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Theories of second language reading

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Abstract

A number of established theories of language learning offer options for justifying the learning process in relation to reading in a second language. This paper highlights two lenses that contribute to the understanding of second language reading, namely cognitive or psycholinguistic perspectives of reading, and sociocultural perspectives of reading that provide detail concerning the nature of learning second language reading from a wider viewpoint. The cognitive process of reading focuses on bottom-up, top-down and interactive reading models and on schemata theory. The sociocultural process of reading is founded on social constructivist theory.

Keywords:

1. Introduction

It has been acknowledged that "atheoretical research is impossible" (Schwandt, 1993, p. 7). This is because theories are used as lenses through which to study a phenomenon (Anfara, 2008, p. 6) or "the spectacles" that an individual researcher wears in viewing a happening (Imenda, 2014, p. 185). Besides that, a few scholars agree that "A theory may be a metaphor, a model or a framework for understanding or making sense of social events" (Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007, p. 39). In this paper, two perspectives of reading are mainly discussed namely cognitive and sociocultural.

2. Cognitive Perspectives of Reading

One perspective on reading is that it is a cognitive or psycholinguistic process. Cognitive views highlight the "individual and the mental processes which are orchestrated in the act of reading" (Mokotedi, 2012, p. 16). Purcell-Gates and her colleagues define cognitive views on reading as reflective, concentrating on human aptitudes of the mind comprising of "perception and attention, representations of knowledge, memory and learning, problem solving and reasoning, and language acquisition, production and comprehension" (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2006, p. 42). The perspectives also help us to understand the needs of linguistic characteristics across languages (Wyse, Sugrue, Fentiman & Moon, 2014), and more straightforwardly can be described as "the process of understanding speech written down. The goal is to gain access to meaning" (Ziegler & Goswami, 2005, p. 3). The next sub-sections discuss reading models and theory that are related to cognitive or psycholinguistic perspectives of reading.

3. Bottom-up Reading Model

In this study I agree with the arguments put forth by researchers who employed reading theories interchangeably with reading models (Harries & Sipay, 1985; Maarof, 1998; Manzo & Manzo, 1990). That approach reflects the arguments by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2005, p. 12) who described both theories and models as terms that are sometimes utilised interchangeably as "explanatory devices or schemes having a broadly conceptual framework".

Three types of reading models have been discussed in the literature in relation to students who learn English as a second language (Blunden-Greef, 2014; Gunderson, 2009; Nunan, 2015; Prasad, Maarof & Yamat, 2016; Shin & Crandall, 2019). The models include bottom-up, top-down and the combination of bottom-up and top-

down models. The bottom-up reading model, also known as the skilled model (Gunderson, 2009), was proposed by Gough (1972) and is regarded as a significant model that was framed during the era of information-processing. The model "portrays processing in reading as proceeding in serial fashion, from letter to sound, to words, to meaning" (Liu, 2010, p. 154). In this model, the activity of reading is directed by written text and begins from components to the whole (Boothe & Walter, 1999). Early readers create meaning from the structural units of language, including letters, words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Texts are processed into phonemic units which signify lexical definition and are created in a linear way (Hudson, 2007). The process incorporates i) eye fixation, ii) letter identification, iii) phonological representation, iv) understanding of words serially from left to right, and v) absorption of visual stimuli (Hamed, 2016, p. 25). The model reflects that reading activity involves a sequence of steps that progresses in a set order, beginning with "building phonemic awareness, which helps discriminate sounds in English, and then moving on to learning the relationship between the sounds and letters in order to decode words" (Shin & Crandall, 2019, p. 189). Meanings start from individual letters which are then constructed together into words, sentences so as ultimately to deliver significant meanings (Adams, 1990). Educators who utilise this approach in the classroom concentrate on building phoneme and word recognition in order to lead the students towards an understanding of meaning (Brown, 2007). In this model, it is believed that learning to read demands understanding that speech sounds are represented by print which is considered as a code (Macmillan, 1997). This is the underpinning of the phonics approach.

4. Phonics

Phonics instruction is one of the major reading approaches that are applied by teachers in the ESL classroom (Hakimi, Abdorahimzadeh & Kargar, 2014; Nunan, 2015) which is derived from the bottom-up reading model. This explicit approach is recommended by many practitioners as a beneficial method to teach reading to young English learners (Dubeck, Jukes & Okello, 2012; Shin & Crandall, 2019). Phonics can be defined as "a system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations" (Adams, 1990, p. 50). Phonics is widely utilised in reading classrooms because "awareness of speech sounds play an important role in reading development" (Gersten & Geva, 2003, p. 2003). Researchers also believe that phonological awareness is linked to reading achievement because "writing systems directly represent phonology" and "the segmental units in spoken sounds become better represented because the symbols are visual representations of phonological units" (Nag & Snowling, 2012, p. 17). Phonics instruction facilitates children to recognise, spell and read the words. Dubeck et al. (2012) argue that students who do not grasp the concept of the relationship between sounds and letters will probably struggle in reading. Nunan (2015, p. 64) demonstrated how phonics works through the example of the word 'cat'. The model begins with "matching individual letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sound and then blending these together to form words" (Nunan, 2015, p. 64). So, with 'cat', one needs to sound out each letter in the word 'individually, 'c', 'a' and 't' and then blend those sounds to construct the word.

Through this approach, students who learn English as a second language are able to acquire phonological awareness as quickly as first language users if suitable instructions are provided (Gersten & Geva, 2003). A study was undertaken in Malaysia to investigate the efficiency of phonics instructions to develop reading skills among ESL primary school struggling readers (Jamaludin, Alias, Khir, DeWitt & Kenayathula, 2016). The findings revealed that students' decoding and comprehension skills were enhanced after using the phonics method. Farokhbakht (2015) also revealed in her study that young EFL students in Iran who were exposed to phonics-based instruction had better reading achievement and higher motivations in ESL reading compared to students who were not exposed to this method.

Top-down Reading Model

The second model, the top-down approach, is also known as the whole language approach (Prasad, et al., 2016) and was proposed by Goodman (1976). In contrast to the bottom-up approach, this model involves the process in reverse, from the whole to the components. Phonics is not commonly considered as an element in this approach (Trepanier, 2009) because the aim is to "make sense of written language rather than sounding out the print" (Smith, 1994, p. 2). This model also focuses on the readers' roles in which the reader's reading objectives and expectations are taken into account (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Readers in the top-down approach are therefore not text-bound because pictures in the text and previous knowledge are deemed useful to attain meaning from the reading materials. Prior knowledge is also employed for readers to compare the currently-read text with what is previously known (Manzo and Manzo, 1995, p. 16). Smith (1994) also argued that to verify what is delivered from the text, readers sample the text rather than read each single word in the text. In this model, reading also involves the process of linking information in the text with the knowledge that readers bring to the reading action (Pardede, 2008). It short, it involves a dialogue between reader and text in which readers' background

knowledge is taken into account to create the meaning of the text (Tierney & Pearson, 1981). This model is also described as "a psycholinguistic guessing game [which] involves an interaction between thought and language… selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time" (Goodman, 1976, p. 127). The Look-and-Say or whole word, is a reading approach associated with the top-down model (Maddox & Feng, 2013; Nofiandari, 2016; Soler, 2016).

5. Look-and-Say Method

Apart from phonics, look-and say is another major approach that is employed in the ESL classroom (Nofiandari, 2016; Scott & Yterberg, 1990). Unlike phonics, which relies on letters and sounds, look-and-say is dependent on words and phrases. Look-and-say is also known as the whole language, whole word and sight word method (Maddox & Feng, 2013). This method is useful to teach young English readers through word recognition and memorisation (Scott & Yterberg, 1990). The method involves "teaching beginners to read by memorising and recognising whole words, rather than by associating letters with sounds" (Nofiandari, 2016, p. 19).

According to Nofiandari (2016), in the classroom practice, target words are shown to children and teachers sound the words out. Children then read after the teacher. The use of flashcards and pictures are necessary so that students can associate the words with their meaning. In order to make the method more effective, teachers can put the words into context. That is to say, to show how words are used in a sentence rather than teaching the words individually. For instance, teachers can describe pictures by using a sentence and reading it aloud to students while pointing to each word as the students read after the teacher.

Hakimi et al. (2014, p. 130) argues that look-and-say assists young ESL students to connect the "whole concepts in their mind with their symbolic representations in the form of whole words". Materials such as flash cards consisting of pictures and words that describe the picture can be useful for students too. The authors also suggested that children start the lesson by introducing everyday words that the children are used to.

Teachers can introduce a few new words every day. Several activities are suggested for use with the look-and-say method: for instance, word-picture matching, card object pointing and guessing games to support student recognition of a variety of words before a longer text reading activity takes place (Scott & Yterberg, 1990).

Nofiandari (2016) has illustrated a few advantages of using the look-and-say method. One such advantage is that the method is easily understood and practised because reading the whole word is more familiar to many parents than sounding out individual sounds. Students can also learn any words by using this method because not all words can be sounded out using phonics instruction. Studies by Budiana (2011), Nurnianti (2012) and Nofiandari (2016) conclude that the look-and-say method has successfully helped young ESL students improve their reading development.

6. Interactive Reading Model

The interactive reading model is the third reading model explained by Shin & Crandall (2019). Chall (1967), author of *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, sought to cut through the debate between bottom-up (phonics) and top-down (whole word) approaches to teaching reading to young students by combining the two into a single approach (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon & Duffy-Hester, 1998). This model is referred to, variously, as balanced reading instructions (Gunderson, 2009), the balanced literacy approach (Shin & Crandall, 2019) or the interactive reading model (Nunan, 2015).

According to Gunderson (2009), the label 'balanced reading' was established in the mid-1990s by researchers who understood that characteristics of both phonics and whole-language instructions were useful to learners. Present day academics recommend utilising an interactive reading model that suggests readers employ both bottom-up and top-down processing skills at the same time during the reading process in learning second languages (Shin & Crandall, 2019). Such a process employs both schematic knowledge and decoding skills at the level of the letter or word to understand text (Herrera, Perez & Escamilla, 2015). The approach has been suggested by many researchers and practitioners of ESL reading for young students (Hakimi et al., 2014; Pardede, 2008; Shin & Crandall, 2019) because it is believed to be the best way to facilitate young students to read successfully (e.g. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Hakimi et al., 2014) and assists in reducing reading difficulties (August & Shanahan, 2006). Teachers are advised "to be sure to take a balanced literacy approach that helps" young students develop both their "bottom-up and top-down processing skills" (Shin & Crandall, 2019, p. 190).

In the interactive model, both the bottom-up and the top-down processes should be happening at all stages at the same time. The reader may utilise the bottom-up process as a foundation to understand the words in a text

and then switch to the top-down process to accomplish higher-level understanding of the meaning (Zakaluk, 1996).

Hakimi et al. (2014) proposed that the interactive reading model should be utilised when teaching reading to young English learners in Iran. From their study, they discovered that the use of phonics and look-and-say techniques together improved the reading development of young students. Conversely, depending too much on one technique alone may cause problems for young ESL readers (Pardede, 2008). Another study, by Prasad et al. (2016), exploring teachers' opinions of the reading models used in the ESL reading classroom in Malaysia, revealed that the study participants recommended including the whole word approach (or look-and-say) alongside phonics so as to support young ESL students' reading development. Similar findings were reported by Apandi and Nor (2019) in their study; teachers of struggling ESL readers in Malaysian classrooms believed that the use of both phonics and whole words together serves to reinforce students' progress in reading.

7. Schema Theory

Besides the three reading models stated earlier, schema theory is another theory related to cognitive perspectives of reading. This theory is considered to be closely associated with the top-down reading model. In schema theory, both background knowledge and past knowledge about the formation of texts are deemed important to comprehend a text (Aebersold & Field, 1997). According to Pardede (2008), in schema theory, one's knowledge and past experiences related to the world is necessary to interpret text. Schemes are defined by Smith (1994) as the "extensive representations of more general patterns or regularities that occur in our experience" or our "pre-existent knowledge of the world" (Cook, 1989, p. 69). Mokotedi (2012) further explained that prior knowledge or existing ideas about the world kept in mental images are denoted as schema. Every one of us carries mental representations of typical circumstances that we have encountered in our heads (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). For example, "one's generic scheme of an airplane will allow him to make sense of an airplane he has not previously flown with" (Pardede, 2008, p. 7). In other words, one's previous experience will be associated with new experiences which may incorporate the knowledge of "objects, situations, and events as well as knowledge of procedures for retrieving, organising and interpreting information" (Kucer, 1987, p. 31). Besides that, it is also argued that "a reader comprehends a message when he is able to bring to mind a schema that gives account of the objects and events described in the message" (Anderson, 1994, p. 469). To understand, the process involves "activating or constructing a schema that provides a coherent explanation of objects and events mentioned in a discourse" (Anderson, 1994, p. 473). The interaction between old and new information is a process involved in comprehension (Anderson & Pearson, 1988, p. 38). Stott (2001) has claimed that, due to insufficient schema, some second language readers might have problems forming these relationships between background knowledge and text before, while and after reading. Enhancing schemata necessitates students to enhance new knowledge and add information to the present one. Schema therefore need to be constructed and stimulated throughout the process of reading (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Urquhart & Weir, 1998), which can be done by using multiple clues including pictures, book headlines or descriptions and having discussions with students that align with their cultural background so as to assist them process the text (Harmer, 2007; McDonough, 1995).

It is suggested that by dividing a lesson into three stages, pre-, while and post-reading, teachers can invent activities that help develop students' comprehension. Pre-reading activities aim to assist students to have the relevant schema and to identify students' prior knowledge. Among the recommended activities that can be utilised are: predicting the topic of the text; discussing the topic and introducing vocabularies relevant to the text, especially for new or difficult words; talking about the pictures; and modelling the right reading approach. (Caddy, 2015; Pardede, 2018). During reading, it is suggested that teachers model fluent reading, encourage students to read fluently, develop students' comprehension of the text by asking questions, encourage the use of new words and discuss about the text (Caddy, 2015). These activities aim to assist students to become active readers. In the post-reading stage, teachers are recommended to ask students to read particular sections or sentences fluently to respond to questions, and to ask students to talk about significant events and their personal views by including the new vocabularies they have learnt (Caddy, 2015).

8. Sociocultural Perspectives of Reading

Another perspective for looking at how children learn to read is from the sociocultural perspective. This view widens one's understanding of the reading process further than "linguistic skills to decode the printed page" and positions the process of reading "within a context that is bound by both cultural and social practices" (Shin & Crandall, 2019, p. 190).

9. Social Constructivist Theory

Social constructivist theory has been renowned in the study of sociocultural influence research related to reading (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000). Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, is regarded as the father of social constructivism (Yang & Wilson, 2006). The increasing influence of the social constructivism perspective on education in general, and on literacy studies in particular, has been palpable (Au, 1998; Azman, 2016). It is argued that studies of second and foreign language learning has also increasingly been framed by the social constructivist theory of learning (Yang & Wilson, 2006). Unlike behaviourism, which considers children to be passive learners who are knowledge receivers (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2000), social constructivist theory believes that knowledge is built in the children's minds and that the interpretation of the knowledge occurs subjectively (May, 2000). Social constructivism advocates one's own cognitive orientation (Poplin, 1995) or individual construction as being a meaning-maker in learning (Oldfather, West, White & Wilmarth, 1999). The fundamental idea of social constructivism is that human beings bring together their knowledge by actively participating in their learning (Schunk, 2008). As such, it is vital to understand, from their own perspectives, the experiences of students who go through reading activities or instructions. In addition, it is necessary to understand that knowledge construction occurs between individuals and social environments (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, the origins of students' knowledge are dependent on the interactions with their environments and other individuals before the internalisation process happens (Roth, 1999). Such an internalisation of the experience would lead to advanced thinking (Lawton, 2017) or cognitive growth (Wiggs, 2012).

A few highlights have been discussed within the framework of social constructivism in relation to students' learning. First, Vygotsky's (1978) ideas emphasise the cognitive process that happens within the cultural and social situation (Au, 1998; Cooper, 2017; Sivan, 1986). According to social constructivist theory, "knowledge is a social product, and learning is a social process" (Pritchard & Woolard, 2010 p. 9). Street (1995) further asserted that engaging with literacy is a social act right from the onset; in essence, "the development of literacy is shaped by the structure and organisation of the social situations in which that literacy is practised" (Blackledge, 2001, p. 56).

Students' skills and abilities are not seen as "original and constitutive realities, but rather as effects that have become gradually constituted through exchanges taking place in a multi-leveled, inter-relational context" (de Castro, 2013, p. 101). Students' social environments therefore play a big role in generating knowledge, in that interactions among social group members facilitate knowledge construction (Alawiyah, 2014; Amineh & Asl, 2015; Schunk, 2012). This is because it is believed that "understanding, significance, and meaning are developed in coordination with other human beings" (Amineh and Asl, 2015, p. 13). Vygotsky has further asserted that:

"[E]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

Learning is ultimately a social phenomenon that occurs within the environment that students belong to through communication with people or objects (Kim, 2001) and "the opportunities that learners have, impacts on how literacy is achieved" (Pillay, 2018, p. 35).

With regard to reading, "the social context affects when you read, what you read, where you read, who you read with, and why and how you read" (Wilson & Lianrui, 2007, p. 52). Since learning takes place with members of society and does not happen on an individual basis, what the students learn and how they make sense of knowledge is influenced by where and when they are learning (Yang & Wilson, 2006). As such, "a higher mental function, such as literacy, is an aspect of human behavior" that must be studied in the social, cultural and historical context within which it transpires, as advocated by Vygotsky (Au, 1998, p. 300). The importance of social context has also been underscored to facilitate an explanation of students' successes and failures in their literacy education (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Gun & Wyatt-Smith, 2011). This context includes the functions of family members, friends and teachers in facilitating learning which affects children's achievements (Moll, 1990; Ebrahimi, 2015). Moll (1990) has examined the role of this immediate social context in great detail, breaking that context down into the function of educators, friends, and family members in facilitating learning, the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom, and the arrangement of the structures within which students learn.

In respect to students' cognitive development, Vygotsky (1987) placed emphasis on two types of concepts, namely everyday concepts and scientific concepts. The first concept is obtained informally through daily life, while the second concept, which is also known as academic knowledge, is obtained formally through school experience. Crucially, both concepts work to develop each other. It has been argued that studies which employ

social constructivism as a framework seek to restructure the literacy learning experiences at school to facilitate students in attaining academic knowledge so that the academic knowledge that children are expected to acquire is built up from everyday concepts or personal experiences (Au, 1998). Similarly, this connection works also in the opposite direction, namely that "students may gain insights into their own lives through the application of academic knowledge" in their daily life (Au, 1998, p. 300).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that assists students' cognitive functions is another important element in social constructivism. According to Vygotsky, ZPD is the "difference between the child's actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 209). Pritchard and Woolard (2010) further detailed ZPD as the:

level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. . . What children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone (pp. 14-15).

The ZPD explains the concept of individual learning, with and without support form a more knowledgeable person. It has been argued that students' level of thinking is enhanced through social interactions. Students will make progress if they are facilitated to advance just beyond their current level of knowledge (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010).

Scaffolding is a concept closely associated with ZPD in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Yang & Wilson, 2006). Scaffolding is likened to a structure that is erected to hold up a partially constructed building. Once the building has enough strength, the supporting structure can be taken away. Vygotsky (1978) referred to scaffolding as the assistance offered by other people such as parents, teachers, friends and reference sources like dictionaries. Such types of support may allow students to achieve more in the learning process (Yang & Wilson, 2006).

Although no strong indicators are understood with respect to motivation in social constructivist theory, the question of what motivates learning has been observed to be well-matched with the theory (Sivan, 1986; Au, 1998). One of the associations cited by Sivan (1986, p. 216) was a "discussion of context and cultural issues that influence motivation and how motivation is shown". In so far as the social constructivist perspectives directs researchers to explore the ways in which culture influences individuals' opinions, emotions and actions, motivation may also be perceived as a cultural construction (Sivan, 1986). From that basis, young students' motivations are principally influenced by people concerned in or connected to their English learning, including parents, teachers and friends, and learning in the classroom setting, such as learning activities and teaching instructions or other related factors (Harmer, 2007; Li, Han & Gao, 2019).

10. Conclusion

This paper explains a number of theories of second language reading from a cognitivist perspective and sociocultural perspective. From a cognitivist perspective of reading, Bottom-up Reading Model and Top-down Reading Model are elaborated whereas the sociocultural perspective of reading highlights on social constructivism. It is important for educators to understand the theories which explain the nature of learning to read for a better instructional practices in the ESL reading classroom.

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