

6 Interaction of reader and text

Anthony Papalia

From a psycholinguistic viewpoint reading is a problem-solving behavior that actively involves the reader in the process of deriving and assigning meaning. While so doing the reader is drawing on contextual information that contains syntactic, semantic, and discourse constraints that affect interpretation (Cziko 1978: 472–89; F. Smith 1971). Syntactic constraints are provided by preceding words and the syntactic rules of the language. Semantic constraints include the distribution of meaning and relationships of words within a specific language and culture. Finally, discourse constraints are those provided by the topic of the text and its development, each language having its own logical connectives and other elements of cohesion. To predict what they are about to read, readers must be continually involved in integrating the information from these three contexts.

Readers decode print in two ways: semantically (i.e., they identify the lexical meaning of words, but they also create a broader meaning for these words within the contexts of phrase, sentence, and discourse), and syntactically (i.e., they recognize the meaningful structural relationships within the sentence). Fluent readers rely more on semantic than syntactic information except when meaning is not clear. The meanings the reader has derived and created are then recoded in abbreviated form for storage in short- or long-term memory. While reading, the reader is relating what has been stored to incoming information and readjusting interpretations as required. Individual students will employ different strategies while engaged in this activity, some being more efficient than others. Observations and interviews have proved useful in identifying the strategies employed by efficient readers as they extract meaning from texts.

How successful readers interact with the text

To discover which strategies successful foreign-language students use in deriving meaning from a written text, twenty American students who were studying French and Spanish at Clarence High School, Clarence, New York, in 1983–4, were asked to read a passage in the foreign language and to “think aloud” while attempting to grasp its meaning. This technique gave the teacher the opportunity to observe what students

actually did when they were reading and to discover the strategies they used in deriving meaning. At the end of the task, students were asked to give their perceptions on how they derived meaning from the written words. The responses reported below indicated that they were employing some useful and efficient meaning-extracting strategies.

David: “First, I pick out the words I know and work around words I don’t know. I don’t translate every word because some words really are not that important to the understanding of the paragraph. They are just there. For those words I don’t know, I leave them out or I put in something that makes sense.”

Dan: “First of all, I know this article has to do with baseball so I get myself in the frame of mind of a baseball game or baseball terms that I know would appear in an article like this. I just get myself in the frame of reference for the article. That’s the first step. In the first sentence I have to find the subject and the verb. I have to know what those are in order to comprehend the sentence and take it one small bit at a time and just try to piece it together. I read it aloud in my mind. I try to think of what word would sound like it. I pick out cognates and words that maybe sound alike and maybe mean the same thing as they do in English. When I hit a word I do not know, my first reaction is just to go over it and not even look at it and finish the sentence and see if I could figure out the rest of the sentence. If I know what the subject is and know what he is doing, chances are I can fill in the blank. Another way I can figure it out is to say it out loud to myself and see if it sounds like anything I might know in English. If I try these ways and I still don’t know what it means, I look the word up in the dictionary in the back of the book.”

Bridget: “First, I look for words that I know. Then I look for cognates. So I have all the words I know and all the cognates and then what is left in the sentence I read around and place in the words that would fit there to make sense with the rest of the paragraph or the rest of the sentence.”

Myron: “I just try to pick out the words I know and the verbs are the main part, then the prepositions just fit into place and I just have to try to figure out and go around the words I don’t know and see if I can make out what it is.”

Scott: “I don’t have to make constant translations and when I come across a word I don’t know, sometimes I can read around it. But if it’s a key word (subject), it helps to read past it trying to find out what the

rest of the sentence is about and then I can guess. A key word might be further explained or another character might ask a question about it which might bring out a definition or an explanation, sometimes even a description. When I come to a line or even a paragraph that seems out of place, I try to think of what I would say or what the character would say.”

For the comprehension of reading passages in a foreign language, these students made the following suggestions to their peers:

- Know the topic of the text.
- Read around words you do not know.
- Make use of all available information in the paragraph to comprehend unfamiliar words.
- Take chances and predict meaning.
- Guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context.
- Remember that all words in a reading passage are not of equal importance.
- Skip unfamiliar words that are inconsequential to the meaning of the total phrase or paragraph.
- Try to find that part of the meaning that is determined by the syntax of the sentence.
- Expect the text to make sense and be sequential.
- Do not make constant translations.
- Look for cognates.
- Have confidence in yourself.
- If you are not sure of the meaning of the word, find it in the dictionary.

In addition, these students mentioned that, *when the reading passages concerned topics that interested them, inferencing and prediction of meaning were facilitated*; if too many inferences were required, however, the text seemed difficult and comprehension became an arduous task.

As Dan indicated, inferences often help the process of comprehension. With a text about baseball, he found that by putting himself in the frame of mind of a baseball game, he was able to make inferences and have certain expectations about the content of the text. Many investigators believe that knowledge can be described in terms of schemata, which form an organized framework of knowledge (Carrell 1983; Wessells 1983). As Dan read the passage, he attempted to relate the incoming information to his existing framework of knowledge concerning baseball. Thus, that schema guided the processing of new information and enhanced comprehension: He was using concepts and schemata he already possessed. In comprehending sentences he used semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic knowledge interactively. Comprehension, then, involves the use of *multiple, overlapping strategies*. It requires attention, decision

making, and a committal of details to memory, where they interact not only with existing schemata but incoming information. By drawing on his existing knowledge and anticipating related information, Dan was able to draw from the text a coherent sequence through a hypothesis-testing procedure. When the passage was long he tended to forget certain information; he would then go back and reread certain sentences. These reinstatement searches became more frequent when he found the text “hard.” He preferred texts that dealt with topics and settings familiar to him. This facilitated inferencing, since he could imagine what the various characters might say or do.

All five student readers utilized cues within and outside of the text to determine its meaning. They sought letter-sound relationships, examined spelling patterns to detect cognates that might give clues to meaning, drew sense from word order, tried to establish meaning from wider contexts, and drew on personal knowledge of the topic and pictures in interpreting the text.

Hosenfeld observed that a skillful reader uses many strategies to attach meaning to the printed text. In her research with Cindy, a fourteen-year-old North American girl, she identified twenty overlapping strategies (Hosenfeld 1979: 59–61). Some of these resemble the ones already presented. Among the successful strategies Cindy employed were the following:

1. examining the illustrations and using information contained in them when decoding;
2. reading the title and drawing inferences;
3. circling back purposefully in the text to check on meaning (cf. Myron’s comments earlier);
4. identifying the grammatical function of an unfamiliar word before guessing its meaning.

To discover how students interact with the text, teachers may use a “debugging technique,” which consists of asking students in class to say how they solved certain linguistic problems or to “think aloud” while they do certain linguistic tasks. Through this procedure, teachers have some access to their students’ thinking processes; this helps them discover where errors are being made so they can provide greater assistance. At the same time, students can learn from each other by incorporating into their repertoire effective strategies that other students have used in solving linguistic problems.

Using the text to facilitate interaction

An analysis of the strategies of the students who participated in the Clarence study supports the view that the teacher must attempt to re-

create in the classroom situations in which the students might find themselves and which are meaningful to them. In promoting interaction with the text teachers should:

- provide a meaningful context by discussing in the classroom related topics to aid with inferencing from the text;
- encourage students to learn words for the things they want to know about (Rivers 1981: chap. 14);
- use the message of the text as a point of departure for discussion rather than the syntactic features;
- develop meaning for the text cooperatively by using a problem-solving approach whereby students offer a variety of answers that require a great deal of inferencing;
- create a learning climate where students feel comfortable about making mistakes and are therefore willing to venture interpretations.

Reading comprehension entails more than knowledge of vocabulary and syntax. It also requires ability to perceive the exact nature of the passage being communicated – a deeper form of understanding sometimes called “reading between the lines.” Students must learn to detect mood and intentions as well as factual detail. These elements are conveyed by the syntactic and lexical choices of the writer, which devolve from selected register, or level of language and stylistic devices. For these reasons, translating into the native language can create more problems than it solves, unless students have been shown how to interrelate words in context and translate entire meanings, not successive words. If translation is to be used as a technique for elaborating meaning, students must practice using reference tools, like dictionaries, judiciously, so that they are weaned from the tendency to decode items by one-to-one word correspondence – a sure way to muddy comprehension.

For student–text interaction of any depth, students need to acquire the skills of drawing information directly from the foreign-language text without the interposition of their own tongue. This skill is best learned in *progressive* stages, with students practicing regularly with materials that approximate their level of proficiency (Rivers 1981: 368–86). Level of proficiency, however, is not sufficient without the motivational element of material of interest to the students. The problems of fluent reading are numerous enough, without being exacerbated by linguistically difficult texts containing materials to which the students cannot relate.

Too often in the past, reading materials have been selected on the basis of their status as “masterpieces” – an aesthetic judgment that was rarely explained – rather than for their intrinsic interest for a specific group of students of a particular age or background. If students are to acquire fluency in reading, however, they need to be enticed to read

materials for the same natural purposes as they read in their native language – for following instructions or recipes; for enjoying letters, jokes, or comic strips; for understanding headlines, news items, and, later, magazine articles; and for savoring short stories, short plays, and so on, before being introduced to what are considered masterworks of the literary heritage. Textbook writers need to concentrate on providing texts that are meaningful for the students, while teachers concentrate on procedures that enhance direct comprehension. What follows is a suggested procedure for an intensive reading lesson that promotes these aims and attempts to develop fluency in reading for meaning and pleasure.

Pre-reading/motivational phase

Pre-reading activities should be selected according to the experience and interest of students and should build on the content of preceding lessons. Expectations in reading are embedded in situations and settings. When a friend receives a birthday card, we infer it is that person’s birthday; when a waiter hands a menu to a customer, we expect the customer to order a meal (Phillips 1984). During the pre-reading segment, students should be introduced to situations or a pictorial collage that generates expectations that will be useful in *anticipating and predicting the content* of the passage that will be read. After some discussion students may be asked to develop questions associated with the title of the reading passage or the collage of pictures. In this way, they approach the text with certain schemata in mind and with questions of their own to which they would like to find answers.

Reading of the text in class

The text may be read, in meaningful segments,

- orally by the teacher while the students follow the text silently;
- silently by the students; or
- orally by the students after a silent reading, or after an oral reading by the teacher.

This class or group reading helps develop the habits that characterize fluent reading: *reading in meaningful segments*, not word by word, and *perseverance with a text* in the expectation that later reading will explicate what has not been understood earlier. (When the reading is assigned for home study, the pre-reading/motivational activities should take place in class at the time the assignment is given, to prepare students for the inferencing later reading will require.)

Removal of difficulties

Teachers may aid students in extracting meaning in a number of ways:

- by discussing possible meanings of new vocabulary, giving explanations only when necessary and then, as far as possible, in the target language by using synonyms, antonyms, and cognates;
- by encouraging students to work at meanings through analysis of related stems and examination of prefixes and suffixes;
- by giving or requesting paraphrases of segments in which the problem words occur;
- by encouraging students to draw inferences from the context about structural as well as semantic elements;
- by providing explanations of new structures through paraphrasing or expanding;
- by demonstrating analogies with structures or idioms previously learned; and
- by demonstrating parallelism with native-language structures where applicable.

Activities like these should be followed by a consecutive reading of the complete text to draw together in the whole what has been learned from the parts.

Checking for comprehension

Teachers may involve students in:

- assigning a new title to the reading selection;
- completing true/false or multiple-choice exercises on the content;
- asking fellow students questions that penetrate beneath the surface, beyond the obvious;
- developing a different conclusion;
- developing a dialogue related to the reading selection that brings out the relationships among protagonists.

Advanced students may:

- identify main and subordinate ideas;
- summarize or retell parts of the text;
- discuss the author's intentions expressed in the tone of the passage (examining elements in the text that reveal this facet);
- discuss viewpoints represented by persons in the text and the cultural significance of these viewpoints;
- discuss the temperament and character of persons in the text and devices by which the author reveals these to the reader;

- discuss aspects of the content from the viewpoint of different persons in the text;
- conduct group discussion on the participants' awareness of the action and why the author chose to develop the content as he or she did.

Summary

A collective summary may be given by several pupils, cued by the teacher when necessary. At the elementary level, a summary guided by key words written on the board is an effective approach. At more advanced levels, the summary may evolve in a more sophisticated way from reports from student discussion groups.

Assignment

The assignment should come after class consideration of the text and draw together what has been learned from the study of the passage. In this way students learn effective reading skills in a supervised situation that prepares them for individual reading at a more advanced level. Students are given a choice of assignment to increase their sense of involvement. Some pupils may reread the passage and write answers to questions; others may write a summary, use new vocabulary in original sentences, or construct additional questions based on the passage to ask their fellow students; still others may fill in blanks in sentences taken from the text with the correct semantic or syntactic response (a cloze-type procedure that draws together the main idea in a recapitulative fashion). Finally, some may write out their reactions to the passage to be shared with others in a final discussion session, or write their own stories, episodes, or alternative conclusions.

Interactive reading activities

Students should be given the opportunity to relate their own lives, activities, and interests and concerns to the second language and to what is being read in the second language. To provide greater interaction with the text and among students, teachers should stimulate work in groups, where students have the opportunity to work together and learn from each other.

In planning reading activities, teachers will normally consider whether students will profit more from working in large groups or small groups or from working independently at their own pace. Instruction should be tailored to the learning predilections of individual students as much

as is feasible. However, in many places, teachers have little choice other than to instruct in large classes or large groups, often for economic reasons. Even within large-group instruction, provision should be made for some small-group interaction or at least interstudent discussion as well as for individual reading.

Small-group work on a reading task stimulates student participation. It provides opportunities to learn how to work harmoniously with others; it encourages open-mindedness about other people's ideas. Students become inquirers – investigators learning from their peers successful strategies for extracting meaning and interpreting content. In small groups, the students have the opportunity to decode and interpret the script, to include personal findings, refine these in association with others, and inject their own reactions. On the cognitive level, those participating in small groups acquire knowledge not only from what they have read, but also through working with other reflective individuals. Through the checks and contributions of others, they learn to relate bodies of knowledge meaningfully, to make cultural observations refined by discussion, and to evolve new and richer interpretations of the material read.

Opportunities for student–teacher interaction, as well as student–student interaction, are greater in a small-group activity than in large groups. Students receive much more attention to their individual problems and feel more personally involved, because they can no longer hide in the crowd. Teachers must, however, plan for small-group work with care. They may begin by promoting activities where students work in pairs on aspects of the text while they circulate among the students to give assistance as needed. Once successful results have been obtained with this approach and students have adapted to more individual responsibility for their work, teachers may develop working groups of three or four students for discussion of more wide-ranging questions and the elaboration of viewpoints to share with the larger group.

To increase student interaction with the text, its author, their fellow students, and the teacher, teachers may select some of the following activities. They are arranged roughly from elementary through intermediate to advanced level.

Interaction between reader and text

1. Students draw a picture to illustrate what was just read or some aspect of it, such as the room where the action took place.
2. Students look for specific information, such as selecting a meal from a menu or identifying times of arrival and departure in airline or railway schedules.

3. Students read a passage and then list three important facts, ideas, or events contained in it.
4. Students read a specially constructed passage and correct sentences that contain wrong information. This is an opportunity to use some humorous sentences that play on similarities in the appearance of words. Students learn to pay careful attention as they read.
5. Students read a story with the ending deleted. They try to make up an ending consistent with the story.
6. Each student is given a comic strip with eight frames. In the first, third, fifth, and seventh frames the dialogue is provided, but in the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth frames it is missing. Students must create meaningful dialogue for these four frames, linking what was said in the preceding frame to the content of the succeeding frame. This activity integrates reading and writing with formulation of oral utterances.

Interaction between reader and reader over text

7. After reading a short descriptive paragraph about something or someone in which the name of the person or object is not revealed, students in small groups try to guess who or what is being talked about or draw a picture of the person or object.
8. A transparency of a reading passage is projected. After a rapid perusal to extract the general tenor, lines are highlighted segmentally and each is discussed for meaning, with the whole group contributing. The lines may be numbered to facilitate quick reference. It is essential to project the complete passage again at the end to draw together what has been extracted from the parts.
9. The first two or three sentences of a passage are shown on the overhead projector. Students then formulate questions to which they expect to find the answers in the completion of the passage. The questions are written on the board. Students finish reading the passage and discuss the answers to the questions.
10. After reading a passage, students supply a suitable title. This can be a large-group activity, allowing students to discuss why they agree or disagree with the titles proposed.
11. Students read a story with the ending deleted. They try orally to make up an ending consistent with the story. Later they may write a summary of the story, adding their own endings. These versions may then be circulated and a vote taken on the most satisfactory ending. Students then compare this ending with that of the original author.
12. Students form their own questions based on a reading selection they

- have read and call on other students to answer their questions to check comprehension. This may be a competitive activity among small groups. Students are encouraged to challenge questions they feel distort the meaning. In this way a lively discussion often ensues.
13. Students work together to paraphrase a reading passage without changing the original meaning. This forces students to pay close attention to nuances of meaning and the author's intent.
 14. Students in small groups read a series of provocative statements on a major public event, a common experience, or a subject of current interest and controversy. Discussion follows the reading, again integrating reading and oral communication.
 15. Students work out as a group a summary of a passage they have read individually. The teacher should cue students where necessary. (Deciding on key words and testing these beforehand is helpful as a preliminary for elementary-level students.) Groups read their summations to each other and discuss the validity of their interpretations.
 16. Students in small groups rearrange a series of sentences into a logical paragraph. The sentences should parallel the kind of material read or at least deal with familiar subject matter. They may consist of a rearrangement of sentences from a passage to be read later. This task forces students to discuss concepts and come to certain conclusions by paying attention to elements of contextual cohesion.
 17. Sheets are prepared containing questions related to a text being read with a series of multiple-choice responses that require students to make value judgments as they rank the various alternatives. Small-group discussion follows. This activity demands close reading by students as they determine the precise meaning of the alternatives. It also integrates reading with oral communication.
 18. Students in small groups are each provided with a card on which an incident is described, but with a different segment of vital information omitted from each card. Students discuss with each other the information they have until they have pieced together the full account of the incident or situation. This is a problem-solving activity that integrates reading and discussion. Students then write out the complete account of the incident as a small-group composition, thus integrating reading, oral discussion, and writing.

Conclusion

In drawing together reader and text, we must continually keep in mind individual interests if we expect the learners to continue reading. Only students who have acquired confidence in reading through materials

accessible to them in content and linguistic complexity may be expected to move on with enthusiasm to the great works that are treasured as part of the heritage of another culture. To integrate reading experiences with developing language control, *reading should be continually linked with purposeful communication*, oral and written. To be successful in meeting this challenge, the teacher should (a) provide students with meaningful tasks associated with the reading, (b) develop activities that encourage students to communicate without making graphic or oral demands beyond their competence in the new language, (c) give students, nevertheless, freedom to experiment with the language they possess, and (d) create a classroom environment in which students feel free to express the ideas that have been stimulated by their reading and to work their way toward more and more valid interpretations through the refinement of discussion in a noncorrective atmosphere. In this way, they will come to appreciate reading in another language as a normal element in their new linguistic experience. Experiences with reading, whether in the first or second language, should create autonomous readers who enjoy the stimulation of direct interaction with writers and will continue to read without prodding for their own pleasure and information.

Let's act on it

1. When you were an elementary-level student of a second language, what problems did you have in assigning meaning to a text? How did you overcome these? What advice would you now give your former teachers?
2. List the activities you commonly use in your classroom for developing reading skills. On the basis of what you have read in this chapter, which ones do you now consider useful for promoting reader-text and reader-reader-over-text interaction? How would you adapt the others to increase their interaction potential?
3. What kinds of techniques beyond those discussed would you suggest to discover how your students interact with a text?
4. Gather some data on how your students interact with a text and share these with others in your teacher-training or in-service group. Then formulate some principles to guide you in the selection of reading materials.
5. Given the importance of linguistic and nonlinguistic context in facilitating inferencing, analyze a reading selection from your language textbook and determine what you could do to help your students ascribe meaning to this text.

Annotated reading list

- Carrell, Patricia L. 1983. "Some Issues in Studying the Role of Schemata, or Background Knowledge, in Second Language Comprehension." *Reading in a Foreign Language* 1, 2: 81–92. An important piece discussing how research in schema theory has shown that reading comprehension is an interactive process between the reader and the text.
- Cziko, Gary A. 1978. "Differences in First- and Second-Language Reading: The Use of Syntactic, Semantic and Discourse Constraints." *CMLR* 34: 472–89. A worthwhile article on the importance of syntactic, semantic, and discourse constraints in deriving meaning from a written text. Discusses their role in the development of the reading skill.
- Grellet, Françoise. 1981. *Developing Reading Skills: A Practical Guide to Reading Comprehension Exercises*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Presents a number of useful techniques for teachers and materials developers. It describes and classifies various types of reading comprehension exercises. Reading is considered a constant process of guessing, predicting, checking, and asking oneself questions.
- Hosenfeld, Carol. 1979. "Cindy: A Learner in Today's Foreign Language Classroom," in Born, Warren C., ed., *The Foreign Language Learner in Today's Classroom Environment*, pp. 53–75. Middlebury, Vt.: NEC. A useful discussion of the reading strategies a skillful reader used in attaching meaning to a printed text.
- Mackey, Ronald; Barkman, Bruce; and Jordan, R. R. eds. 1982. *Reading in a Second Language: Hypotheses, Organization and Practice*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House. Discusses theoretical considerations, with a wealth of practical suggestions for ESL or foreign-language teachers interested in the development of advanced reading comprehension.
- Phillips, June K. 1984. "Practical Implications of Recent Research in Reading." *FLA* 17: 285–96. An important article that explores how the successful reading of any passage depends upon a combination of linguistic knowledge, cognitive skill, general experience, and knowledge of the world.
- Rivers, Wilga M. 1981. *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*. 2d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chap. 9 offers a lucid presentation of the process of reading. Examines the stages that students pass through in developing abilities for fluent direct reading with comprehension of meaning. Very useful as a guide to teachers when choosing reading texts for various levels.
- Smith, Frank. 1971. *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Discusses a psychological model of reading, maintaining that *prediction* of what appears in a text is an essential part of the reading process.