Revaluing the reading process of adult ESL/EFL learners through critical dialogues⋄

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Abstract

The authors explore language developmental processes of university English language learners. They used Retrospective Miscue Analysis (RMA) and In-depth Reading Interviews as heuristic tools to generate critical dialogues with students to reflect on their L1 and English language learning processes and perceptions. The studies show that RMA and In-Depth Reading Interviews lead the teacher-researchers and English language learners to critical learnable and teachable moments.

Key words: Miscue Analysis, Retrospective Miscue Analysis (RMA), In-depth Reading Interviews, ESL readers, Academic Reading, Popular Reading, Critical dialogues

Resumen

Las autoras exploran los procesos de desarrollo de aprendices universitarios de inglés. Ellas utilizan el método de análisis retrospectivo de miscues (RMA es la sigla en inglés) y el método de entrevistas de lectura en profundidad como herramientas heurísticas que generan diálogos críticos con los estudiantes para reflexionar sobre su proceso de aprendizaje en lengua materna y segunda lengua. Los estudios muestran que RMA y las entrevistas de lectura en profundidad llevan a los profesores investigadores y a los aprendices de inglés a momentos críticos de enseñanza y de aprendizaje.

Palabras claves: Miscue Analysis, Análisis retrospectivo de Miscues, entrevistas de lectura en profundidad, lectores de inglés como segunda lengua, lectura académica, lectura popular, diálogos críticos.

Since I don't know much about American cultural background, I often have no clue about what I read. ...I got stuck when it said something like, "get up and watch Letterman. If Dave offends, switch to Leno." I couldn't understand what they were talking about until my husband explained that Letterman and Jay Leno were midnight talk show hosts. I don't watch TV very often... Maybe I should from now on. I feel like if I were familiar with the American Cultural background, reading English would be a lot smoother (Sukyong, translated into English from Korean)(Chin, 1996. P. 77-78).

People who reside in the United States know a lot about Jay Leno and David Letterman, late night television hosts. They are familiar with popular culture even if they are not avid watchers of late night shows. However, ESL/EFL learners reading in English often have difficulties understanding references to personalities in various popular texts, not because of complexity of grammar or vocabulary but due to their unfamiliarity with socio-cultural aspects of the English material they read. It is also not unusual for ESL/EFL learners to believe that in order to read English they have to pay attention to grammar. Keonmo, a Korean ESL/EFL student, shares how he interacts with an English text:

I first distinguish a subject from a predicate in a sentence as my old English tutor advised me when I was a teenager. And it really works... especially when I encounter a complicated sentence structure. Once I identify a subject and a predicate, I don't get confused. Also I try to keep track of the "verb" of a sentence. The verb plays the most critical role in terms of making meaning. If I lose track of a verb, I get frustrated(Chin, 1996, p. 146.)

In our teaching experience, it is common for ESL / EFL readers to believe that while reading in their second language (L2) they need to be very careful and accurate to get the "right" meaning, since there is a tendency to perceive L2 as a problem rather than looking at it as a resource (Ruiz, 1988). They often believe that trouble in reading is caused by their lack of knowledge about the grammar and vocabulary of English. They rarely consider that what they know about their reading in their first language can support their reading and in the second language.

In this paper we explore the ways we work with adult ESL/EFL students to become consciously aware of their reading processes in both L1 and L2 in

order to develop their second language reading. We are university faculty and reading researchers who have worked with hundreds of ESL/EFL students for many years. Because we want to understand the nature of the influence of instructional strategies on reading development, we often collect the interactions between ourselves and the readers and carefully analyze the language used in our sessions. As we work directly with our students, we tape record and transcribe the sessions, so we are able to reflect on the influence of instruction on second language learning. Our research has shown that engaging readers in discussions about their own reading process, the strategies they use while they read and the cultural and linguistic knowledge they bring to their reading, helps them become more proficient readers. At the same time they come to revalue themselves as readers.

In this article, we discuss the implications of the research we have done on students with a wide range of language backgrounds, including Spanish and English. In this study our focus is on proficient adult Korean readers to show that engaging readers in such reflective dialogue works for readers in many different orthographies. They were students in ESL classrooms in The Center for English as a Second Language at the University of Arizona. In these sessions we share our knowledge about the reading process with our students and help them explore and understand more about their own reading in two languages. We call these interactions 'critical dialogues' because as we examine their reading, we also share what we believe about reading and help the students build the concept of ownership about their own reading. We explore the power relations between the author and the reader. We discuss language variations and language status (Goodman, 2003).

K. Goodman's (1982; 1996; 2003) reading model that emphasizes that there is a universal reading process within which readers use their background knowledge, reading strategies and the language cueing systems (semantic, syntactic, grapho-phonic as well as pragmatic cues) to construct meaning. We use students' miscues and their reading responses to show that reading is not a simple process of decoding but it is complex sociopsycholinguistic process (Coles, 2000; McQuillan, 1998).

Other scholars have made similar claims supporting the idea that academic development, which includes reading, is enhanced by holistic instruction which values students' experiences and incorporates them into

their learning process (Bernhardt, 1991; Cummins, 1996; Freeman & Freeman, 2000; Kutz & Roskelly, 1991). Our work is also informed by Carrell's (1987) discussion of two types of schematas. Content schemes refer to background knowledge, which readers bring to a text while formal schemata refers to formal, rhetorical organizational structures of texts. Carrell (1987) indicates that L2 readers' content schemata plays a more important role than formal schemata in reading comprehension. Also, Smith (1988) and Kutz (1991) interpret the reading process as cultural since readers rely on their existing knowledge about the world outside the text to relate to texts they read. This supports Krashen's (1996, 1999) beliefs about the importance of "comprehensible input" in developing a second language. We discuss these various ideas with our students in critical ways through our dialogues.

The students in this study participated in one-on-one sessions following Retrospective Miscue Analysis (RMA) (Goodman & Marek, 1989, 1996) and critical dialogues to reflect on themselves as ESL/EFL readers and to consider how they use their knowledge and resources as language users in developing their reading abilities. We encourage the participants in our study to situate themselves in the socio-cultural context of what they read and especially in how they perceive themselves as readers.

We consider these dialogic sessions to be effective and engaging because they are learner centered. Kutz (1991) states that dialogues are important in establishing knowledge since they promote active learning. According to Freire (1998; Shor, 1987) through dialogues learners pose issues and problems to reflect on their learning process in critical ways. Our students' self perceptions about their reading in their first and second languages demonstrate how the RMA sessions and critical dialogues illuminate our students' voices in discovering their strengths as readers.

The Korean readers we studied almost all reported that in their schooling in Korea the focus on ESL/EFL reading was on English grammar. We also hear this from ESL/EFL international readers from many countries. In addition, these students report that their teachers rarely help them build background knowledge on a topic prior to reading about it.

For the purpose of this article, we select two issues of special concern to our readers which we see as important to ESL/EFL teaching and learning of reading: their self perceptions of themselves as readers and the cultural

knowledge they need to read a range of English texts. In the process of self-reflection, the participants in our study report that their lack of familiarity with socio-cultural knowledge of the United States is problematic and does not lead them to adequately comprehend texts. They also believe their difficulties stem from not being capable of applying their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary to their reading of English. As we analyze our dialogues, we discover that these ESL/EFL readers do not initially self reflect on themselves as readers, nor are they consciously aware of their reading strengths in their first language and how they can use such strengths and knowledge to develop reading in their second language.

Procedures: retrospective miscue analysis and critical dialogues

Our critical dialogues involve humanistic and reflective teaching. Through reader-centered sessions, the readers come to define themselves as active readers in their second language as well as their first. This new view of their reading ability begins to occur in three or four sessions. Students begin to read not merely as a decoding process but as a transactional process with the focus on meaning making. The readers explore the issues of their L2 reading critically with us as we share with them our views about the reading process and the ways in which proficient readers engage with texts. They become aware of the power of their own interpretations informed by their cultural and academic knowledge.

Retrospective Miscue Analysis (RMA) developed from reading miscue analysis research (Brown, Marek, & Goodman, 1996; Goodman, 1977). Goodman and Marek (1989) state that involving students in exploring the ways in which their reading miscues reveal their search for meaning as they read is crucial in readers' developing a positive view of themselves as readers. The authors have researched the use of RMA for more than 15 years with readers of a range of ages, languages, abilities and backgrounds. Y. Goodman (1998) documents how RMA sessions help readers revalue themselves since readers explore their own reading process with their teachers and/or researchers, and thus become consciously aware of their strengths. In this study, the RMA research was conducted in English and Korean depending on the common language of the researcher and the student. ESL readers are

eager to use English since one of the main objectives for volunteering for the RMA sessions is to improve their English. In addition critical dialogues have been conducted in Spanish and other languages when all the participants are proficient in those languages.

Critical dialogues include interviews, questionnaires, think-aloud protocols, follow-up discussions to help readers explore their own reading processes. We keep a researcher's journal to help support the information we gather on the tape recorder and to use in our discussions. These critical dialogues provide a way of highlighting the experience of readers and how they construct meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). When interviews were conducted in Korean, the L1 of the students, the quotations were translated into English. We find that regardless of the language used for conducting the discussions, students and researchers find that the opportunities to explore the issues of their L2 readings are supportive of their development of reading in L2. Although the RMA and critical dialogues we report in this paper are one-on-one sessions, research has been done with small groups with equally successful results (Costello, 1992, 1996). Through our dialogues, we come to understand, along with our ESL readers from different countries, the importance of self-reflection on one's own reading process in order to revalue, understand and demystify the negative views that readers often develop about themselves as readers (Goodman, 1998). With greater confidence, the readers develop greater proficiency as readers.

Self perceptions of L2 readers

It is important to consider both the L2 readers' positive as well as negative self-perceptions. The participants in our study had positive self-perceptions as L1 readers, but not as L2 readers of English. Here is what Chang and Sukyong told us about their L1 reading in response to questions about how they read in Korean.

Researcher: Tell me about how you read in Korean?

Chang: It is kind of natural in Korean, read a lot of cartoons, comics to learn to read. I don't have any special frame or special time just for reading...I don't have to change (anything) special, almost no problem, vocabulary or no

> special problems...just read good books in Korean.

> Sukyong: Korean is my first language...so what do you expect? I just read on...what ever I read in Korean, it flows naturally, and I hardly get stuck. In case I do, I can clarify it based on the context most of the times. If I can't, I don't care and keep going because I know that the meaning will be eventually made clear somehow(Chin,1996, p.75).

The ESL readers show their confidence in reading Korean. However, they are not consciously aware of the complexity of their reading process. Sukyong and Chang were looking at English reading as different from their L1 reading process. When they talked about their L1 reading, they saw their reading process as holistic and natural. They transacted with the text by utilizing their socio-cultural background. They know they read to make sense. Sukyong implied that reading in her L1 was a meaning construction process by stating, "I know that the meaning will be eventually made clear somehow." On the other hand, neither of these readers initially had a very holistic view of their reading in L2. Here is what they told us considering their perceptions of reading in English:

> Researcher: What do you do when you read English?

> Sukyong: I learned that I should identify a subject and a predicate in each sentence to make reading easy...even now I stick to that approach. Whatever I read, especially when I am stuck on a complicated sentence, first of all, I divide it into a subject and a predicate and I also tend to parenthesize adverbial phrases and put a dash before a relative clause...then I can fix it up most of the time (Chin, 1996, p.75-76).

> Chang: I should choose good material and first I think (what) I have to do I have to choose which material and which books I read because first, I don't have much time and (it is) difficult so (it) must be right for me and it has to help to also increase vocabulary or structure so the first problem is which book and materials I choose (to see) are right for me, I think it is very important.

When Sukyong was talking about reading English, she was emphasizing grammatical knowledge and the use of surface features of English to deal with challenging sentences. Her perception of English was being divorced

from the meaning making process she used successfully in reading her first language. Chang believed that reading "good" books was necessary for him to improve his English vocabulary as well as grammar. Chang stated that exposure to good books was related to being a good reader in his L1. However, when he talked about English he was restricting his reading genre to specific textbooks for EFL/ESL learners in order to improve grammar as well as vocabulary.

During the RMA session we use a tape recording of the students' oral reading to examine the students' miscues. By asking specific questions we explore with the readers how their miscues reveal their knowledge of English, the influences of Korean in this study and their growing understandings. We encouraged the readers by asking constructive questions so that they reflect on their language cueing systems, their reading process and strategies, critically. Our critical dialogues include questions such as; Does your miscue make sense? Why or why not? (Semantic cueing system) Is there any meaning change? (Semantic cueing system) Does the result of your miscue sound like language? (Syntactic and grapho-phonic cueing systems) Should you have corrected your miscue? What does the miscue reveal about your knowledge about English or your first language? (reading strategy use).

In the following example we discuss with Chang a miscue he produced while he was reading the text "Follow Your Dream"(Canfield & Hansen, 1995). It provides an additional example of our discussion with these readers. The reader was instructed to read and retell the story which he had not read previously. Chang read the whole text first orally without any help from the researcher, then he was asked to retell the story. We tape-recorded his reading and retelling to be able to return to the reading and discuss his miscues. The excerpt from the text begins on page two, line 26 and ends with line 29 on the same page. Chang and the researcher are discussing his substitution miscue of "came" for "camp".

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0226   The best part of the
0227   story is that two summers ago that same school- came

0228   teacher brought 30 kids to camp out on my ranch
0229    a week
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Researcher: Does your miscue make sense?

Chang: Because "came out" the sound is very similar this one, and one more thing usually /p/ sound you just keep and don't sound out much, so maybe I learned it not perfectly.

Initially, Chang was focusing heavily on "language form" and "correctness" of pronunciation and overlooking his meaning making process. He was analyzing why he came to make the miscue "came out" for "camp out", and his analysis was that his poor articulation caused him to make the miscue. He even went on to say that when a word ends with /p/, it is a difficult sound to pronounce. We encouraged Chang to explore his miscue further.

Researcher: Should you have corrected your miscue?

Chang: "camp out" I reduced this sound (referring to the /p/ in camp), and kind of "came out"...Maybe I reduced the sound...."camp out", "came out"... "came out" and "came out" I think first is mute (referring to the sound /p/ of camp) and second I think also, camp out kind of meaning...it is similar.

Initially, Chang tried to analyze the miscue by looking at his oral performance. However, in the course of the critical dialogue, he realized that his miscue was actually making sense:

Researcher: Is there any meaning change?

Chang: If maybe it is "camp out" they come here and then build some tent, camping kind of more of this, but it doesn't matter because in this case, 30 kids came out to the horse ranch and naturally it is kind of a short trip, we can imagine.

Through the conversations we had during the RMA session, Chang was able to recognize that the miscue was semantically acceptable, and he came to accept the miscue as an appropriate reading strategy considering its semantic acceptability. Over time, Chang began to understand that his miscue reflected his language knowledge and was a resource to help him continuously develop his second language literacy.

At first both Sukyong and Chang seemed to overemphasize the convention of English usage while they seemed to not pay attention to their personal interpretative use of English. However, by engaging in a critical
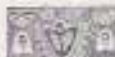
dialogue, the students began to reflect on their personal invention of the language. We helped them explore what they knew as they read and how they were using their knowledge to comprehend.

During our interactions, we support the readers to see how their miscues and understandings reveal their knowledge of English grammar but at the same time involve their focus on meaning making. We share with them how we read in similar ways and the kinds of miscues we make. Such discussions lead the readers not only to revalue themselves as readers but also to become more comfortable and confident reading in their second language.

Academic reading and popular reading

ESL/EFL readers, including our ESL students, discuss the value they place on the importance of academic reading. They study English mainly to pass exams that test their conventional knowledge of English. For the most part, their view of schooling is influencing their purpose for L2 learning. To a lesser degree, the readers we work with also feel the need and desire to be able to comprehend popular readings, including newspapers and magazines, yet these materials are perceived as quite complicated as well as challenging. Their difficulties come from the lack of connection the students have to the socio-cultural background knowledge they need to understand their L2. Also the Korean readers told us that they had very few opportunities to read a wide variety of authentic English texts in Korea. There, students mainly read textbooks with English grammar lessons and exercises since the main purpose for studying is to pass English exams. We explored the issue of the importance of socio-cultural aspects of reading with our students. For the most part, the readers did not value their wealth of experience with reading and their own popular culture, which they can use as a basis on which to develop their English reading.

Our readers stated that newspapers and news magazines were some of the hardest readings due to their lack of knowledge of socio-cultural information. In Korea, a number of specialized courses are offered at a number of universities in the English departments (also through private English language institutes) that focus only on reading newspapers and news magazines. This is because these are thought of as very difficult genres to tackle. It is interesting to note that even though the Korean students admit

that *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines are very difficult to read, they are still popular among the students and they express their interest and motivation to read and understand them.

The opening quote (see above) explains how Sukyong struggled to transact with culturally specific texts as an ESL learner in the U.S. Through the encounters with authentic texts, in this case newspapers, Sukyong felt that it would be helpful if she were more familiar with American culture by watching TV more often. In regards to reading newspapers, the participants in this study reflected on popular readings as follows:

Researcher: What do you do when you are reading newspapers?

Chang: Many parts...I just skip because so many words or topic(s) I don't know or can't understand. I don't know about the way of Americans think or act so it is hard to understand newspapers for me in. .

Researcher: Tell me more about your reading of Time magazine?

Arum: In order to comprehend Time magazine, I should know slang and uncommon vocabulary, and on top of that, I need to have background knowledge in almost every area, such as politics, history, literature, economics and even the bible, etc. But unfortunately I don't. (Chin,1996, p.182)

By being engaged in critical dialogues about their reading and ways to access the background knowledge they needed, our ESL readers explored their concerns about their academic as well as popular readings. Through the interviews we were able to come to realize what knowledge about their home cultures they were able to bring to their reading in English. We helped them understand that watching television, conversing with Americans, and asking questions about what they were reading were all helpful in their developing greater expertise in their English reading. Through this research, we found the importance of implementing authentic texts. The use of authentic materials which are easier to access in the U.S. context, help our students realize the importance of reading materials beyond text books. These days, variety of authentic reading materials are becoming more readily available on internet to use anywhere in the world. We also discuss the ways in which non reading experiences with varied cultural experiences aid in understanding popular

written materials. Also, as teachers, we had the opportunity to learn about the anxieties our students had that often impede their reading development. We gained insight into their views about the reading process and we learned more about the socio-cultural nature of reading from our ESL/EFL students. We were then able to respond to such anxieties with supportive strategies.

Readers' self perceptions after our critical dialogues

Through our dialogues with our L2 readers, over time (after two or three sessions) the ESL students started to perceive their L2 reading strategies as being more similar to what they had told us about their L1 reading strategies.

Researcher: What do you think about your English reading now?

Jinhyuk: Reading English is basically to comprehend what you read. If you are good at comprehending what you read in Korean, you will also be better able to comprehend what you read in any other language (Chin, 1996, p. 111).

Chang: Before, I never heard about miscues and it is positive. And for me it is a new idea and it is fresh and I think they have some kind of.... first some pronunciation, new vocabulary, or sometimes I know the meaning but I can't feel the words. Story isn't only coming from text. Come from our..come from the things we know or believe, meaning of the same story is different because many different countries and many different cultures.

As a result of our dialogues, the participants in this study were able to reflect on and look at themselves as readers critically. They also realized that their reading process in L2 is not so different from their L1 reading process. The more aware of the reading process they became the more they realized the importance of developing greater knowledge about L2 socio-cultural knowledge within the L2 context, rather than prioritizing grammar and vocabulary. They were able to articulate no matter what they read, their purpose is to construct meaning (Goodman, 1996, 1998).

Conclusions

From our analysis of our conversations about reading with our students, we conclude that the following instructional strategies:

1) gathering information about the students' perceptions of themselves as readers; 2)exploring with the students how their views impact their reading ability; 3) helping readers to demystify the idea that L2 reading is more complex and something totally different from L1; 4) helping readers find resources in addition to reading in order to build background and experiences to understand L2 popular culture texts; 5) helping students understand that reading difficulty is based on connecting to content schemata more than to formal schemata (Carrell, 1987); 6) sharing what we believe about the reading process by reflecting on our reading process and the miscues we make. We find that regardless of the language used for the instruction (whether in students' L1 or L2), the discourses concerning reading with our students are engaging and constructive.

In the future, we plan to dialogue more specifically with our students about how teachers help readers develop stronger backgrounds on socio-cultural information related to the L2 in both the L1 setting as well as in the L2 setting. We encourage the readers of this article to do the same.

Readers in many ESL/EFL settings are instructed to see reading as a passive and transmission process. Often they were conditioned to approach reading from the perspective that careful analysis of surface text features can help them become better readers, rather than considering reading as a process of making sense, which is what they do in their first language. According to Freire's (1998) ideology, a dialogic as well as a problem posing nature is crucial for learners to become aware of what it means to be actively engaged with the social context. Reading is not merely reading words but involves reading the world and bringing that world into our reading (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Through our critical dialogues, we support ESL/EFL readers to be active in their own reading, to be aware of the strengths and resources of their knowledge and literacy in their first language.

The ESL/EFL students we have worked with became actively engaged in relearning, rediscovering and revaluing the dynamic and fluid nature of reading in a second language through our 'critical dialogues'.

We support them as they explore their own reading process in their first and second languages, and together discover its transactional nature. Also, the sessions create critical teaching and learning moments (Y. Goodman, 1998, 2003). We encourage students to inquire into what they do as readers

help them understand their own reasons for making miscues and how their miscues help them become more knowledgeable about their reading, and language in general, by raising their intuitive language knowledge to a conscious level (Y. Goodman, 2003). We help them answer their questions as they interrogate the materials they are reading. In the process of interaction through critical dialogues, the readers came to consider reading as emancipatory instruction and to look at their literacy more critically.

At the same time we learned from our ESL students that their academic experiences which include with a range of authentic texts, help them change their perceptions about reading in English and about themselves as readers. Together with our students, we come to understand that being successful in understanding both academic as well as popular readings takes more than competence with grammatical structures and vocabulary. We understand the context itself leads to conceptualizing surface features of language in a critical way and to focus transactions with the text as a meaning making process. Critical dialogues provide many opportunities for students to discover their own knowledge about language and the reading process and to value their own knowledge, language experiences and backgrounds. At the same time, by listening carefully to students' voice teachers and researchers develop ways to reconsider our understandings about curriculum as well as our roles as educators.

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