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Learning to Read in a Second Language: A Window on the Language Acquisition Process*

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In this paper I should like to discuss the influence of the stage of L2 language development on the learning to read process. My interest, as a teacher as much as a researcher, is in the kinds of resources drawn on by L2 learners in learning to read in English; also in trying to account for some of the difficulties which apparently simple reading texts may provoke for such learners. My aim is to show that difficulties encountered by L2 learners in reading should not be perceived as deficiencies in the learner; rather they can be exploited as an opportunity for both learner and teacher to react to and reflect on some of the features of written English texts, in particular the relationship between written and spoken language modes.

One way in which difficulties are made apparent is through the occurrence of learner miscues. A miscue is defined by Goodman (1973) as "an actual observed response in oral reading which does not match the expected response", the expected response being the print on the page. Goodman (1969) proposed that readers make use of three cuing systems simultaneously, namely graphophonic, syntactic and semantic. These cuing systems reflect three levels of language inherent in all texts. That is, all texts consist of actual physical marks on the page, structure or grammar carried by morphemes, function words and word order, and meaning carried by both content items and grammatical items. More recently interest has centred on a fourth level of language and a fourth cuing system, namely pragmatic (cf. Rigg 1986), which involves our drawing on certain kinds of knowledge of the world, often culture-specific, and which for an experienced reader would also include knowledge of the world of texts, for instance a knowledge of the typical structure and content of certain genres.

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Second language learners may have difficulty with all these levels, because of a mismatch between the text's language and assumed knowledge of the world and the learner's own language and knowledge systems.

Inherent in the concept of textual cues and learner miscues are two major principles. Firstly, miscues should not be regarded negatively. All learner readers and all experienced readers miscue. Secondly, learner reading behaviour is not random. Just as we can uncover patterning to L2 learners' oral language development, through error analysis for example, so miscue analysis can reveal a patterning in L2 reading behaviour.

In this paper I shall use as illustrative data, samples of the language and reading behaviour of one young adult learner, new to both English and to literacy at the start of her instruction. The teaching situation described was one to one with a teacher, i.e. myself. What the one-to-one reading aloud situation offers, as well as a chance for teacher and learner to read together and talk about stories in an interaction focussed around a particular text, is also an opportunity to observe and record how the learner tackles particular features of written English texts. The reading aloud activity is thus potentially a window not only on the learning to read process (as Goodman 1973 describes it) but also on the language acquisition process.

A dilemma for ESL teachers in considering the source of unexpected difficulty with apparently simple items of language is whether one is talking of a reading problem or a language problem. In fact, the two are necessarily interlinked if one has a view of reading as a process which essentially involves using one's language competence to predict structural, semantic and pragmatic features of texts. If the learner is unable to predict even basic structures in the second language because control of the English language system is still weak, reading, that is reading for sense, will not take place. What may occur is mechanical decoding, especially with L2 learners who are literate in their L1 and have therefore learnt or acquired decoding skills which may equip them to decode English, without, however, necessarily understanding what they read. It is frequently observed that ESL learners often have highly developed graphophonic skills (cf. Rigg 1986). For this reason learners new to literacy as well as to English and not taught through decoding methods of reading instruction, are interesting to observe. Points of special interest are not only the nature of miscues but comments made by the learner herself. In the shared reading situation a learner's thinking aloud through a text can shed light on both her expectations of texts and key features of the texts themselves, which may be "taken for granted" by

more experienced readers.

One should add, moreover, that the oral reading event not only offers insights into the learner's existing language and reading competence but is potentially a language learning activity, in the sense that an opportunity is offered the learner to discover more about English because certain linguistic features are more salient and therefore observable in written than in typical oral forms of the language. As Holdaway (1986) observes, "spoken words cannot be held in front of attention, cannot be studied, cannot be pointed to in any direct way".

One way, then, in which metalinguistic awareness can be developed is through access to written texts which allows learners to focus attention on (Simons and Murphy 1986:193) "the phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels of language, to notice anomalies at these different linguistic levels and to comment on them". Simons and Murphy are particularly interested in phonological awareness. My interest in this paper is in ways in which learners' awareness of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features may be enhanced through interacting with written language, with the teacher on hand to confirm or disconfirm learners' hypotheses.

Subject and Data Collection

Amna was a nineteen year old Pakistani woman who had been in England for about one year at the start of instruction. She had not in that time, however, had much contact with English speaking people and was a near beginner to English in September 1985. She could not read in her mother tongue, Urdu, and had no experience of school in Pakistan before arriving at the local college of further education where I taught her. She was also a total beginner to reading in English at the start of our lessons.

At our college, the Havelock Centre in Southall, West London, Amna was a full time student acquiring English in both classroom and naturalistic contexts, as English tended to be the peer group language, along with Punjabi, the main community language. Nearly all the students were bilingual, many multilingual, and most of the classroom contact was of the English immersion type (as described by Ellis 1985) where focus is on meaning in L2 medium subject lessons, such as Maths or Science, with few interactions focussed on form.

Amna was a particularly interesting learner in that she was ready to

take the initiative in learning situations. She was a learner who, as Rivers (this volume) describes it, "seeks opportunities to communicate". Our sharing of texts offered an opportunity for one to one interaction which Amna was eager to take advantage of. While much of our talk related the experiences described in the story to our own, Amna continually commented on the structure as well as the content of the texts we read together. Moreover, these comments were largely unsolicited by me. It is important that the conversation around texts allows the learner an "initiating role" as Dombey (1983), talking of child/adult interaction around a text, describes it. I should add that Amna herself asked for extra lessons in reading, which provided the opportunity for this study.

I recorded nearly all the reading and conversation sessions between myself and Amna over a period of 17 months in all. I also kept notes. However, most of the recordings took place within an eight month period of more regular weekly one-to-one reading sessions. I have selected for analysis eleven of these hour-long sessions recorded at monthly intervals over a period of one year from February 17, 1986 to February 18, 1987. It includes both reading aloud data, a small amount of elicited classroom language data and also informal spontaneous conversation between teacher and learner which occasionally also included contributions from other learners in a small group situation.

The Texts

Amna and the other students in the group usually selected texts themselves from a number of books made available to them. There was also some language experience work where texts were composed jointly by the group and then read back. While language experience approaches are likely to play a major role in the literacy classroom, the experience of print in commercially produced books and the achievement of completing even a simple book, with however much support, is also important. There then arises the question of which books. It is difficult to find books which are both predictably structured and culturally accessible and appropriate for adult L2 learners. In our case, teacher/learner consultation would result in a range of text types or genres being selected and the four samples given here in the appendix are representative of these.

1. *The Empty House* is part of a reading scheme, *One, Two, Three and Away.*
2. *The Sly Fox and Little Red Hen* is a simplified folk tale and forms part of the supplementary books in the *Ladybird* reading scheme.
3. *A Woman on her Own* and 4. *Doing up my Flat* are books produced by adult learners for other adult learners in an adult literacy scheme.

It will be noted that these texts were produced with different kinds of readers in mind, though none of them can be said to be "natural" texts if by "natural" one means written by authors to entertain, inform or persuade, rather than for broadly educational purposes. The first is part of a widely used reading scheme in Britain and has a controlled vocabulary; *The Sly Fox and the Little Red Hen*, though recognisably part of the *Look and Say Ladybird* books, is designed to be read by adults to small children. *A Woman on her Own* and *Doing up my Flat* have been produced by adult learners for other adult readers on a "language experience" model. This means students have told their personal stories to a literacy tutor who acted as scribe. These stories have subsequently been produced in book form.

Though no explicit rationale is given for the selection and grading of language items, the texts suggest the operation of certain principles. The reading scheme book has a controlled vocabulary, with a calculated repetition of items; the folk tale accommodates a richer vocabulary base than the actual reading scheme books, though it is still structurally and rhetorically simpler than most authentic childrens' stories. In the last two "adult" books there is a shift of genre to autobiography so that the writer is the protagonist. The vocabulary is not controlled, on the language experience principle of keeping as close to the narrator's original spoken version as possible. Content words such as "depressed" and "frightened" are anyway both predictable in the context and readily explained by a literacy tutor if necessary. What possibly is not considered is that the selection of this particular genre may involve stylistic choices which initially create difficulty for early readers.

The Study

From the selected books, I took three examples of textual features which in Amna's oral rendering provoked:

non-attempt or hesitation;

a miscue or miscues;
comment about the particular textual feature.

All these responses are potentially significant in that they can offer useful insights into, firstly the stage of second language development, secondly, developing reading strategies, thirdly developing metalinguistic awareness and finally areas of textual difficulty for L2 learners in particular but, arguably, for all learner readers.

I selected for focus two classes of grammatical items, morpheme and pronoun, and from these groups, the *-ed* morpheme and the personal pronouns *they* and *you*. As soon as learner readers begin encountering simple continuous narrative texts they will need to recognise the function of the *-ed* morpheme in marking past tense; pronouns are another of the most frequent items in any spoken or written text and an understanding of the way they give text cohesion is crucial to the comprehension of even the simplest of written texts. As Goodman (1984) points out, "the language requires the use of pronouns where the referents for noun phrases are established in the text or situational context". Although pronouns perform grammatical functions and are therefore part of syntax they are also part of the semantic system. Goodman (1983) notes: "The specific reference of a particular pronoun can only be determined from the total semantic and pragmatic context". It will be seen that in responding to pronouns in context Amna needs to bring both semantic and pragmatic judgements into play.

It is important to stress that what is at issue is not the manner in which words may be understood out of context (though many teaching approaches and materials continue to assume that difficulty lies at the word level); rather it is the learner's response to the items in context and the fact that in Amna's case this is typically variable. In the first case, that of the response to the *-ed* morpheme, this is because of a developing language competence and language awareness in the learner; in the second case, that of the response to *they* and *you* in particular contexts, this is because of the variable meaning, both propositional and pragmatic, which the items take on in the context of the texts. The "problems" then reside neither in the text nor in the learner, but in the interaction between text and learner.

1. *Past Tense -ed Morpheme*

The transcripts of Amna's spoken language show a development from the base form of the verb for simple past meaning, e.g. *he go r ad* "he went

down the road" and *I finish this page* "I finished this page" with an increasing number of irregular past tense forms gradually being added (the progression being: *saw — went — lost — took — came — read*). As might be expected, the irregular past tense forms met in texts created little or no difficulty and were not miscued. The regular *-ed* forms were very slow to emerge in Amna's spontaneous oral production (partly because, as Ellis 1985 notes, past time reference is not required very much in communicative classroom speech). Only after seven months of fulltime classes at Havelock, which included our weekly one-to-one hour of reading, did I notice a clear use of past tense *-ed* in *College man maybe he locked all* "Maybe the college man, i.e. the caretaker, locked everything". And in all the data transcribed, I found only one other instance, namely on the last occasion when we had an extended conversation together — *I stayed to my sister house* "I stayed at my sister's house".

During the first recording of a reading lesson transcribed in detail on February 17, 1986 and indeed the first time a full narrative in past tense was attempted, Amna read "looked" as "look — it", isolating the *-ed* morpheme and then querying with "Miss?" (cf. Appendix 1, line 7). On the same occasion she totally failed to read other *-ed* forms, such as "lived" and "stopped". There appeared, that is, to be no understanding initially of the grammatical function of the *-ed* morpheme. However, after another similar rendering of the item in the same text as "look — it" (Appendix 1, line 13) on the next occurrence of the word "looked", Amna rendered the text as follows: *Ramu look up it the top window* "Ramu looked up at the top window" (Appendix 1, line 17). Moreover, she continued thus: *Something white fly across the window* "Something white flew across the window" (Appendix 1, line 19). This rendering clearly reflected Amna's current interlanguage. And the shift into interlanguage away from attempts at decoding marks on the page — or attempting to — was an encouraging sign that Amna was reading for meaning. For, as observed in Wallace (1988), it tends to be at times of greater fluency and confidence that L2 learners render texts directly in their interlanguage, much as native speaking non-standard readers do in the case of non-standard dialects.

However, it must of course be emphasised that learners' ability to read and make sense of structures is in advance of their own productive use of them in spontaneous face-to-face situations. And the next past tense narrative text we read nearly two months later seemed to indicate that Amna was now competent to understand the function of the past tense *-ed* morpheme

though this was still absent from her own spoken English production. On this occasion Amna read the regular past tense forms of the text with no hesitation, so "walked", "jumped", "slipped" and "picked" were read with little or no difficulty as "wokt", "jumpt", "slipt" and "pikt" and there was no attempt to mark off the *-ed* morpheme.

Two weeks later, there seemed to be a further development in the process of conceptualising about the *-ed* feature. Again this was indicated by departures from the text. While most of the *-ed* forms in the text were again read with no difficulty (e.g. "lived", "worked", "picked" and "looked", with the *-ed* morpheme in "lived" being differentiated from that in the other three words to give the response "livd") there were two other kinds of responses: firstly, interlanguage forms were occasionally used along with the standard forms, the interlanguage form acting as a gloss, e.g., *None of the sly young fox's plans worked — work*. Also of interest was a new phenomenon, namely overgeneralisation (cf. Appendix 2). Amna began to read *He picked up a bag* ... at which point I provided the missing and almost certainly unknown word *slung*. Amna repeated it and then chose to retrace the text to read: *He picked up a bag and slunged it* ... (Appendix 2, line 4). A little earlier in the same text she read *he didn't live* as *he did -ent — didn't lived*. Her reading behaviour here thus appeared to mirror a stage observable in more advanced L2 learners' oral language development, but not so far with Amna.

In short, one notes, in Amna's case, varying kinds of responses to *-ed* marking for past time in texts i.e.

1. non-recognition of the grammatical form;
2. direct rendering in the text version;
3. overgeneralising the *-ed* marker;
4. rendering in text version with a gloss in interlanguage
5. direct rendering in interlanguage.

5, as already suggested, tends to characterise growing confidence and fluency in early L2 learner readers. 2 and 3 together suggest a developing understanding of how past is marked in written texts. And 4, most interestingly perhaps, is indicative of an awareness of alternates, of an equivalence of meaning between the learner's typical interlanguage version and the standard form of the text. For finally what is of interest is not recognition of form as such but a growing awareness of how form relates to meaning. This is even more apparent in the second example of a textual feature which I shall consider next.

2. *The Pronoun "They"*

One of the items which created difficulty for Amna was the pronoun *they* in the text extracted in Appendix 3. Amna generally had some difficulty with this particular pronoun, either not attempting it at all or, occasionally, rendering it as *they're* (possibly having understood this as a chunk from the frequent occurrence in oral language of the contracted form, e.g. *they're outside*). The problem may be attributable to any one or all of several factors. Firstly, I nowhere noted in my data any use of *they* in either Amna's spontaneous speech or elicited classroom language. Where Amna used third person plural anaphoric reference (noted only six times in the data) she used *he*, e.g. *You know my nephew and niece. He told me you going Pakistan* "You know my nephew and niece. They told me that I (i.e. Amna) was going to Pakistan". Moreover, for the impersonal meaning of *they* Amna used *somebody*, e.g. *Somebody no give her time* "They don't give her time".

A second factor is that she was more familiar with *they* in situational uses than in referring uses (cf. Appendix 3, lines 38-40). That is, in the kind of spoken face-to-face interaction with which Amna was familiar, there is more use of exophoric reference than of endophoric reference, exophoric reference being reference which is outside the confines of the text but present in the situation (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Simons and Murphy (1986:190) suggest that intratextual or endophoric reference may create difficulty for early readers. They put it thus:

> The use of deictic items in written text [among which they include referring pronouns] requires different processing strategies of children whose language experiences are mainly oral and who are accustomed to using the physical and temporal situations to anchor deictic items.

I would argue that illiterate adults such as Amna may initially have similar difficulties with endophoric reference, especially where it is remote in the text.

However, the particular difficulty with this text is that *they* neither refers back in the text to specific characters in the story nor to accompanying pictures. Nor indeed is *they* an impersonal use as in *they say he beats his wife*. Here *they* refers to a class, i.e. "all women on their own", an abstract concept not representable through illustration. And Amna, like all early readers, was still heavily dependent on pictures to anchor reference items which occur in the text. Dombey (1983) notes how "the pictures provide

continued deictic support for the child". And the same is likely to be true for the adult learner new to literacy.

The difficulty, in short, was a conceptual one, due to Amna's as yet limited awareness of how items refer in English, which in turn was partly due to her limited access to written texts where such uses of reference are highlighted. Certainly Amna expected texts to have cohesion and her comments (cf. Appendix 3, lines 19, 21 and 26) show her searching the text for referents for *they*. However, she expected reference to be tied closely to the pictures or immediate text, and it is likely that, initially at least, she understood "women on their own" as "a woman on her own", that is the individual woman shown in the pictures who is also the story teller in this first person narrative. The case of *they* suggests that it is not so much linguistic forms which create difficulty for Amna, but the way in which form relates to meaning, and the fact that this relationship is not one to one.

3. *The Pronoun "You"*

My third example of text-related difficulty is illustrated by the pronoun *you* in the text given in Appendix 4. Here the difficulty seems to be not so much a syntactic/semantic one as a pragmatic one. It was not the propositional meaning but the function of *you* which perplexed Amna. She had never before encountered this exophoric use of *you* in a written text and as a learner who looked to make sense of texts she sought clarification. Paradoxically, this interpersonal use where the addressee (here, the reader) is directly addressed is like speaking, where, of course, the interpersonal use of the second person pronoun would be very familiar to Amna. However, in most written genres the writer does not directly address the reader. For instance, in folk or fairy tales we typically get this kind of exchange:

> What big eyes you have Grandma!
> All the better to see you with.

The reference is endophoric and it was this use of second person reference in written texts, usually supported by an illustration of two characters, which Amna had become familiar with. She had no difficulty with the pronoun in: "*Did you see that*", *cried Peter* (cf. Appendix 1, line 11). However, the direct address from the writer, who is also the narrator in this first person autobiography, to the reader confused Amna, not yet familiar with the genre of first person true-life narratives which in mode may be close to

"speaking written down". In other words, as an inexperienced reader, she was as yet unfamiliar with the different ways language may function in pragmatically different types of texts.

Amna's Comments on Texts

Amna's comments suggest that it is not only what learners do in response to texts, as evidenced by miscues for instance, which is of interest but what they say; the language they themselves use to talk about the language of the text. Firstly, such comments may show the second language learner verbally checking out differences between her own current interlanguage and the language of the text. So, for example, Amna who had never herself previously used the *do* auxiliary to form past tense interrogatives, on meeting this feature in written texts, commented thus:

> "Did you" mean past?
> "Did you sleep" means you sleep or no?

Secondly, the comments may throw light on the actual process of developing a greater understanding of written language. For instance, shortly after our conversation centering on the pronoun *they* Amna commented, sotto voce and more to herself than to me, as follows on this text extract later on in the same story:

> I go home and get a cup of tea.
> I sit down and drink it.
> Why not write here "tea"? Why write "it"? Short way. "It" means "tea".

In short, the kinds of comments and queries made by Amna on the forms and related meanings of written English reveal her checking out her hypotheses about the nature of English, using the written data as evidence and the teacher as a resource to confirm or disconfirm. They also reveal her interacting with the text, drawing on her as yet limited experience of other written texts, as well as her greater experience of spoken forms of English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the one-to-one reading event offers the opportunity not merely to help develop the learner's reading strategies but to gain insights, through the way print is tackled, into the learner's current interlanguage development (not always accessible to teacher observation from informal or even more formal classroom contact). More importantly, the learner herself, if encouraged to explore and comment on textual, as well as topic, features, is advantaged in several ways. Firstly, access to written language, more stable, consistent and fully structured than typical day-to-day spoken language, visible as marks on the page and therefore more readily talked about, allows the learner the opportunity to develop an awareness of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of texts. Secondly, she is offered access to her own second language development through the opportunity to "stand back" and reflect on areas of difference between her own typical English usage and the way meaning is conveyed in written English. Arguably both learner language and language awareness is extended through the process, however halting and teacher supported, by which L2 learners render aloud simple texts in the second language.

Appendices

Texts referred to in the Appendices:

1. *One Two Three and Away*: *The Empty House* by Sheila McCullagh.
2. *Ladybird*: *The Sly Fox* and *The Little Red Hen* by Vera Southgate.
3. *Gatehouse*: *A Woman on her Own* by Margaret Fulcher.
4. *Centerprise*: *Doing my Flat Up* by Dalcy Edwards.

Notes on the transcription

^	indicates an intervention from the teacher at this point
...	indicates a hesitation
-	indicates a immediate self-correction or repetition
capitals	indicates that a word or phrase is provided by the teacher
word italicised	indicates a student's response or comment
---	indicates that a word is omitted
.....	indicates that a portion of transcription is left out