was one reader who has some knowledge in the alternative medicine and she reported that she could understand the state of things in the story.

Words such as 'powder' and 'power in pot' evoked cultural conceptualizations in the

group of American readers that were quite different from those of the group of Korean and Japanese readers as shown in Table 2 below.

**TABLE 2**
**Conceptualizations of 'gray unknown power'**

| Americans | Koreans and Japanese |
|---|---|
| Bathing | Herb, bamboo salt |
| I don't know what it is! | Health supplement |
| Unknown, mysterious | Well-being? |
| I have no idea | What else it can be? |
| No image | Seasoning |
| Something unknown is unknown | Might be something eatable |
| Just powder! | Eatable or uneatable? |
| Doubt | Black salt |
| What it can be! | |
| Unknown powder in a pot | |

The responses given by the Korean and Japanese readers instantiate their cultural schema of the 'gray unknown powder' as they refer to the several eatables and relates such as herb, seasoning, and well-being. The responses from the American readers suggest that the 'gray unknown powder' is restricted to the 'unknown, mysterious'. Responses such as 'I don't know what it is!' or 'I have no idea' by American readers reflect their common sense that something unknown is unknown as it is.

In *The Song of Golden Fond* a family struggles with the care of the grandpa who comes to live with them. The grandpa is grumpy and always complains about anything particularly when he feels being treaded poorly. The family realizes their current situation is not quite appropriate for the care of grandpa mainly due to their busy life. They argued about the idea of sending grandpa to a nursing home, finally deciding that they will. But the initial struggle in the matter is resolved in the end of story - grandpa stays and lives with the family.

Interpretability differences for *The Song of Golden Fond* between the two groups of reader instantiate the different cultural schemas. The differences between the groups were significant, although they were more a matter of degree than was the case with *Father*. The sense of obligation in the care of parents and elders was the issue of understanding for the readers. The group of Korean and Japanese readers deeply empathized with the situation of the family in the story and how painful it would be for them. They understood that the decision to send their mother or grandfather to nursing home meant acting against the duty embedded in Eastern or Asian culture and also in their cultural conceptualization. In contrast, though the American readers also

understood the obligation and duty, but not the comparative strictness of it that has its root in many Eastern and Asian cultures. Although the American readers also understood the situation, they did not feel the same level of sympathy for the decision that sending their parents to a nursing home was serious as the Korean and Japanese readers did.

One example of this difference in interpretation of the situation is illustrated by the description in the story of the lack of care grandfather received at her son's home in an evening, his delayed dinner caused by everybody's busy schedules that day, and the grandfather complained about this. The Korean and Japanese readers agreed that this complaint could be treated seriously. Delayed dinner for the grandfather of his age that long could be a sign that the care for him in the family was not sufficient.

On the contrary, the American readers did not feel that the delay of dinner just once in the story should justify serious complaint. They reported that the author's intention of this description was an indication that grandpa was too grumpy and demanding, and giving some difficulties to other family members, and that he was in fact receiving excellent care, but that he was just exaggerating the lack of concern for him. This kind of interpretation ran in conflict with what was a far more likely intended interpretation from the perspective of the group of Korean and Japanese readers, making the sequence of events and the consciousness of the characters', among other such factors, illogical to them at times.

The difference in the interpretation of the Singaporean stories between the two groups of readers was not caused by the linguistic forms. Even with high word-level understanding, the deeper message fully accepted through the Eastern and Asian cultural conceptualization was unclear to the American readers. They were able to understand the sequence of events in the stories, but they were unable to interpret the responses from the characters quite often, or recognize the whole picture or message the author intended to show. Their understanding of the stories is due to a mismatch between cultural schemas that they relied on and those that the Korean and Japanese readers drew upon. Their relative lack of familiarity with Eastern and Asian culture and cultural schema made them less well-equipped to easily interact with the author and the text at the stage of the story.

Words such as 'family', 'home', and 'care of grandpa' evoked cultural conceptualizations in the group of American readers that were quite different from those of the group of Korean and Japanese readers as shown in Table 3 below.

The responses from the American readers suggest that the words 'family' and 'care of grandpa' are generally restricted to the nuclear family and includes a pet dog or a cat. On the other hand, the responses given by the Korean and Japanese readers instantiate their cultural schema of 'family' and 'care of grandpa' as they refer to the members of their family and especially 'grandpa'. Responses such as 'they're there for me, my family

support me a lot' reflect the responsibilities of care that are alive between the members of family in Eastern or Asian cultural conceptualization. Compared to the American readers, the word 'home' and 'family' seems to be mainly associated with family relationships in Asian cultural conceptualization.

**TABLE 3**
**Conceptualizations of 'family' and 'care of grandpa'**

| Americans | Koreans and Japanese |
|---|---|
| My brother got married to his college sweet heart last year!<br>It's amazing! | I miss my parents and my grandpa.<br>It's been a year since I met them. |
| I miss mom and dad.<br>Oh, my Lexy, too. | My grandma lives with my uncle.<br>He is my mon's elder brother. |
| I visit grandma once in a while.<br>I miss her. I like my step-mom and step-brothers. They are sweet. | My family supports me a lot.<br>They are always there for me.<br>I know that. |
| He is in nursing home. We visit him quite often. | My grandma is on my mother's side.<br>She is in good condition and so energetic. |
| I have twin sisters.<br>They're coming to see me on Friday.<br>I can't wait!! | I'm the only daughter.<br>So my parents give me everything they could. |
| I have two cats. They are my family. | My mom is math teacher. |
| I'm from a big family.<br>Three sisters and two younger brothers. I'm the youngest. | My grandparents live with my family.<br>I mean mom and dad.<br>My mom takes good care of her mother-in-law. |
| | My grandpa is my home.<br>You know what I mean! |

The Korean and Japanese readers showed no significant differences from that of the American readers in terms of English proficiency. This is significant because the differences in their responses may be distinctive predominantly in term of their underlying system of cultural conceptualization, which provides a basis for semantic and pragmatic meanings, without correlation with features of linguistic forms.

In contrast to the Singaporean stories, the American stories, which present a typical Western culture with which both groups of readers are experienced, did not yield the same kind of interpretation troubles to either group. For example, *City Life* describes the life of a struggling young woman who wants to be a journalist living in New York City. Her city life in every sense of the word on 'unstable ground,' it suddenly becomes even more unstable when her boyfriend leaves her one day, and her nagging mother comes to visit her. But she gets by in New York City, despite her being on this increasingly unstable ground.

Both groups of readers reported understanding and high degree of sympathy with the feeling of instability of the main character in the story and how the author created this feeling in a modern New York metropolitan area and how the metropolitans' life carries on without the lack of resolution at the end of the story. For example, the readers described the end of the story: 'life goes on as it is' (a Japanese reader), '... this is life' (a Korean reader), 'full sympathy' (a Korean reader), 'life continues in this way ...' (an American reader), and 'this is the way we get by' (an American reader). Compared to the Singaporean stories, there was little difference in the readers' responses and their understanding American stories as a whole. Both groups of readers, experienced with the American culture and equipped with American cultural conceptualization, had little or no interpretation problem.

## V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To understand how English is used by communities of speakers and how they communicate with different communities of speakers around the world, this study focused on the English literature from different varieties of English, and aimed to get some insights into how intelligible it is to English speakers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and what factors are involved in the intelligibility of these English literatures from the perspective of Cultural Linguistics.

The analysis revealed that the understandability of the stories depends on cultural conceptualization and cultural schema. To the readers who are familiar with cultural context within which the stories were written, that is, the readers with the cultural schema or conceptualization, the stories are not difficult to understand. Conversely, the stories are more difficult to fully understand for the readers who do not have the same cultural schema or conceptualization.

The group of Korean and Japanese readers had more difficulties in comprehension than the American readers did for both groups of stories, but their overall level of interpretability was higher than the Americans'. Two factors that differed between the groups were proficiency in English (native speakers of English compared to speakers who use English as a foreign language), and cultural schema and familiarity with the cultures within which the stories were written. Thus the groups of Korean and Japanese readers, who had the advantage both in cultural familiarity and cultural background, were better equipped to fully understand the stories overall than were the Americans, who are the native speakers of English which is the medium of the stories but comparatively lack the Asian cultural knowledge. The American readers' understanding difficulty is assumed to come from a mismatch between cultural schemas that they relied

on and those that the group of Korean and Japanese readers drew upon.

This kind of understanding problem is not limited to the English literature but characterize the everyday life interactions between interlocutors with different cultural background and cultural schema, disadvantaging them in all contexts where there are significant differences between the cultural conceptualizations that interlocutors rely on. A less important factor in understanding the stories was their linguistic form. The source of understanding trouble for the group of Korean and Japanese readers is mainly intelligibility and comprehensibility, so their trouble can be easily cleared up by consulting a dictionary. In contrast, the American readers could not so easily "fix" their interpretability problems.

This study has serious implications for establishing criteria for what would count as an English literature canon and for the English language classroom as well. The concept of monolithic English has been problematized due to the wide spread of English across the world and the use of English in cross-cultural context. As Kachru (1987) clearly articulates the creative aspects and contributions of new-English literatures written by native speakers of other languages, these new-English literatures have contributed to understanding of cross-cultural traditions in new linguistic and cultural paradigms. No analysis of a literary text's intelligibility can be complete without a consideration of the role of readers and the cultural conceptualization with which the readers are equipped. By examining the responses of readers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to literary texts, this study revealed the roles of cultural conceptualization and cultural schema in achieving a deeper understanding of English literature across cultures.

This study also has significant implications for English language classroom and other related concerns. Rather than persisting in using only literary canon based on British and American tradition, teachers need to help readers to develop and gain the values of cultural knowledge and cultural background represented in multi-ethnic literatures. Both teachers and student readers armed with the role of cultural knowledge can adopt strategies that will promote their understanding of literary texts written in both traditional canon of English and new-English. The benefits of using such literatures in the classroom have been well demonstrated by Talib (1994), Tawake (1991), and Thumboo (1977). Regarding Singaporean English literature, Talib (1994) argues that the use of such literature in Singaporean classrooms can help make students more aware of the country's culture and well equipped with cultural values. Tawake (1991) argues that new-English literatures can provide students in the West with a glass through which they can see cultures and codes of behavior based on the cultures. As a way of uniting multi-ethnic society in Singapore, Thumboo (1977) also argues for the use of new- English literature. In a broader context, Smith (1986) demonstrates that readers develop concern in other cultures through guided exposure to literature written in English from other cultures.

In addition, this study also has implications for a critical approach to applied linguistics, particularly to the literacy education of the non-native speakers of English or speakers of non-standard varieties of English and other related concerns. As Sharifian (2005) demonstrates, there can be a significant miscommunication between children from non-standard English speaking communities and Standard English speaking educators. This miscommunication is due to the mismatch between cultural schemas that the children and the educators rely on each. This kind of problem is not limited to the context of non-standard English speaking communities but also characterize the interactions between non-native speakers of English. Globalization and the significant growth in human mobility have yielded speakers with multi- or trans-cultural knowledge. However, there are still potentials for miscomprehension due to the lack of cultural background and cultural conceptualization of target language. School literacy material, therefore, should be equipped or informed with resources that can supply trans-varietal cultural schema and cultural conceptualization.

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