

# What Is Reading?

One way to introduce the nature of reading is to directly engage the reader (you) and to ask you to think about what you are doing, mentally, as you read this sentence. So stop reading, look away from the page, and think about the act of reading, what you did when you read this paragraph, and complete this sentence:

## REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- Complete this sentence:  
— Reading is \_\_\_\_\_.

Your answer most likely had something to do with comprehension, with meaning, and with understanding. This is the most common way that people think of reading. This view of reading as comprehension is generally thought of as a cognitive or mental view of reading—of what takes place in the brains. A useful cognitive definition is this:

*Reading comprises a number of interactive processes between the reader and the text during which the reader uses his or her knowledge to build, to create, and to construct meaning.*

This chapter covers some of the keywords in this simple but helpful definition. The first keyword is *interactive*. This key word refers to two different conceptions: (1) the interaction that occurs between the reader and the text whereby the reader constructs meaning based partly on the knowledge drawn from the text and partly from the knowledge that the reader has; (2) the interactivity occurring simultaneously among the many component skills that results in reading comprehension. As Grabe (1991) notes, the interactive reading processes involve “both an array of low-level rapid, automatic identification skills and an array of higher-level comprehension/ interpretation skills” (p. 383).

Another key word is *processes*. A number of processes are at work when you read. Grabe (2009) identifies “lower-level processes, including word recognition, syntactic parsing and meaning encoding as propositions” and “higher level processing, including text-model formation (what the text is about), situation-model building (how we decide to interpret the text), inferencing, executive-control processing (how we direct our attention), and strategic processing” (p. 21).

Also critical is *knowledge*. Actually, perhaps *knowledges* would be more accurate. These include knowledge of the language (e.g., the writing system, grammar, vocabulary), knowledge of the topic of the text, knowledge of the author, knowledge of the genre (e.g., editorial in a newspaper, a romance novel), and knowledge of the world, including experiences, values, and beliefs. Readers use all of these knowledges *to build, to create, to construct meaning*, and all readers all have different knowledge.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- Two people read the same book. Will they construct the same meaning?
- Why or why not?

The best answer to these questions is *Probably not because they have different knowledges*. They could have similar knowledges, so perhaps they

would construct similar meanings, but they would probably not construct identical ones.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Now reflect on your teaching:
  - If you teach ESOL reading, do you let your students read?
  - Do you allow them to create or construct their own meaning?
  - Or do you insist on your meaning?

Reading has other dimensions. For example, reading can be seen as a *cultural* event. All reading takes place in a given culture; culture shapes what, how, where, and when people read. Indeed, culture even determines if people engage in reading. Some cultures are what may be called *nonreading* cultures. In a nonreading culture, in general, people tend not to read. For example, in a nonreading culture, people generally do not read on buses or trains. By contrast, in a reading culture, people read at every opportunity.

Still another view of reading is *affective*. This affective dimension sees reading as *enjoyment, pleasure, exciting, even magic*. Without leaving their chairs, readers can visit a different city, a different country, a new and strange world. They can leap ahead in time and space, or visit the distant past. Readers experiencing this magical dimension of reading may lose track of time and space. They forget what time it is and where they are. Psychologists call this a *flow experience*.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Reflect on flow and your reading in both your first language (L1) and a second language (L2):
  - When you read in your L1, do you have flow experiences?
  - When you read in your L2 do you have flow experiences?
  - Do your students have flow when reading in English?
  - How might you create the conditions for flow when your students read English?

# Conclusion

This chapter examined the nature of reading, and looked at three dimensions of reading: cognitive, cultural, and affective.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Before moving to chapter 2, think about these reflection questions:
  - What is the most important thing you have learned in this chapter?
  - Why is it important?