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Thinking Allowed

Teaching reading: Research into practice

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In pre-service and in-service language teacher education, and in curriculum-related projects in second and foreign language settings, a recurrent issue is the failure to relate the teaching of reading to reading as a meaning-making activity. In this paper, I will consider what current research on second language (L2) reading has actually succeeded in bringing to the classroom. In doing this, I will examine the three obvious candidates for inclusion in a reading programme: extensive reading, reading fluency development, and intensive reading. For each of these I will give my perspective on what's getting through to teachers, and what isn't, and my best guess as to why it isn't. This leads to suggestions about areas for further research and other actions that need to be taken to improve classroom practice.

1. Introduction

Just the other day I observed a lesson focussing on reading taught by an experienced teacher in a leading private English language school in a south east Asian country. The teacher was well organised, skilled in classroom management, and had clearly established excellent rapport with the students. While I enjoyed being a small part of that environment that day, I emerged after 90 minutes wondering what it was the students had learned. The underlying pattern had been that students read a short text and offered a response which the teacher either accepted or rejected, without explanation.

A week earlier I had been interviewing pre-service teachers from a different south east Asian country as part of an ongoing project investigating the development of teacher cognition. As part of the interview, the participants described an imagined lesson based on a particular text. The responses were diverse, but often followed a pattern of activating background knowledge and making predictions about the text prior to reading, followed immediately after reading with a focus on a grammatical item, such as prepositions or a verb form.

Much of my work involves pre-service and in-service teacher education, and collaborating with serving teachers on curriculum-related projects, and what these two examples serve to illustrate is a recurrent issue that I perceive in the teaching of reading: a failure to relate the teaching of reading to reading as a meaning-making activity.

In what follows, I shall examine the three obvious candidates for inclusion in a reading programme: extensive reading, reading fluency development, and intensive reading. The support for including these three components lies in the four strands framework (Nation

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2007). The four strands are meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency development. The input strand can only include listening and reading, just as the output strand can only include speaking and writing. All four skills, however, can fit into fluency development. Language-focused learning includes areas such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling. Activities that teach learners how to read also fall into the language-focused learning strand. In terms of curriculum design, a balanced language course should give roughly equal time to each strand. The different approaches to teaching reading that will be examined here contribute to three of the strands – meaning-focused input, fluency development, and language-focused learning – as well as providing stimulus for the fourth strand, meaning-focused output.

2. Extensive reading: Emerging from the shadows

2.1 What's getting through

For advocates of extensive reading, there have been a number of positive signs in recent years. These include the creation of the Extensive Reading Foundation (www.erfoundation.org/wordpress/), and its annual learner literature awards recognising the best of the year's newly published graded readers. The first Extensive Reading World Congress was held in Kyoto, Japan, in 2011, and a new journal, the *Journal of Extensive Reading*, has been launched. These new initiatives add to the advocacy of extensive reading over a number of years by the EPER (Edinburgh Project in Extensive Reading; Hill 1997, 2001, 2008) and to the research promoted through *Reading in a Foreign Language* (www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/).

Advocacy of extensive reading is supported by a considerable and growing body of research, although this is of variable quality. The classic study from the late twentieth century is that of Elley & Mangubhai (1981, 1983) reporting on the Fijian 'book flood'. This study was conducted in primary schools in an EFL context, using a limited range of L1 children's books, over a two year period. The results might simply show that reading has benefits for language learning in an input-poor environment. Since then, however, many studies have been reported and benefits claimed in both EFL and ESL environments, input-rich and input-poor, at all levels of education. Often, impressive language learning gains are reported for studies that are of much shorter duration than the original 'book flood' (Lao & Krashen 2000), and graded readers rather than L1 children's books are the usual reading material, although there are also reports of teachers using authentic texts (Pino-Silva 1992) and teacher-made materials (Tanaka & Stapleton 2007).

Advocacy of extensive reading is often supported by reference to one book in particular, Day & Bamford's *Extensive reading in the second language classroom* (1998), and implementation is often claimed to be guided by those authors' principles (Day & Bamford 2002), although the implementation of an extensive reading programme can – and should – be influenced by local contextual factors (Green 2005; Macalister 2009). For example, one principle says that 'Learners choose what they want to read', which limits the potential for meaning-focused output activities that rely on groups of students or the whole class having read the same text;

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strict adherence to this principle would constrain the teacher and restrict language learning opportunities.

A note of caution about the potential for language learning gains, at least for vocabulary, was introduced by Waring & Takaki (2003), whose study focussing on the learning of non-words highlighted the fragility of any gains, but overall the consistent message for thirty-odd years has been that, no matter where or who you teach, extensive reading is an important component of a language learning programme. For believers, as the sub-title of the first Extensive Reading World Congress puts it, reading is 'the magic carpet to language learning'.

2.2 What's not getting through, and why

Despite the signs of extensive reading adoption identified in the preceding section, in many places the 'magic carpet' remains firmly nailed to the floor. In the same English language school where I observed a reading class the other day, for instance, I was party to a conversation between an experienced and a less experienced teacher. The latter had come to the former for advice, and when asked why the students were writing a book report after reading a graded reader, said 'But if I don't get them to write a book report, how will I know they've done the reading?' On then being told that was not the point, the teacher was clearly baffled. The idea that reading lots of easy, enjoyable books – extensive reading, reading for pleasure – was a legitimate language learning activity was an idea that had not yet got through.

Concerns about the lack of extensive reading adoption have been expressed elsewhere; for example, by Renandya (2007) and Waring (2009). In an attempt to investigate teacher attitudes to extensive reading and its place in a language learning programme, a study involving teachers on pre-sessional courses in an ESL environment (Macalister 2010a) yielded some answers to why everyone is not 'doing it'. The first is that awareness of research about the benefits of extensive reading was low, suggesting, in turn, that researchers are not successful in communicating their important findings to teachers. This may be a result of working in contexts where research-based funding receives strong emphasis, but if applied linguists working in the field of language teaching report their research in forums frequented by other applied linguists, rather than to language teaching professionals, it seems unlikely to have an impact on the profession.

A second powerful factor was found in the learning/teaching context, with teachers citing the expectations of fee-paying international students or their employers, or the constraints imposed by curricula and assessment requirements. Teachers felt, quite reasonably, that they needed to accommodate such concerns in their practice by, for instance, 'teaching to the exam'. The result, however, was an absence of extensive reading in the programmes.

One factor that did not contribute to that absence in this study was personal, positive experiences of reading for pleasure, at least in the L1. The teachers believed that reading for pleasure facilitated language learning; it was just that they did not translate this belief into their classroom practice, often because of constraints in the learning/teaching context. In other situations, where teachers may have little or no personal experience of this type of reading, the barriers to extensive reading adoption are likely to be considerably higher. Recognising this barrier leads to a further factor that should be acknowledged: the research

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about, and advocacy of, extensive reading largely emanates from universities in English-speaking countries, which is not where English language teaching at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels tends to occur. This is the BANA/TESEP divide identified by Holliday (1994), which remains a powerful construct for interpreting much of what does or does not happen in the English-teaching world. 'BANA' represents the approach to language learning and teaching practised and promoted in **B**ritain, **A**ustralasia, and **N**orth **A**merica while 'TESEP' stands for the approach found in **te**rtiary, **se**condary, and **p**rimary sectors throughout the world. These approaches are not geographically constrained, however. TESEP is practised in BANA countries just as BANA practices can be found in otherwise TESEP environments, such as in the teaching by a private language provider. To make this point in terms of the staffroom discussion mentioned at the start of this section, the experienced teacher was an expatriate native speaker expressing BANA views on extensive reading, while the less experienced teacher was a local and a non-native speaker of English from a TESEP background.

One final obstacle to research about extensive reading getting through is, ironically, the publishers of graded readers. A random survey of readers from a range of publishers suggests that the books are freighted with teacher-like support, typically addressing vocabulary and comprehension, and publisher websites provide further suggestions for teachers. This presentation of the texts can only serve to reinforce teachers' tendency to view graded readers as a further opportunity for intensive reading (Claridge 2009). It sometimes seems that teachers do not trust learners to get their own meaning from the text, even though research has shown that learners are able to make their own, often quite sophisticated, meaning without any input from the teacher (Marianne 2009) or the publisher.

3. Reading fluency development: Still in the shadows

3.1 What's getting through

In L2 reading, fluency has not yet received the attention it deserves (Grabe 2010). One way of developing reading fluency is through an extensive reading programme (Beglar, Hunt & Kite 2012), ensuring that the books read are easy: in other words, that the language is already known to the learner reading it. There has, however, been recent research interest in two additional teaching practices which might be beginning to get through.

The first of these are courses variously known as SPEED-READING or TIMED-READING courses. These consist of a series of texts of fixed length, written with a controlled vocabulary, and followed by simple multiple-choice comprehension questions which learners answer without referring back to the text. Learners note and record the time it took them to read the text, providing a words-per-minute measure, and teachers can monitor the balance between speed and comprehension by observing the number of questions correctly answered. As an example of a speed-reading course, *New Zealand Speed Readings for ESL Learners* (Millett 2005) consists of twenty texts, all written within the 2,000 high-frequency word list, each text exactly 400 words in length, and followed by ten multiple-choice questions.

Recent research has investigated the use of such courses in both EFL (Chung & Nation 2006; Chang 2010; Tran 2012) and ESL (Macalister 2008, 2010b) contexts, and the consistent

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findings are that reading rates improve on the speed-reading texts over the duration of the course, and that these reading rate gains transfer to other types of text. For an activity that takes no more than ten minutes each time, these are substantial benefits, and Millett (2008) has suggested how teachers can incorporate speed-reading into a daily fluency programme that also includes writing and speaking.

The second teaching practice to receive attention is REPEATED READING in EFL contexts (Taguchi & Gorsuch 2002; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass & Gorsuch 2004; Chang 2012). There is some variation in the methodology used, but in essence a learner reads the same text again and again, typically in one session. The reading can be oral or silent, and done with or without assistance (listening to a recording while reading, reading to a listener who can assist). Recent research suggests gains for both fluency and comprehension through repeated reading (Gorsuch & Taguchi 2008), with current interest in reader-internal processes (Taguchi, Gorsuch, Takayasu-Maass & Snipp 2012), although the strong correlations between fluency, comprehension, and repeated reading found in L1 reading research have yet to be found in L2 reading.

3.2 What's not getting through, and why

Teachers, in my experience, are quick to latch onto speed-reading courses when they learn of them. They are easy to implement, have obvious learning gains, and require no preparation or marking by the teacher. There seems to be less enthusiasm about repeated reading, primarily, perhaps, because it seems repetitive and boring.

Apart from that, barriers to the adoption of reading fluency development activities are likely to be similar to those for extensive reading. Neither, for example, tends to feature in coursebooks, so teachers need to adapt their curriculum to make space for such activities. While fluent reading is obviously a benefit in test-taking, it is seldom an assessed skill, so may not receive as much attention in classrooms where assessment plays a shaping role on classroom activities.

All the same, research on teaching practices focussing on developing reading fluency is relatively recent (*pace* West 1941; Bismoko & Nation 1974; Cramer 1975). If the findings are effectively communicated to the teaching profession, there may well be better adoption than for extensive reading research, perhaps because such activities remain teacher-directed. They are not activities where students sit and read silently whatever they have chosen to read; after all, one of the possible barriers to silent reading in class is that there is no obvious role for the teacher. As Williams (1986: 44) pointed out, in the teaching of reading 'Teachers must learn to be quiet'.

4. Intensive reading: Too much of a bad thing

4.1 What's getting through

Teachers are well aware of the importance of intensive reading – the type of reading that happens in class, directed by the teacher, using a text that learners would be unlikely to read

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successfully without assistance. They know, for example, that it is important for learners to acquire the skills and strategies needed for successful reading. They also know it is important for learners to learn useful new vocabulary. Furthermore, they are aware of the importance of learners understanding how language conveys meaning in a text. The problem would seem to be that they devote too much time to intensive reading, and that they teach it poorly.

4.2 What's not getting through, and why

The key message that seems not to be getting through is that we read to find out what a text says, so learning skills, strategies, vocabulary, and grammar should be embedded in a meaning focus. This is not a new idea; Johns & Davies (1983), for example, proposed that teachers view the text less as a linguistic object than as a vehicle for information. Similarly, in task-based learning, teachers are reminded to draw learners' 'attention to the surface forms realising the meanings they have already become familiar with during the task cycle and so help them to systematise their knowledge and broaden their understanding' (Willis 1996: 114). Meaning comes first.

In similar vein, applying the four strands framework (Nation 2007), and accepting that intensive reading fits the language-focused learning strand, there are five conditions that must be met for learning to occur. Two of these are that the teaching should be learner-centred and meaningful. 'Learner-centred' can be interpreted as meaning that an identified learner need is being addressed, but also that the learning is presented in a way that engages the learners. If they are engaged with the meaning of the text in the first instant, wanting to know what it says, learners are more likely to notice – a third condition for learning in this strand – the language that conveys the meaning. Macalister (2011) has demonstrated how this approach can be applied in the teaching of reading, so that the language focus (in this case, referential pronouns) emerges naturally from a meaning focus.

Teachers do, of course, believe they are giving attention to meaning when they ask learners to answer comprehension questions following reading. There is value in comprehension questions, especially when they give learners practice in reading for different levels of meaning (Pohl 2000), and there are sensible approaches to the design and use of comprehension questions (Day & Park 2005). But too often they are overused, and others have written – not without reason – of the 'curse of the comprehension question' (Nation 1979).

There is still insufficient use of alternatives to the comprehension question, despite such alternatives having been around for a long time. One is the INFORMATION TRANSFER ACTIVITY, whereby learners transfer information from one form to another, such as from text to tables or diagrams (Palmer 1982). Such activities are well-suited to regarding texts as vehicles for information (Johns & Davies 1983), and lend themselves in turn to meaning-focussed output activities, using the transferred form as a prompt for reconstructing the information, for example.

This is not the place to go into the teaching of vocabulary (see Nation 2011 for a recent overview), but the way teachers approach vocabulary cannot be ignored in the teaching of reading, as teachers often identify new words as a goal in any such lesson. In a different observed lesson at the same private English language school mentioned at the outset of this

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article, students were instructed to record in their vocabulary notebooks as many unknown words from an article just read as they wanted, using online dictionaries to find out meanings, part of speech and so on. The internet effectively removed the teacher from any monitoring or guiding role, and I was left wondering how many of these pre-intermediate level learners would find 'languish' a useful word any time soon. Knowing which words to focus learners' attention on, and how (Nation 2004), is just as important as knowing whether attention is best given before, while, or after reading (File & Adams 2010; Sonbul & Schmitt 2010).

Much of what is not getting through has not been getting through for a considerable while. In part this must be because of the way teachers have themselves experienced the teaching of reading as learners; as Dupuy, Tse & Cook (1996: 10) noted, 'students have only been exposed to intensive reading of short excerpts or passages in their ESL classes and tend to believe that this is the only way to read in a second language'. Native speakers of English will have experienced similar teaching approaches in their own FL or L2 classes; the experience is likely to be universal. A Malaysian pre-service teacher involved in the teacher cognition project mentioned earlier described her experience as follows:

> They, they in Malaysia we have the syllabus, most teachers just follow the syllabus. They are like um, try to finish the syllabus on time. So it's like, basically they just come to the class open your text book, turn to page this, and do this exercise, pass out, pass out this moral.

The importance of these prior learning experiences, the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975), should not be underestimated. Beginning teachers draw on that experience in their own teaching and while it is to be hoped that there will be a 'sleeper effect' (Richardson 1996) for ideas encountered during professional training, meaning that those ideas will kick in once the teacher has developed confidence in the classroom, this does presuppose that different ways of doing are being promoted in teacher education programmes.

5. Conclusion: What we still need

Successful teaching of reading requires all three approaches described above: intensive reading, extensive reading, and reading fluency development. A sporting analogy may be helpful here. An athlete can give close attention to diet and devote hours to exercising in the gym, but without actually going out to run regularly she will not gain, or maintain, the benefits of this regime. Similarly, students can spend hours on intensive reading activities in class, and even follow a speed reading course for a time, but without a programme of extensive reading, giving them the opportunity to put their skills into practice, the benefits from the first two activities will be sub-optimal.

It is not necessary to tie this view to the four strands framework, but an understanding of this framework and, crucially, the conditions for learning attached to each strand, provides a principled basis for its adoption, as the framework is well informed by reading research and theory.

Regardless of the four strands framework, professional coursework in the form of pre- and in-service teacher education has an important role in improving the teaching of reading.

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It can shape teacher cognition, and thus classroom practice, and challenge the views of language teaching formed through the 'apprenticeship of observation'. If it is indeed the case that lack of knowledge and information about extensive reading and fluency development is a major reason for their neglect in reading courses, teacher education provides an excellent opportunity to remedy the situation.

The teaching of reading will not, of course, remain static. There is more to know, and no doubt a great deal we do not yet know, for the process of reading is internal and unobservable. But to focus for now on knowing more about what we already think we know, I will finish by suggesting some areas for further investigation.

5.1 More about extensive reading

Despite the research related to and advocacy of extensive reading, there remain areas of interest: three in particular.

The first relates to implementation. The standard advice is that learners should be reading at or a little below their level, but increasingly there are suggestions that reading well below the current level is more beneficial (Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Fukada 2010). Well-designed research would reveal whether this does, indeed, lead to improved language learning.

The second area of interest relates to the content of an extensive reading programme. There seems to be a default assumption on the part of teachers that reading for pleasure means reading fiction and as a result there is a failure to recognise that there are different types of (student) reader: some prefer to read non-fiction. It would be useful, particularly for teachers, if research could show whether non-fiction has the same language learning impact as fiction.

But perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the biggest, question that deserves investigation is this: what does 'pleasure' mean when reading in a second or foreign language? Do we perhaps delude ourselves by insisting that extensive reading is reading for pleasure?

5.2 More about fluency development activities

Despite the sporting analogy at the beginning of section 5, we do not yet have any research evidence to suggest that a speed-reading course combined with an extensive reading programme leads to greater gains in reading rate than a speed-reading course on its own. This is a very worthwhile question, and is related to another: so far only one study has looked at the retention of reading rate gains after the end of a speed-reading course (Macalister 2008), and this study was unable to account for changes.

From a teacher's point of view, however, there is a need for a greater range of fluency development activities, though it is encouraging to note that one section of a recent book is dedicated to exactly these (Day 2012). Speed-reading courses work well, but they are few in number and any single course is best not used again with the same student cohort. Easy extensive reading also works well, but does require access to suitable texts. Repeated reading has far greater flexibility, as it can be used with almost any text, but there is the issue of affective

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resistance. Research to support the use of further activities that, like repeated reading, can be employed with a wide range of texts, would be welcome. In this regard, readers' theatre (Carrick 2006; Tsou 2011) may be a worthwhile field of investigation.

5.3 More about intensive reading

If research does work to inform teachers and change classroom practice, a convincing case for changing practice could be based on experimental studies comparing the effect of (a) reading lessons based on a four strands approach, in which language learning is embedded in a meaning focus, and (b) traditional lessons, in which the text is treated as a linguistic object with scant regard for its message.

Ultimately, however, teachers must continue to ask themselves a simple question, one that has been asked before (Nation 1979; Macalister 2011): how has today's teaching prepared my learners to be better readers tomorrow?

5.4 Final thoughts

While research into the obvious components of a reading programme appears to be in a healthy state, important findings and principles still need to be communicated effectively to teachers. Greater awareness of the four strands framework would certainly contribute to a sounder understanding of teaching reading, which should lead to improved classroom practice; this can only be for the good of the most important participants in the whole teaching and learning enterprise, the students.

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