CULTURAL CITATIONS IN READING

Reading for meaning involves predicting content on the basis of prior knowledge and familiarity with the content. Content knowledge provides the schema for adding on new information while reading. A second language reader may be familiar with the topic and have a sufficient vocabulary to comprehend the text; however, that reader may encounter words which are not in the dictionary and which assume experience with the culture, or at least a knowledge of the context in which the reference is being made. This Bulletin gives examples of common types of cultural citations which readers may encounter, explores variables affecting a reader's understanding of cultural citations, and offers teachers suggestions for helping second language readers increase their cultural knowledge in reading.

CATEGORIES AND EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL CITATIONS

As described below, cultural citations cover a broad range of categories. These sample citations will be best understood by an adult U.S. American who has spent most of his/her life in U.S. culture. The depth of understanding will depend on variables in each reader's experience.

Advertising
*The velvet decor of Heinz Hall is the color of ketchup.

Film
*Regarding the earthquake, Seattle is shaken, not stirred.

*He described 'Crouching Dragon, Hidden Tiger' as Bruce Lee meets Jane Austin.

*She sat on the bed wearing oversized pajamas, like Doris Day in 'Pillow Talk'.

Food
*When he came by tonight he gave me a few bucks, about what it'd cost for a burger and fries at Mickey D's.

Geography
*Qatar is located on the Persian Gulf about 100 miles from Saudi Arabia and is about the size of the State of Connecticut.

History
*The trauma they experienced upon arrival was akin to the Union army's debacle at Bull Run.

Literature
*It was a cold, gray day, the kind of day that Americans, reading English novels, imagine being far more picturesque than the reality.

*The light was slanting into the loft making an elongated Ichabod Crane shadow on the floor.

Music
*The women screamed 'We miss you Johnny Mathis!' He opened his mouth, and suddenly it was 1963, when the miracle of his voice was fresh and the Beatles were an ocean away.

*Before them was a young man with two long braids and a blue bandanna tied into a headband like Willie Nelson.
News
*Unmarked tracks diverge in the woods, one leading to a startup winery and another to a corrugated metal shack that the F.B.I. must have searched while looking for the Unabomber.

Politics
*He was as slick as an American politician, and probably as rich.

Religion
*He scribbled in an additional $90,000 on the estimate, which had waxed to the girth of the Talmud while rivalling it in possible interpretations.
*When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass him by.

Sports
*Her skin is as tender as DiMaggio's glove.
*He treats her the way a young black kid would treat Michael Jordan - as a blend of role model, escape route, and god.

TV
*Sounds like an episode of X-files, doesn't it?

COMMON VARIABLES IN COMPREHENDING CULTURAL CITATIONS

Age. References to events occurring before the reader's life experience may be incomprehensible. Similarly, if these events occurred in another culture and had no import outside the culture, they would be little understood.

Education. The reader's educational background will have a great impact on comprehending literary allusions and current events, be they political or social. The ability to interpret broader meaning from these citations depends upon both the reader's education and the cultural context from which the citation is referenced.

Environmental context. A reader whose geographical experience is with a tropical climate will have some difficulty comprehending references to life in other climates. Descriptions of events in cold, mountainous climates, for example, may be difficult to comprehend.

Interest. Someone unfamiliar with or uninterested in baseball will have difficulty understanding citations in that sport; a non-movie goer will not understand film citations in the same manner as a film buff; and a person disinterested in art will not comprehend art references. These citations provide numerous examples of how embedded our cultural knowledge needs to be in order to fully comprehend meaning beyond the literal value of the words. Individually, our age, education, environmental context, and interest all converge in several variables which affect our comprehension.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Intensive reading. When engaging students in intensive reading, it is important to anticipate the citations and to provide the necessary background knowledge for greater meaning to occur. By anticipating cultural citations in the text, the teacher can help expand students' knowledge of the world. Here are some suggestions:

1. Provide students with a variety of experiences on a given topic.
2. Provide books, TV programs, videos, and movies that expand cultural knowledge.
3. Provide background information on a particular topic before students read about that topic.
4. Provide a variety of reading materials on the same topic.

Extensive reading. The biggest challenge for students reading on their own is the random encounter with citations that defy dictionary access or with information gathered from other reference materials. This is especially true for citations taken from other contexts that serve as metaphors for deepening understanding of the topic. For this reason:

1. Have students maintain a log of unfamiliar vocabulary, including cultural citations, for future discussion and clarification with someone who is culturally informed.
2. Inform students that they need to be made aware that citations do not usually appear in the dictionary, and can be explained only by someone more proficient in the cultural and linguistic nuances of the language. An appreciation of the richness of language and the deeper meaning which can be derived from it can greatly expand second language learners' knowledge of both culture and language.