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RESEARCH AND THEORY DRIVEN INSIGHTS: TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR L2 READING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Research and theory on second language reading has reached heightened dimensions in recent years. It is through reading that learners access much information concerning the target language and culture, and consequently reading is an important part of almost all language programs across stages of acquisition. The purpose of this article is to offer informed suggestions for the foreign language instructor of reading. The ideas given in this paper constitute a collaborative project that developed as part of a graduate seminar on L2 Reading and Writing taught at Washington University in St. Louis.¹

Introduction

As part of training towards a graduate certificate in second language instruction, students were encouraged to consider the practical implications of theory and research concerning literacy in a second language. Through a course entitled, “Reading and Writing in a Second Language: Theory, Research and Implications” students examined the development of past research, studied

¹ The course is taught by Cindy Brantmeier, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics and Spanish at Washington University in St. Louis. Brantmeier is the Co-Director of the Graduate Certificate in Language Instruction.

the interaction of the many socio-cognitive variables at play, and discussed the methodological and instructional implications of current theory and research. As part of the course requirements, students individually created an inventory of suggestions in order to assist L2 reading instructors in the development of successful and enthusiastic L2 readers. Upon completion of the individual assignment, the professor challenged students to collaborate and make a unified list of suggestions. The following are 10 suggestions for instructors who would like guidance in their exploration of the L2 reading process.

Reading Is An Extremely Important Skill To Be Developed Across All Levels Of Instruction.

Personal experience and research stress the fact that reading is paramount to second language acquisition. Nevertheless, some scholars, such as Homstad and Thorson (Bräuer, 2000), contend that although current communicative methods consider all the four modalities as equally important, in practice, reading and writing skills are often severely overlooked (p. 8). Furthermore, Bernhardt (1993) showed that space and time of instruction allotted to reading activities in most textbooks are insignificant (pp. 177-178). This means that instructors must make room for reading and learn how to create and integrate efficient and interesting reading activities across all levels of language instruction.

Most language practitioners agree that reading provides a wealth of general information, but research has shown that reading is a valuable source of input for language acquisition as well. For example, Wolf (1987) and Day and Bamford (1998), among others, assert that reading serves as a fundamental source of vocabulary and grammatical input as well as a means to provide sociocultural information. Bernhardt (1993) and Swaffar (2001) contend that the reading process can be viewed as the decoding and reconstructing of linguistic data and of sociocultural macro structures and scripts. Bernhardt (1993) also reports that reading is “the most durable” of all L2 modalities as well as the most cost-effective means of providing input about the second language and culture.

At most universities, reading is a major skill which students need to acquire in order to be successful in advanced courses. Brantmeier (2001) contends that reading skills should be emphasized in the initial stages of language learning to avoid the frustration that university students and instructors often face in the intermediate and the advanced levels, where they read large amounts of domain-specific texts (Brantmeier 2001). Researchers agree that reading affects other major linguistic and cognitive skills, and Lee and VanPatten (1995) believe that reading is the best model of formal discourse to develop writing skills (p. 245). Therefore, reading should begin in the initial courses. Writing about what is read is also a way to help students improve their academic reading and writing abilities across all levels of instruction (Grabe 2001).

Instructors And Students Should Understand The Multi-Faceted L2 Reading Process.

First of all, instructors should have a solid understanding of the reading process based on research in the field. Understanding what the foreign language students undergo while extracting meaning from a written text helps instructors grasp the reasons why students may have difficulties. It also aids students with solutions to overcome reading challenges. Instructors should know that the reading process is “clearly multidimensional and multivariate” (Bernhardt 1993, p. 72): it is not an act or a simple linear process but a process that requires many different

skills on the part of the foreign language learner. Research indicates that reading is a process during which the reader may connect new information extracted from the text to a “permanent cognitive domain” (Brantmeier 2001). Successful comprehension requires the activation of multiple skills and knowledge: research indicates that language proficiency only explains about 30% of the reading comprehension in the second language and that literacy in the first language accounts for only 20% (Bernhardt, 2005). The remaining 50% may consist of what the readers undergo to bridge the gap between the text and themselves, such as passage content, cognitive resources, attitudes toward reading, etc. (Brantmeier, personal communication, 2006). In order to understand a text in a second language, a reader needs to manage text-driven as well as knowledge-driven operations which together will lead to a successful (or unsuccessful) reconstruction of the text. Text-driven operations include word recognition, syntax, and text structures. Knowledge-driven operations include the activation of relevant schemata, generation of inferences, rereading the text, etc. (Bernhardt 1993).

Use Appropriate Reading Materials.

Instructors should choose texts that are at an appropriate level of linguistic difficulty, adapting authentic texts if needed (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 57). Again, research has shown that linguistic competence may account for as much as 30 % of reading ability. A text that is beyond students’ linguistic competence raises their affective filter, which, according to Krashen and others, is detrimental to language acquisition. If the goal of teaching reading as part of a L2 curriculum is to educate and train learners to be life-long readers, the notion of choosing appropriate texts is paramount, since texts that are consistently beyond learners’ L2 competence will discourage them and create negative attitudes towards both reading and L2 acquisition. That fact is consistent with Day and Bamford’s (1998) adaptation of Feather’s (1982) *expectancy + value* model which tries to explain how materials and attitudes are the main components of motivation in reading: materials should meet readers’ expectations by being at an adequate level of difficulty, and should help students see reading as a valuable source of information (Day and Bamford, 1998, pp. 27-29).

Due to the “cult of authenticity” (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 53) which stems from the popularity of CLT methodology, language practitioners since the 1970’s have shown a preference for “authentic” texts in the L2 classroom. However, a clear consensus on what constitutes an authentic text remains elusive, as Day and Bamford (1998) have shown (p. 54). Simplified or modified texts such as graded readers may meet Honeyfield and Swaffar’s description of authentic texts as sources of “meaning and communication” (Claridge, 2005, p. 157). Day and Bamford (1998) cite Alderson and Urquhart’s assertion on simplified texts: “If simplification is defined as making a text appropriate to the audience, then perhaps *any* text may be considered a simplification” (p. 61). These well-constructed simplified versions may ultimately provide a springboard for L2 readers to reading and enjoying unsimplified texts.

Be Aware Of The Student’s L1, Background Knowledge, Gender And Level Of Acquisition.

Instructors teaching L2 reading should be aware of the specific needs of learners, which implies careful text-selection and/or text-adaptation. First, if there are students whose L1 orthography differs from the L2, instructors need to devote time to teaching the letter system,

basic orthographic rules, and the like. Therefore, Bernhardt (1993) suggests that for some readers, recognition processes begin at the decoding level; while for others, certain automaticity is possible sooner (pp. 76-77). By the same token, instructors should be advised of the fact that “some kind of subvocalizing *probably occurs*” in L2 reading (p. 77, original emphasis). This is to say that readers ‘hear’ in their minds the words being read. Consequently, readers’ accents and phonological processes may at times interfere with or enhance the reading process. In practical terms, when choosing texts, instructors need to consider how the text is processed and how its phonological aspects interact with comprehension, especially at beginning levels of instruction.

Another crucial aspect to bear in mind when choosing texts for L2 learners is passage content. Bernhardt (1993) refers to these “knowledge-driven operations” as the ‘invisible’ features of the text. These textual aspects are frequently “culture-dependent” (p. 94). Instructors should recognize the type of knowledge being activated by each text (local, domain, or culture-specific), since it influences the learner’s (mis)comprehension. The instructional implication behind this premise would be not only to determine the type of content of a text, but also to adapt it to the learner’s level of cultural familiarity by activating or providing appropriate schemata through pre-reading activities.

During the beginning levels of instruction, teachers should also consider the content of texts presented to their learners, not only for cultural barriers, but also for gender-related issues. Certain topics may be gender-biased and hence, provide an extra aid in comprehension to one gender, while hindering the process of the other gender. As summarized in her 2001 article, Brantmeier concluded that, with intermediate level students “male subjects recalled significantly more idea units from [the male-oriented] passage” than females (p. 331). The reverse proved true for females when exposed to a female-oriented text. In another study, Brantmeier (2002) also showed that students’ self-reported familiarity with the text significantly affects comprehension. Therefore, it is important that instructors be aware of the interaction between gender and comprehension at the beginning and intermediate levels and that they prepare students accordingly. If unable to adapt texts to make up for gender bias, instructors should devise appropriate pre-reading tasks and activities that will place both genders at equal levels of opportunity (Brantmeier, 2002).

Instructors Should Model Their Passion To Read.

Instructors may be familiar with students’ fear of reading in the L2 because “*it’s difficult*”, or “*boring*”. Based on general personal experience, students with poor attitudes toward reading may not feel encouraged to invest time and effort in the literacy process and subsequently may not have a positive attitude towards the target language and culture.

Day and Bamford’s adaptation of Mathewson’s (1994) “Model of Attitude Influence upon Reading and Learning to Read” highlights four key factors that influence learners’ attitudes about L2 reading. First, one must consider learners’ attitudes toward reading in their L1 as well as possible previous experiences with reading in second languages. In addition, learners’ attitudes toward the target language, culture, and people, and the second language classroom environment are key (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 23). Instructors should generate and foster a positive attitude by being a role model for students: when instructors are noticeably enthusiastic about reading, learners are more likely to follow their lead in the classroom. As Richard Day and Julian Bamford explain in their Extensive Reading approach, teachers must remind their students

that “the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding” (Day and Bamford, 2002, p. 138). This entails providing students with opportunities to select texts that interest them. In this way, instructors can foster a positive classroom environment through the creation of a more “individualized and less competitive nonjudgmental community of readers” (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 26).

Instructors must also take into account the central issue of motivation. Motivating students involves successfully communicating the value of reading to the learners. Thus, instructors should offer interesting materials adapted to appropriate linguistic levels in order to avoid frustrating their learners with reading “material beyond their capabilities” (p. 29). By incorporating some of the principles of the Extensive Reading approach, instructors can maintain a positive and dynamic reading environment where learners feel motivated to engage in the process.

Through Strategy Instruction, Learners Should Eventually Become Independent L2 Readers.

In order to assist students in their reading process, the instructor should provide reading strategy instruction. According to Barnett (1988), reading strategies refer to the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read. These processes may involve skimming, scanning, guessing, recognizing cognates and word families, reading for meaning, predicting, activating general knowledge, making inferences, following references, and separating main ideas from supporting ideas. Studies show that students who consciously use such strategies perform better on assessment tasks than students who do not. Barnett (1988) found that students performed better as their actual strategy use and even their *perceived* strategy use increased, signaling a positive effect of strategy training. Raymond (1993) also tested strategy training and found that strategy use is a characteristic of successful L2 readers.

Research has clearly shown that reading strategies are important for students in the process of literacy acquisition; however, it is not enough for the instructor to simply expose students to a variety of strategies. In addition to showing students possible strategies, instructors should assist them in identifying effective reading strategies based on text variables, since strategic reading not only entails knowing which strategies to use, but also how to employ them successfully (Anderson, 1991). It is worth noting that students at the beginning levels of instruction may fail in their strategy use, not because they lack reading strategy knowledge, but because their limited vocabulary and schemata may not be “enough language foundation to build on” (Anderson, 1991, p. 469).

Activate Learners’ Schemata Via Well-Constructed Pre-Reading Activities.

Before students read a text, they should work through pre-reading activities in order to activate relevant background knowledge or to better comprehend the text, because all texts are laden with knowledge: local-level, domain-specific, or culture-specific knowledge. A text with high local-level knowledge will demand a deep familiarization with the L2 culture, and it is possible that most L2 readers will not be prepared to understand such culturally-loaded references. Domain-specific knowledge requires readers versed in the particular jargon of a discipline, activity, etc., which restricts readers’ comprehension if they are not educated in that particular field. Culture-specific knowledge refers to “ritualistic knowledge as well as cultural-

historic knowledge. . .transmitted from generation to generation” (Bernhardt, 1993, p. 97). A text with culture-specific references would demand a great amount of familiarity with the L2 culture, a familiarity that even members of the L2 community might lack. Therefore, it is necessary for instructors to attend to different types of texts and create pre-reading activities that will promote textual comprehension. Instructors can introduce students to a particular text, elicit or provide appropriate background knowledge in order to activate necessary content and formal schemata. According to Brantmeier’s (2001) summary, schemata refer to knowledge stored in permanent memory that connects to the new knowledge students are exposed to. For example, content schemata connect readers’ individual knowledge to the information present in the text at hand. After reviewing research on content schemata from the past 20 years, Ketchum (2006) concludes that “reading in a foreign language can be greatly facilitated by developing students’ background knowledge about the culture represented in the text” (p. 24). Formal schemata, which concern the reader’s ability to recognize different text types, have frequently been explored in conjunction with content schemata. Research provides empirical support for the hypothesis that students’ knowledge of text types and formal structures aids L2 reading comprehension, given that students can use their familiarity with text structures and rhetorical patterns when their cultural or linguistic competencies fail them (Carrell, 1987; Raymond, 1993).

Based on the importance of activating students’ schemata, Ketchum (2006) presents a 3R model that focuses on developing background knowledge about a target culture. According to this model, students are responsible for *recognizing* what hinders their comprehension of the text, *researching* the necessary information to understand the text, and *relating* that new information to the text. Ketchum (2006) demonstrates the usefulness and applicability of the 3R model in assisting students to successfully understand culturally laden texts. Therefore, instructors might want to integrate the 3R model into their teaching and encourage students to take the initiative in facilitating their own reading process.

Be Flexible With Post-Reading Activities.

Bernhardt (1993) states that successful L2 instructors should not anticipate which portions of the text will be obstacles to language learners’ comprehension (p. 186). Preparing post-reading activities that assess learners’ reading comprehension invariably assumes the instructor’s textual interpretation as the paradigm that learners should follow. This overlooks learners’ individual interpretations and tends to result in learners developing the ability to recognize grammatical and contextual clues that constitute the “right answers,” instead of enabling them to create their own meaning (Bernhardt, 1993, p.184). Both, from a cognitive and social perspective, reading should not be deemed as a goal whose product is ‘true’ comprehension of a text, or ‘correct’ comprehension answers. Therefore, as an alternative to traditional comprehension questions, instructors may want to ask students to write individual recalls, share them, and then work with them in an impromptu manner to clarify areas of misunderstanding, instead of devising activities that may reveal that only one answer is possible or that a single meaning is hidden in the text. Recall protocols constitute a valuable tool as post-reading activity, since learners need to have comprehended the text well enough to be able to write coherently about it. Written recalls also prove to be powerful means in detecting problem areas for individual learners, granting both, individualized attention to the reading process, and fast exposure of points that need further work. Once instructors collect the recalls and determine the problem areas, they can utilize this material as a source for planning the next lesson. Bernhardt (1993) suggests that this activity can

be carried out either using the last ten minutes of class, or at the beginning of the class period, in which case, learners themselves would read their recalls and get more involved in a cooperative comprehension process (p. 188).

Task-based post-reading activities are another option to avoid the bias of comprehension questions. Day and Bamford (2002) advocate post-reading activities that respect “the integrity of students’ reading experiences,” such as writing about characters, and their opinion of the books, or doing dramatic performances (reading a piece, role-playing, etc.) (p. 138). All these tasks, while they do not interfere with the learners’ appreciation of the reading, expand their engagement with the text to a broader level.

Comprehension Assessment Tasks Should Require Learners To ‘Do Something,’ With The Texts.

Research shows that not all assessment activities are reliable. Bernhardt (1993) outlines the weaknesses of cloze passages, multiple-choice, and true/false activities, showing that they often result in the student providing a fixed “right answer,” which may or may not be dependent on the text. Brantmeier (2005) reports that the type of comprehension assessment task may influence performance. Students perform differently on multiple choice, sentence completion, and written recalls for the same passages read. L2 reading instructors should carefully consider which assessment activities most accurately reveal learners’ level of reading comprehension in light of their particular classroom environment. For example, instructors of large classes find multiple-choice to be an efficient means of assessing reading comprehension. Indeed, a carefully-constructed multiple-choice assessment activity can provide learners with the opportunity to practice the “input before output” pattern espoused by Communicative Language Teaching Theory (Lee and Van Patten, 1995). Following Wolf’s guidelines for multiple-choice questions, answers should be passage-dependent, there should be four choices, three of which should be plausible and there should only be one correct answer (Wolf, 1993). Ideally, however, an L2 instructor should assess comprehension by having learners perform a task that demonstrates their understanding of the text (Bernhardt, 1993), such as immediate written recall in the native language. For example, the learner could give and support an opinion, respond to a specific event, or construct a logical alternate ending (Day 1998).

Be A “Principled” And Vigilant Language Instructor

Personal and institutional preferences or habits should not solely drive an instructor’s educational practices. A thoughtful language instructor is a professional whose methodology is grounded in current research. Bernhardt (1993) asserts that “the surest avenue to improve educational practices will occur through the application of knowledge derived from careful research” (p. 224). Therefore, instructors must analyze and question their own teaching methods.

Teachers must keep in mind, as Bernhardt (2001) phrases, that teachers “teach students” (p. 197), not language, nor literature. All instruction should be as learner-centered as possible. As a result, curriculum planning must reflect the significance of reading in a second language in collegiate and professional contexts. Language instruction should cater to the high-level reading skills that students require at advanced levels, in immersion programs, or in their future professional life. Students must be versed in all kinds of genres, including literary analysis.

These goals will drive the instructor's text selection and instructional activities in the classroom and will demand the acquisition of specific linguistic and non-linguistic competences.

Instructors must also be aware that research on reading is relatively innovative and that there are still many processes that research has not yet firmly identified (Bernhardt, 1997, p. 173). Thus, instructors should *be aware of* developing theories and practices in order to retain an informed and professional approach to language instruction. Consequently, instructors ought to embrace new practices that may prove efficient but contrast completely with current practices, for instance extensive reading. As a result, instructors should familiarize themselves with current theories and construct their teaching environment in dialogue with scholars, colleagues, administrators, students across disciplines.

Conclusion

This collaborative project evolved through a sustained writing and revising process that incorporated our insights from our L2 instructional experiences and from research and theory concerning the L2 reading process. This list represents suggestions that we have assembled while incorporating knowledge of pedagogical practices across language boundaries (English, German, French, Spanish, and Chinese). From the role of reading in the classroom, to text selection, to pre- and post-reading activities, to the ever-changing role of the instructor as a guide in a successful L2 classroom, these suggestions provide a basic framework for encouraging students to become enthusiastic and proficient readers in the L2. The list certainly cannot be seen as exhaustive; more suggestions may certainly be added. Nevertheless it gathers our collective insights and into a concise inventory of ten suggestions that assist L2 reading instructors in the creation of a successful classroom and curriculum.

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