

# Models of Reading and the ESOL Student: Implications and Limitations

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*Models of the reading process are models of an ideal reader reading: they tell us what such a reader does. By comparing how our real students do to a model, we can develop a much clearer sense of what our students' needs are and attempt to address these needs in class. For ESOL reading teachers, like other reading teachers, these models therefore have direct implications for teaching, though such models tell us nothing at all about other important aspects of reading.*

## Implications

Currently popular 'interactive' models suggest that the most successful readers are both skillful 'bottom-up' processors of texts-- they can convert the language on the page into the information it represents both rapidly and accurately-- and skillful 'top-down' processors-- they can relate this new information to the relevant knowledge they already have to construct a plausible meaning for the text. These models also tell us that successful readers do these two things simultaneously: they decode and interpret as they read. As they become more proficient in the former, eventually achieving automaticity, they can devote more attention to the latter, in what is technically called parallel processing. For teachers, the obvious message in this is that students who have problems with either kind of processing, or with both, will have trouble reading.

For ESOL readers, these problems are compounded at the decoding -- bottom-up -- level by their limited knowledge of the language. As a general rule, the more students read in their native languages, the more likely they are to become proficient readers of English, since good reading habits readily transfer across languages, but, as Clarke (1978) has pointed out, insufficient language skills can "short-circuit" this transfer. If the text contains a great many words or grammatical constructions these readers cannot decode, they will have trouble recovering the information contained in the language of the text and, in struggling to do so, will be prevented from engaging in efficient top-down processing. At the interpretive-- top-down-- level, even when working with texts they can decode, such students may lack the relevant background knowledge-- schemata-- on the subject of the text, American history or sports, for example, knowledge the writer has taken for granted. Or, they may have conflicting schemata based on different experiences and values. Thus even if they can successfully determine what the text says, they may be unable to determine what it means, or may simply misread it.

In teaching reading to ESOL students, we must therefore take great care in choosing the texts we ask them to read, with respect to both the language and the content of those texts, and we must also take great care to provide these students with both the language and the knowledge of the content they will need to make sense of any text assigned. Of course, this is easier said than done. Texts which are interesting to adults, relevant to their lives, and written in simple English are hard to find (but see Rosow, 1996; Brown, 1994 and 1988; and Mikulecky, 1990, for suggestions). One way of dealing with this problem is to develop effective pre-reading class activities to introduce new texts to ESOL readers -- to bridge the gap between what the students know and what they will need to know to read assigned texts successfully. We can also teach our students various strategies to facilitate both their bottom-up and top-down processing. For bottom-up processing, do activities that help students learn to read in larger chunks of text, and thus to break away from ineffective, and wearisome, word-by-word decoding (see Mikulecky & Jeffries, 1996, pp. 205-274, for activities). For top-down processing, think-before-you-read activities can enhance comprehension of the text as a whole by requiring students to think about the probable content of a text and to ask themselves what questions they will likely find answers to in that text (see Mikulecky & Jeffries, 1996, pp. 34-48, for activities).

## **Limitations**

As useful as models of reading are in helping to shape teaching practices, they have their limitations. Models of reading deal with reading as a psycholinguistic process, which of course it is, but reading is also, and just as importantly, a form of sociocultural behavior which people choose, or choose not, to engage in, with major consequences for their ultimate development as readers-- an area of concern for reading teachers to which models of reading have little to contribute. The major implication of this dimension of reading for the instruction is that just as we should do whatever we can to facilitate our students' text processing, we should also do whatever we can to motivate students to read, in quantity, whatever they need or would like to read.

As Frank Smith (1988) has argued, becoming a reader in any language means joining the people who read in that language, much as someone might join a club -- in this case, what Smith calls "the literacy club"-- devoted to some activity that he or she enjoys and would like to engage in. If this is so, then we should think of our classrooms as mini-literacy clubs where students not only learn how to read better but actually engage in a good deal of reading. Here again, ESOL students present special problems. Unlike native speakers, they have not been exposed to U.S. literacy practices and have, conversely -- if they are literate in their own languages -- been members of different literacy clubs in which people may read different kinds of texts in different ways for different purposes -- texts considered worthy of reverence, for example, like *The Koran* or *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*, which students may be expected to memorize. They will, in other words, have their own reading histories, ranging from not reading in their native languages to reading a great deal but having little knowledge of the texts they will have to read, or may want to read, in English, and the ways in which we approach these texts. Thus a very large part of the ESOL reading teacher's job is to introduce these students to the kinds of materials we read in English and the uses we typically make of them-- from an application for a driver's license, to academic textbooks, to newspapers, magazines, and popular novels. Teachers must welcome students into the large and complex literacy club of those who read in English, and to do so at a level that makes sense for the particular students.

Just as students need to read rapidly and accurately, they also need to read extensively, and many current programs have been primarily designed to address this and have achieved some success in doing so (see Krashen, 1993, for examples and discussion). The question of how to motivate readers to read in sufficient quantity is certainly a sticky one, and the answer probably varies from class to class (see *Learning to Love Reading*, by Donna Earl). A good place for us to begin is to project our own love for reading by discussing what we are reading ourselves, why it interests us, how it relates to our everyday lives, perhaps even reading a few selected excerpts -- in short, treating the students as fellow readers -- then inviting them to reciprocate.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, these two practical pursuits -- facilitating the students' text processing, to which models of reading can make a major contribution, and motivating them to read in quantity by helping them to join our literacy club -- constitute the major part of any reading teacher's job. But teachers of reading in ESOL must be especially attuned to students' language problems, to mismatches in any given text between the writer's and the students' background knowledge, and to the problem of introducing students to materials these students might need or want to read in English and the uses we normally make of these materials.

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