Metaphors, usually regarded as “culturally-loaded,” are likely to cause more difficulties for readers, especially those from different cultural backgrounds, as shared knowledge is required to fully understand them (Littlemore, 2003). Based on this assumption, this study aims to examine specifically what clues readers use to interpret L2 metaphors and how Korean college students struggle with L2 reading. Through qualitative analysis, this study seeks to identify exactly what makes metaphor-reading easy or difficult for its participants. After completing a questionnaire and a reading task, participants were asked how they responded to the reading task, followed by a semi-structured interview. The findings reveal that in order to infer metaphorical meanings, Korean college students looked at syntactic structure, images of the metaphors, literal translation, and grammatical structure. In addition, culture and context appeared as factors affecting the relative ease or difficulty with which participants understood the metaphors in the reading task. Word knowledge also appeared as another important factor affecting understanding, functioning both as a cue and a hindrance as participants interpreted metaphors. In terms of the pedagogical implications, instructors’ primary focus on easily imaginable metaphors is highly recommended. Then, materials or teaching methods assisting the memorization of them can be also complementarily used.

Key words: metaphor, reading difficulty, Korean college students, culture
I. Introduction

Metaphoric language is widely used in everyday life (Littlemore, 2001; Verbrugge & McCarrel, 1977). In spite of the importance of metaphors in everyday life, it is quite difficult to develop metaphoric competence (Littlemore, 1998). L2 learners in particular face significant challenges comprehending metaphors in the target language because metaphoric meaning is not easily understood or inferred from literal meaning, there is rarely a one-to-one relation between different languages, and learners’ overall language ability may be lacking (Littlemore, 2001). As metaphors are closely related to how people think and act in the target culture, and not a problem of language itself, they are even more difficult for people from different cultures to learn (Gibbs, 2013; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003). In addition, it has been noted that even people in the target culture are likely to acquire metaphoric competence through repetitive use and exposure to metaphors, building ‘metaphoric schemata’ (Sanford, 2013). Thus, it is natural that people without background knowledge of the target culture have difficulties dealing with metaphors and acquiring metaphoric competence.

Accordingly, a metaphor is often pointed out as a major difficulty when reading, especially among people from other cultures (Littlemore, 2001; Swaffar, 1986). In the past, language and text length were traditionally regarded as major factors determining the ease or difficulty of reading, but recently “shared background knowledge” has been emphasized as an important factor (Hauptman, 2000, p. 625). Being “culturally-loaded,” (Littlemore, 2003, p. 4), metaphors causes more reading difficulties among people from different cultural backgrounds, as full understanding can be only possible when readers understand “the surface structures and information...in conjunction with their subsurface referential systems, and with the sign-systems of the culture that generated them” (Swaffar, 1986, p. 79). People might have difficulties comprehending metaphors because they