

Paper Title: Reading Considerations and the L2 Learner

Writers:

Tina Sharpe, Consultant
Maureen Walsh, Australian Catholic University

Source: ATESOL Newsletter November 1992

Accessed from: AIS Literacy Website www.studentnet.edu.au/aispd/literacy

Key points that teachers need to know about ESL students:

- Students of all ages may be emergent readers of English. Low ability grouping does not provide readers of English as a second language with models of what constitutes positive and successful reading behaviour at various phases of gaining control of the reading process.
- Sociocultural factors, especially attitude to reading and self esteem as a reader in a new language have a significant influence on a learner's proficiency.
- Learning to read only happens once. Ability to read in the first language contributes to reading development in a new language because students will already have understanding of the concepts of print: (speech can be written down in any language, print is constant and carries the message, words can be separated from its referent and that numbers and letters are different.)
- Spoken language proficiency in the first language helps reading in a second language. Reading has its foundation in listening and talking. Reading growth in English for bilingual students should be part of the student's ongoing development in speaking, listening and writing English.
- Cultural experiences, or lack thereof, influence readers' understanding and interpretation of texts.
- Reading for meaning, rather than merely decoding isolated sounds and then blending them together to form words, is crucial for the second language learners who are learning to read while learning English.
- Reading for different purposes places different demands on students learning English as a second language. Reading to learn requires specific strategies for successful learning. Reading to learn is associated with the learning of a particular Key Learning Area or the performance of a particular subject area task.

How is reading different for second language learners?

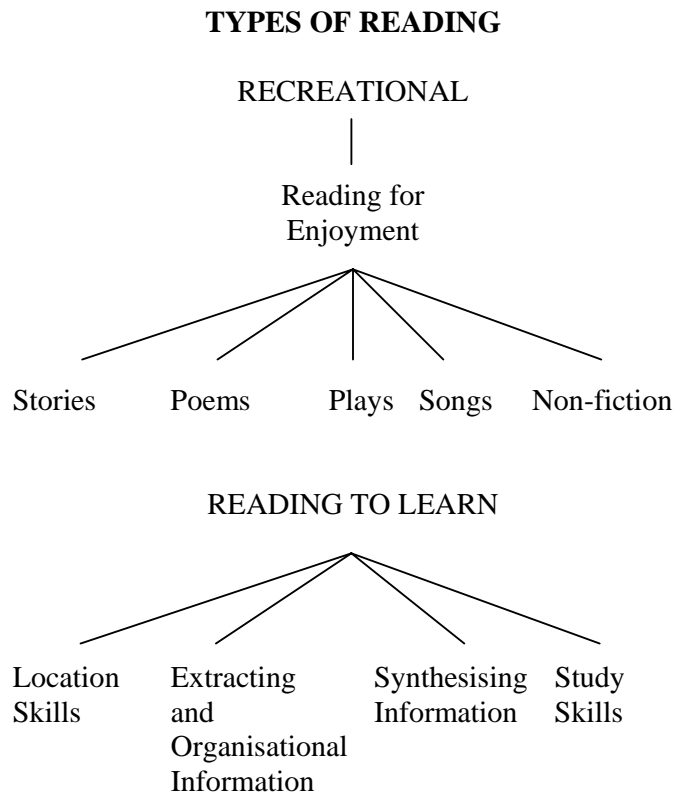
- The bilingual student is learning to read while learning to learn English as a new language. Native speakers of English do not encounter this challenge.
- To extract meaning from print bilingual learners will be attempting to decode not only the orthographic and phonemic features but more importantly, the unfamiliar social and cultural contexts inherent in the English text.
- Unfamiliarity with spoken English and with the social and cultural contexts of the text may hinder bilingual students to read for meaning. Classroom strategies used to teach reading such as sampling print, predicting, testing, confirming and

correcting when necessary, may not be familiar to students who have learned to read through different approaches in their first language.

- Second language learners may not be familiar with the structures and meaning of texts to predict as effectively as their native-speaking peers. When asked to predict the end of a sentence “the girls w...” a native speakers would know, through familiarity with English language use, that the required ending would be a verb such as “waited” rather than preposition “with” or adjective “wild”.
- Whereas native speakers of English may be able to recognise miscues, new learners of English may miscue and not recognise their miscue. For example, they may not be able to answer questions like “does it make sense?” which involves recognition of which language units carry the information. Due to unfamiliarity with the text, confirming meaning or wrongly confirming becomes a difficulty.
- To maintain meaning and fluency students rely on illustration and as a strategy may draw on substitutions, borrowing vocabulary from their first language during reading. Teachers should encourage students to talk about the strategies they use to read in English.
- Bilingual learners have a greater tendency than emergent readers in first language to miscue graphonically. (“b for d” and “p for q”) and semantic substitutions which do not maintain the meaning of the text. “*He picked up his cup (instead of cap) and put it on his head.*”
- Syntactic differences between the readers first language and English influence reading but do not necessarily interfere with reading in English, because reading involves more than processing syntax, importantly, it involves the background information the reader brings to the text (schemata).
- Where the grammar of the first language differs from English, teachers need to anticipate the complexity in the text for bilingual students. Through scaffolded questioning, teachers need to assist students to decode the meaning in texts where, for example:
 - the passive tense is used: “the truck was damaged by the car”;
 - meaning is subsumed rather than stated (ellipsis): “I’ll have a coffee” – “me too”;
 - embedded clauses: “the boy (who lives down the road) has a red car”

What are the different types of reading?

Reading requirements are different from recreational reading and for reading to learn as highlighted in the diagram below:



From: *Learning to Learn from Text: Effective Reading in the Content Area* by Morris and Stewart – Dore (1986).

Reading materials in the Key Learning Areas tend to be expository in nature, that is, they try to tell you about a subject – to explain and teach. Texts are mostly factual and present a great deal of information in short space or time.

- Exposition text has its own language register, the language of Human Society and Its Environment is not the same as the language of Science and Technology and Mathematics. The demands imposed by each of the Key Learning Area is different.
- Exposition text tends to be more variable than fictional material, in particular stories which have an order specified by cultural conventions. Readers of English as a second language may be able to draw on their cross cultural understanding of how stories work to enhance their understanding of narrative; which is not a resource available to the student in expository text. Stories provide second language learners with the opportunity to evoke events, situations, experience and imagination, whereas expository text tends to be abstract dealing with new concepts. Students learn to expect ambiguity, multiple meanings, idiomatic and figurative language in story, features not present in factual texts.

Features of content area reading include:

- the use of headings and sub-headings, highlighted words and even questions to organise the text.
- the addition of a large amount of technical vocabulary.
- in comparison with imaginative prose, reading in content areas contain a higher number of content words (vocabulary).
- While fiction may, in some instances, involve the second language reader to recall of events in a time sequence, content areas have different reading response patterns, for example:
 - to show understanding in the social sciences the reader will need to use English to show cause and effect relationships sequence events and make comparisons.
 - to read and response to science, the reader will predominantly need to use English to describe, define and classify.
 - readers of English as a new language need to learn to read and interpret tables, charts, figures and diagrams (graphical information) in the content areas.
 - the function of logical connectives (however, whereas) and referrals which link ideas in paragraphs and sentences need to be made explicit to the readers, then to recognise how main ideas in them are followed through and readdressed in the text (theme).

For example:

- 1) *Prior to (connective) the assault on the city, the soldiers made camp?*
Which event took place first?
- 2) *On a map of Queensland's coast from Mossman to Cardwell you would notice how mountainous this (referral) region is. Here is Queensland's highest peak, Mt Bartle Frere.*

English as a second language readers need to:

- 1) know the purpose for reading;
- 2) bring background knowledge to the text (schemata);
- 3) know how the text is organised at different levels (text schema).

i) *The purpose of reading*

Readers of English as a second language need to have a clear understanding of the purpose for reading so that they can learn to read in different ways to meet the demands of the text and reading tasks in Key Learning Areas. For example in tasks which require students to search a topic, teachers need to guide students to articulate questions which will assist the reader to focus on purpose for reading:

Who am I working with to help me achieve the task. (peer support).

What does the task require me to achieve?

What particular aspect of the topic do I want to focus on?

What do I already know about this topic?

What information do I need to find out?

How will I go about getting the information?

Sampling, skimming, scanning, note taking.

Teachers need to anticipate the demands of the reading task and plan to teach, through demonstration and practice, the reading skills the students need to

develop. For example, when the purpose for reading is to summarise a text, students will need to know how to:

- select main ideas and build these into an outline.
- note top-level structures such as cause/effect.
- learn the meaning of new vocabulary from context clues.
- identify features of the text which allow the reader to distinguish fact from opinion.
- follow a line of argument and make decisions about the relevance of the argument to the topics being researched.

ii) *Background knowledge*

Students need to have the opportunity to explore and discuss what they know about a topic before they are expected to read information and make sense of it.

Familiarise students with the cultural context of the text so that students have prior experience, expectations and background knowledge (schemata) of the English text. Relate new concepts to previous experiences and understandings of students to help them to make sense of new ideas being introduced.

Students need to have opportunity to understand the context of the cultural specific information they are reading about. For example, the nuclear family, local, state and Federal government may not be familiar to second language learners.

Lead the students to share their own experience and bring prior knowledge to the reading content.

Direct students to read teacher selected segments of the text, guided by specific comprehension questions on the topic. Discuss any misunderstandings the student may have. Expand on ideas narrowly expressed, due to lack of vocabulary. Ask students to talk about, present, what they have read.

The cultural origin of a text makes more a difference in student reading comprehension than the text's semantic and syntactic complexity. Students may for example, recall fewer prepositions (on, in) from unfamiliar portions of a text than from a familiar text (contextualised text).

Use concrete material, visual representation (diagrams, illustrations, to move from the concrete to the abstract to assist readers to become familiar with decontextualised text (context – reduced, unfamiliar to the second language reader).

Refer to cross cultural origins of different genres of narrative (heroes, legends, fairy tales).

Readers of English as a second language may not be able to make “intertextual” links because of either lack of experience with the particular type of story, its content and its language. Even more difficult for bilingual children is having the language to talk about the book, especially the language of classroom discourse.

Where possible contact parents through interpreters. Explain the reading program and invite their participation. Provide opportunities for parents who may be non-readers to tape stories. Encourage parents to talk and tell stories or

read to their children in their mother tongue. Involve older members in the community to read to or with children.

In selecting reading resources for bilingual readers, consider elements in the text which may cause students “gaps” in their understanding. Plan to contextualise the information from the students by providing opportunities for talking about the reading, role play and providing visual support as part of planning pre reading activities.

While it is important for learners to listen, re-read and become familiar with a text to gain fluency and confidence as readers, when learners oversee the same language forms (either in spoken, written language or by relying on “safe” texts) it is important for teachers to present and model a variety of texts and to encourage learners to move beyond the known.

iii) Text scheme (syntactic and graphophonic features of the text)

Syntactic features of the text

- Students need to understand and recognise the organisation of the different text-types (text schemata). In particular how the content of the text is organised and how the linguistic features are organised to convey meaning. Teachers need to show children, through modelling, self-correction strategies to read for learning and to develop independent self correction skills. These may include, guided questions to use backwards and forward references to test and confirm prediction.

Ask students to identify key words in the text and to identify their relationship to each other by circling the referent and tracing a line (backwards and/or forwards) to show reference.

During reading bilingual readers may lose the meaning of the text due to the number of factors:

- inability to predict syntactically in English through insufficient knowledge of word order and word association (bus stop).

Ensure the student hears how an unfamiliar text should sound prior to independent reading. Use tapes to allow students to listen more than once if necessary. Introduce key vocabulary from parts of the text. Invite class/group contribution to related ideas. “Tell me what comes to your mind when you the expression “a good friend” provide non threatening discussion which will allow the bilingual student to contribute prior experiences (irrespective of “correctness” at this stage). “what made you think of “chum?” discuss and organise text according to agreed upon criteria (semantic mapping): use words generated to design a word association game, as post-reading communicative activity for the bilingual student/peer to rehearse and practice new vocabulary.

- difficult to recognise systems of language, which may be due to as yet developing skills in spoken English. These systems of language may include:
 - time and tense
 - mass (unaccountable noun) and unit (countable noun)
“how much money?” (much takes singular form because ‘money’ is mass)

“how many cups?” (many takes plural form because ‘cups’ is a trait)

- comparison and contrast
- the significance of modality (could, should, must, would, can, will, may).

Use communicative activities designed from the reading text to allow students to become familiar and practice with peers syntactic features they are likely to encounter in the texts (such as modality).

While focussing on the meaning of the text, provide students with opportunities to develop syntactic comprehension through:

- paraphrasing text
- use cloze activities in context of reading
- manipulation of text (ordering jumbled paragraphs and sentences within a paragraph)
- combining text
- sentence building
- word study in communicative games (synonyms, acronyms, palindromes, origin of words)

Grapho-phonetic features of the text

- Orthographic (print) features vary in languages (Chinese, Arabic, Greek).
- Direction of print is different from English in some languages (Chinese, Arabic).

Reinforce left to right direction of print by “pointing” to develop automatically in following directional print.

- English is a syllable-stressed language compared with other languages that are tone-stressed.

Use clapping patterns, music and drama activities to tune students into the stress patterns of English.

- In attempting to read, emergent bilingual readers will approximate sounds from their first language to English (use *dis* instead of *this*, *live* instead of *leave*). Frequent interaction with native speakers of English and regular listening to written text (being read to) contributes to the bilingual readers students to closer approximation Australian English.
- Punctuation meaning varies in some cultures, (the question mark is placed at the beginning of the question in Spanish).

Make explicit through modelling in the text, the use of capital letters and the significance of punctuation (pause for full stop) question mark (inflection), exclamation mark (expression, tone).

- Some languages are tonal and have features of accentuating which changes the sound of letters. ^' hôtel école
- Patterns of letter cluster in English may be unfamiliar to children eg. “tion” “II” and patterns of letter clusters which children may be familiar which do not occur in English: cz, jc, sz.

What Readers of English as a second language should know?

- the letter names (not sounds) of the English language alphabet.
- letter names are constant, sounds vary (use letters in children's name and familiar vocabulary in text to develop understanding).
- letters sometimes work alone and sometimes in clusters eg. The letter 'e' in me, her, bread, read.
- the sound a letter (or a cluster of letters) represents depends on its place in a word and what other letters surround it eg. The letter 'c' in 'cat, chair, city.'
- the same sound can be represented by different letters eg. "cheap, sheet, chief."
- that the same letter clusters can represent different sounds "though, through, cough."

Use techniques such as sight words, recognition of words in context, oral cloze, grapho-phonetic cloze. Ensure students understand metalanguage such as "what word begins with". Ensure students understand where words begin and end. Play games such as My grandma's game: In pairs, small group:

My grandma likes "apples but no bananas, kittens but not cats, bottles but not jars..." game ends when children discover that grandma only likes double letters! Extend to words with silent letters, words with three syllables, nouns and verbs.

Play games such as secret messages: (in pairs, threes) extend to word blends. Take 'b' off "book" and put in 't'. Take 'g' off "good" and put in 'm'.

It is important for teachers to be aware of the background of individual children and to understand how their degree of proficiency in their first language will have a strong relationship to their proficiency in reading tasks. In many cases it is difficult to determine a child's mother tongue or degree of proficiency in mother tongue.

- teachers also need to understand the cultural background of families of children in their class, realising that the culture of particular groups cannot be stereotyped but has its own dynamics within the Australian cultural context.
- where possible contact parents through interpreters. Explain the reading program and invite their participation. If parents themselves cannot read in English or their mother tongue, they must be able to help with craft, art or other activities that can be linked to reading tasks.
- encourage parents to talk, tell stories or read to their children in their mother tongue. Also realise that some parents and even more so children will not want to use their mother tongue as they want to learn only English.
- consider involving older members in the community to read to or with children.
- since reading in a 'decontextualised' task it is even more important that reading tasks can be 'contextualised' where possible. There are a variety of ways that this can be planned so that there is this learning continuum established to move from concrete, representational and 'context-embedded' situations to more abstract, symbolic and 'context-reduced' aspects of reading. Some suggestions for doing this will vary according to the age and level of the children, but can involve: For young people bilingual children, beginning to learn to read in English poses an extra layer of difficulty than for monolingual children because they are trying to read while also learning the language.

Teachers or large classes of bilingual children need contextualise the reading event even more than they would need to for monolingual children. This can be developed through using picture books and particularly during the shared reading time.

Picture books can be used in a number of ways in that they can provide some contextualisation for aspects of reading, especially for beginning readers: more challenging picture books can link to themes, techniques or ideas in novels or non-fiction; others even are structured so that they are more decontextualised and abstract so these texts can be used to show children how authors construct different layers of meaning in texts.

The reading of different varieties of novels needs careful planning. Bilingual children need contextualisation at a number of different levels such as concrete experiences and demonstrations that may occur from excursions or other concrete activities in the school and in the classroom, by continued visual reinforcement, and by supporting these with varieties of talk and print where appropriate.

From *Story Magic* (M. Walsh 1991) an approach to helping children's reading can be through teacher planning that considers context from a number of aspects:

CONTEXT OF THE READING EVENT:

Background knowledge that the reader brings to each reading experience. It involves the reader's knowledge of real life events, people, places and situations. It may also involve knowledge of the content material and concepts in the particular text to be read.

CONTEXT OF THE TEXTBOOK:

Experience of other stories and their structures (eg narrative, fantasy, realism) 'schema'. Awareness and exposure to other types of texts and genres.

CONTEXT OF THE LINGUISTIC:

STRUCTURE:

Style of language (narrative, descriptive, discussive). Author's voice: 1st or 3rd person. Sentence varieties. Use of oral and written discourse within written mode. Specific vocabulary. Cohesion.

CONTEXT OF ARTISTIC FORM:

Pictures, Layout, Artistic style and structure. How these convey ideas and themes. Imagery, symbolism. Tone.