Language and Inter-Cultural Communication Symposium Part 2

Working proposal for a research project

Dr Eric Bouvet

Foreign Language reading and cultural problem-solving

1. Introduction

The purpose of this project is to pursue my investigation of the Foreign Language (FL) reader’s problem-solving behaviour. Having examined the conditions of implementation of reading strategies associated with lexical and syntactical difficulties, I now propose to study how Anglo-Australian university language students deal with unfamiliar cultural events featured in written texts prescribed for the French literature class.

While a number of empirical studies have looked at the effect of cultural knowledge on reading comprehension, it appears that little research has been carried out in relation to how FL readers identify problematic cultural elements and attempt to solve comprehension problems that may be associated with those unfamiliar elements.

The main objective of the project I propose to undertake in the context of Language and Intercultural Communication research is therefore to gain an understanding of the type and nature of the strategies implemented by FL readers to identify and attempt to overcome cultural unfamiliarity featured in written texts. A corollary objective is to observe how FL linguistic proficiency may influence the perception and apprehension of cultural difficulties from a strategic point of view.

Beyond the strict examination of learners’ strategic approach to cultural problem-solving, the processes of construction of cultural coherence in unfamiliar textual environments could also be examined. In other words, if FL reading may be described, at least in part, as an act of mediation between the learners’ cultural resources and the culturally unfamiliar, the conditions of learners’ engagement in the process of intercultural negotiation during reading could then be given consideration.

In the present exploratory work-in-progress paper, we will review the literature on reading strategy research and reader response to literary texts, we will outline the project’s theoretical rationale. As it stands, the ambition of this paper is to attempt to establish a research paradigm for the proposed project. The reader should bear in mind that this is by no mean a final, polished piece of research. Rather, this text should be regarded as a ‘first draft’, unfinished paper, containing a number of unresolved theoretical and methodological issues. In accordance with the aims of the LINC symposium, it is anticipated that this paper will form the basis of a discussion aiming to strengthen the project rationale and study design. Due to time constraints, issues of study design and data collection will only be briefly alluded to in this report. Details will be provided at the symposium.
2. Background

Overview of reading strategy research

Reading is a complex dynamic process that involves visual, cognitive, linguistic, semantic, affective, situational and social operations. Readers elaborate textual representations by bringing knowledge, experience and emotions to the text. The vectors of the elaboration of textual representations are reading strategies. Reading strategies that may be defined as a series of actions to construct text meaning (Garner, 1987), or as “a set of interdependent mental operations” which are “interchangeable” and “can be modified” in relation to the context in which they are used (Borkowski & Muthukrisna, 1992).

Strategies are commonly viewed as effective remedial actions used to solve a particular problem. However, strategies can also be called upon to help enhance learning or comprehension. They can be goal- or task-oriented and are features of an executive control structure that sets goals, provides the necessary resources, and allows comprehension control and regulation (see Kern’s (1992) model).

Strategies have been classified in terms of functionality in four main categories (Mcdonough, 1995, from Sarig, 1987):
- Technical aids (eg using a glossary)
- Clarification and simplification (eg paraphrasing)
- Coherence-detection (eg integrating background knowledge)
- Monitoring (eg identifying misunderstanding)

Since the 1970s an impressive number of L2/FL empirical studies have examined the use of reading strategies by language learners to process text. These studies, substantiating interactive models of L2 reading (ie Eskey, 1988) have demonstrated that readers attempt to make sense of text by overtly or covertly relating the language of the text to their knowledge-base by implementing reading strategies.

Reading strategies have been explored from several vantage points. Some studies have identified and compared the strategies used by proficient and non-proficient readers (Hosenfeld, 1977, 1984; Block, 1986, Anderson, 1991, Kletzien, 1991; Jiménez, Garcia & Pearson, 1996). Others studies have looked at the relationship between L1 and L2 use of strategies (Sarig, 1987; Barnett, 1988; Carrell, Paris and Liberto, 1989), and at the role of metacognition (Kern, 1994; Carell, 1989; Block, 1991; Schoonen, Hulstijn and Bosser, 1998). Some investigations have focused on the effect of text content and text structure on reading strategic behaviour (Pritchard, 1990, Kletzien, 1992), while others have investigated the relationship between gender and strategy use (Brantmeier, 2000), as well as between cultural background and strategy use (Pritchard, 1990). Recently some researchers have attempted to identify the strategic specificities of reading in hypertext mode (Anderson, 2003, for example). Despite the diversity of research methods used and the contexts in which
strategies have been investigated, a coherent picture has emerged from the body of L2/FL reading strategy research. Some of the key-findings are outlined below:

- Proficient L2/FL readers tend to be engaged in meaning-building and have a more global/top-down strategic orientation than less proficient L2/FL readers who tend to concentrate on low-level operations (Hosenfeld, 1984; Carrell, 1989).

- Proficient readers tend to use a higher total number of reading strategies (but not necessarily a wider range) than less proficient readers (Anderson, 1991).

- Although there is evidence of shared strategic patterns between readers of similar proficiency levels, important differences have been observed between individual readers (Sarig, 1987).

- There are no substantial differences in strategy use between male and female readers when they read the same texts. Strategic differences may arise when text topic is either male or female-oriented (Brantmeier, 2000).

- It is not enough to know about a particular strategy. Strategy use must be “orchestrated” to be efficient (Anderson, 1991)

- There is evidence of a threshold below which knowledge of reading strategies does not compensate for lack of linguistic knowledge (Alderson, 1984)

- Formal and content background knowledge affects the reading comprehension process and strategy use (Steffensen, 1987; Pritchard, 1990; Malik, 1995)

- Metacognitive strategy instruction enhance L2/FL reading (Carrell, Pharis and Liberto, 1989)

**Reading as problem-solving**

The interaction between the reader and the text is based on the interplay between three aspects: meaning construction processes, monitoring and evaluation. Predictions and hypotheses emerging from the reader’s progression through the text are stimulated by incoming semantic cues, syntactical cues and structural cues. If during smooth reading these processes maybe placed on the level of automaticity; in the context of non-expert L2/FL reading, however, learners must make a conscious effort to think about what they read. They must constantly evaluate textual semantic, syntactical and structural characteristics against what they know and identify potential problems that may impede comprehension. In doing so, they place themselves in problem-solving situations, which involve the implementation of a range of strategies to solve comprehension problems at word, sentence, paragraph and whole-text levels (e.g.
consulting an external resource, using contextual clues to guess at words, translating strings of words or visualising scenes, for example).

In a study comparing comprehension monitoring of L1 and L2 readers, Block (1992) demonstrated the existence of a regular problem-solving process operating across languages. She identified three phrases and six steps.

- **Evaluation phase:**
  1. problem recognition
  2. problem source identification

- **Action phase**
  3. strategic planning
  4. solution attempt

- **Checking phase**
  5. check
  6. revision

Block observed differences in monitoring across levels of proficiency. According to her study, poorer respondents tend to use the three phrases incompletely due to a lack of awareness of problems, or a lack of inclination to solve them. Efficient readers seem to have a better control of the reading process; this enables them to compensate, to some degree, for their lack of knowledge of the language.

As suggested by Pearson Cassanave (1988), problem-solving reading mode may be involve strategic behaviour occurring between a *triggering problem* and its *resolution* (or attempt at resolution), as shown in Figure 1. On each side of the problem-solving phase lies routine monitoring phases. So, monitoring during reading may be viewed as an alternation of routine monitoring strategies, problem valuation strategies and fix-up strategies.

**Figure 1:** Strategic behaviour in the reading process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine monitoring strategies</th>
<th>Evaluation and problem-solving strategies</th>
<th>Routine monitoring strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>--------------------------</strong> Trigger意義 <strong>------------------</strong> Resolution意義 <strong>------------------</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Pearson Cassanave, 1988, p. 290)

The evaluation and problem-solving strategies may be categorised as follows using Block’s (1992) framework (from Bouvet, 2002):

**Table 2: Classification of strategies associated with problem-solving**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. EVALUATION PHASE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identifying a problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- stating nature of a problem

### 2. Deciding on importance of a problem

- deciding a problem is important/unimportant
- changing plan

### II. ACTION PHASE

#### 3. Planning strategic action

- announcing type of action to be undertaken
- justifying action plan

#### 4. Implementing problem-solving strategies

##### a) Instrumental strategies

- skipping and ignoring problem
- reading on for clarification
- rereading problematic part silently
- rereading problematic part aloud
- slowing down reading speed
- increasing reading speed
- marking text for ulterior consultation
- using a dictionary
- step-by-step translating until next problem

##### b) Deductive strategies

- inferring meaning using morpho-syntactical clues
- inferring meaning using lexical recognition
- inferring meaning using contextual clues
- inferring forgotten meaning from memory

##### c) Cohesive strategies

- translating for coherence
- visualising a situation
- making a hypothesis about situation
- confirming a hypothesis
- disconfirming a hypothesis
- connecting problematic part with another section of text
- elaborating a macroframe
- making a summary
- identifying a theme
- relating a theme to the text
- refocusing concentration
- making comments on text’s characteristics

### III. CHECKING PHASE

#### 5. Evaluating the effectiveness of action

- commenting on the effectiveness of action taken
Reading as a transaction

The interactional psycholinguistic view of strategic reading presented above is compatible with the reader-response perspective, which describes reading (particularly literary reading fictional literary texts, which is the type of texts we will be concentrating on in the design section of this article) in terms of ‘experience’ and stresses the importance of the reader’s participatory role in the act of reading. This so-called transactional view is important because, beyond cognitive processes, it accounts for the readers’ textual engagement in terms of a dialogic system of voices, viewpoints and stances. In a pedagogically-oriented research context such as ours, it is essential to that reading behaviour not only be described in cognitive terms, but also be given a phenomenological perspective that includes reading as an textual experience. Such a multi-dimensional perspective has been advocated by Tomilson (2001).

The participatory role of readers is defined by Rosenblatt (1978, 1985) in her transactional theory of the literary work. She proposes two key concepts:

- the efferent transaction, which occurs when readers focus their attention on facts (this is mainly the case of non-literary reading);
- the aesthetic transaction, which occurs when readers focus on their “lived-through” experience of the literary work.

Rosenblatt views literary reading not as an object, but as an “event” (or experience) during which readers bring feelings, images, ideas and concepts drawn from their literary and linguistic knowledge as well as from their knowledge of the world, and synthesise them into a transactional experience. For Rosenblatt, there cannot be one correct and normative interpretation of a text because the reading transaction is the result of individual and circumstantial factors. Rosenblatt insists on the living nature of the transaction.

Another useful view of reading comparable to the concepts of efferent and aesthetic reading proposed by transactional theorists has been developed by Langer (1996) who proposes the concept of literary envisionment building developed as an explanation for the literary experience. Langer defines envisionments as “text-words in the mind” and also as “dynamic sets of related ideas, images, questions, disagreements, anticipations, arguments, and hunches that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking, or other experience when one gains, expresses, and shares thoughts and understanding” (p. 9). Envisionments may vary from one individual to the next and are not finite; they evolve and become enriched through the absorption of new ideas, concepts and experiences.

A compatible concept offered by Gadamer’s (2000) philosophical hermeneutics to explain textual comprehension is that of horizon (or ‘vantage point’) that provides a space for personal and societal dimensions. Gadamer’s view (summarised in Rees, 2003) is that comprehension is not just born from the known and familiar but also
from the confrontation with the ‘strange’ and the ‘different’. The reader’s attempt at understanding a text involves projecting the text from their own vantage point, through a process of question and answer (hermeneutical conversation) as soon as initial meaning of text emerges. When comprehension takes place there is fusion of horizons and creation of new perspectives.

The philosophical hermeneutic position outlined above is echoed by Kramsch’s (2002) social-semiotic perspective based on a social and dialogic process of meaning construction. For Kramsch learners enter a dialogue during which “each person tries to see the world through the other’s eyes without losing sight of himself or herself” (1993, p. 231).

In sum, it can be said from the psycholinguistic and transactional view-points presented above that the act of reading consists of the elaboration of an intricate system of processes (interactional perspective), voices (transactional perspective), horizons (hermeneutic perspective) born from the linguistic, cultural, social and discursive characteristics of the text, in such a way as to find resonance, outside the text, in the reader's personal knowledge and experience of the world. In other words, reading is not just about understanding words and phrases; it is also about experiencing the text from personal and societal perspectives, cognitively, affectively, linguistically and non-linguistically (Tomilson, 2001).

**L2/FL and cultural distance**

The issue of cultural distance (or cultural difference) and L2/FL reading has been addressed by a number of researchers. Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) suggest that reading should be studied in the context of schema theory. They claim that “reading comprehension depends crucially on the reader’s being able to relate information from the text to already existing background knowledge” (p. 562). Carrell (1983) and Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) make a distinction between formal schemata (knowledge of formal, rhetorical and organisational structure of texts) and content schemata (knowledge of situations and content areas of texts). Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) insist particularly on the importance of culture-specific content schemata in ESL reading which must be made available to the L2/FL reader in order to “minimize cultural conflicts and maximize comprehension” (p. 566).

One of the major differences between L1 and L2/FL reading concerns the cultural content of the text. While L1 readers can be quite familiar with the cultural content of most texts they read in their native language, L2/FL readers are often confronted with varying degrees of cultural distance. The socio-cultural dimension of reading was first treated by Fries (1945, 1963) who defined it as a component of meaning. In other words, comprehension is at its best when linguistic meaning is related to a socio-cultural framework. Carrell & Eisterhold (1983) argue that reading comprehension “may be culturally based and culturally biased” (p. 553).

In a cross-cultural experiment involving Americans and Indians, Steffensen & Joag-Dev (1984) also demonstrate that “comprehension is a function of cultural background knowledge” (p. 60). Importantly, they argue that learners lacking target cultural knowledge distorted meaning, creating interferences as a result, by simply
superimposing their own cultural attitudes and values onto the text in an attempt to be culturally coherent with their own experience. Steffensen & Joag-Dev conclude they investigation by saying that learners must be made aware of the cultural dimension of reading.

Subsequent studies focusing on cultural background knowledge have corroborated Steffensen & Joag-Dev’s (1984) findings: Droop & Verhoeven’s (1998) suggest that cultural background knowledge affects both comprehension and reading efficiency. In a study investigating the effects of cultural schemata on reading processing strategies, Pritchard (1990) argues that comprehension monitoring strategies can provide the necessary scaffolding to develop text cohesion when cultural background knowledge is insufficient. In a study comparing Nigerian and Chinese students’ strategic orientation when reading academic texts in English, Parry (1996) shows that, while Nigerian students in her sample tend to favour top-down strategies, Chinese students have a more bottom-up orientation due to there literacy and cultural backgrounds. She concludes her investigation by suggesting that “differences in strategies could often be explained in terms of how different cultural communities represent, use and teach language and literacy” (p. 687).

Observations made by Chulakorn et al (1997) in Thai universities suggest that Thai learners of French experience great difficulties in interpreting a French folktale with a Christian perspective, partly due to cultural distance. Chulakorn et al (1997) conclude their study by arguing that cultural competence constitutes a fundamental aspect of textual perception. They suggest that when the gap between the native and target culture is not too wide, learners may be able to cast foreign cultural characteristics of a text into a cultural format they can relate to and with which they can identify. This is a form of appropriation through transformation. The concept of appropriation through transformation is an important one because it lies at the crossroad between interactional and transactional reading. In interactional terms, it may be viewed as a process in which strategies relating text characteristics with the reader’s cultural background knowledge are at play. In transactional terms, it may be seen as an intercultural space where the reader confronts and attempts to overcome 'the different’ by questioning 'the familiar'.

In his assessment of the problem posed by cultural distance and reading comprehension McDonough, (1995) states that one of the central aspects of the so-called cultural problem is that language learners “do not want to have to master massive amount of information about the society or societies where the language is spoken and yet they need that information to avoid incomprehension” (p. 43). McDonough (1995) concludes his discussion by signalling that little or no research has been carried out in relation to how FL readers identify and solve cultural problems. The database search I have recently carried out to prepare this report has confirmed that only few studies have addressed the issue of strategic reading behaviour associated with cultural unfamiliarity (see above). To my knowledge no such investigation has been conducted in the context of FL literary texts read at university level.
Project outline

Objectives

In the Background section of this paper we have provided an overview of some of the most salient issues associated with L2/FL reading, both from interactional and transactional perspectives. We have also defined L2/FL reading as being problem-solving-based. Furthermore, we have examined the effect of cultural distance on reading comprehension. We have subsequently identified a lack of research data relative to problem-solving behaviour associated with culturally unfamiliar reading. Research into cultural distance and L2/FL reading suggests that learner’s cultural background knowledge may be superimposed on the cultural content of the text in an attempt to recast the text into a more comprehensible format. This approach has been defined here as an act of “appropriation through transformation”, the aim of which is to elaborate and/or preserve cultural coherence and textual unity during reading.

The main objective of the proposed study is to cast a light on the process of ‘cultural appropriation’ from a strategic perspective. In order to achieve this, we aim to study how Anglo-Australian university French language students go about making sense of what is culturally unfamiliar to them when reading the types of literary texts they are typically assigned to read for study purposes. In particular, we would like to identify patterns of strategy use (ie regular use of particular single strategy, set of strategies, or categories of strategies). We would also like to see if learners’ attempt to resolve potential cultural difficulties fits in the monitoring pattern (Evaluation-Action-Check strategic cycle) that has been shown to be applied by FL readers to solve lexical and syntactical difficulties (Block, 1992; Bouvet, 1998). We would like to know whether readers’ strategic behaviour is FL language proficiency and/or in-country experience related.

The concept of ‘Cultural appropriation’ will also be viewed from a transactional point of view. We propose to look at how readers experience unfamiliar cultural elements by measuring the quality and coherence of readers’ textual representation prompted by unfamiliar cultural elements present in texts. In other words, we will examine the extent to which existing knowledge-base is ‘questioned’ by readers in order to accommodate and transform original cultural elements. This will lead us to define the concept of reading intercultural space where negotiation text place.

In its pilot stage, the study will be essentially qualitative. Data will be collected from a small number of participants and will be introspective (Think-aloud protocol of reading) and retrospective (recall test/s or and reading diary). The methodology outlined in the next session is of exploratory nature. At this early stage of the study no data has been collected, and the theoretical and conceptual framework of the project is still evolving. The purpose of the Project description section is therefore to generate basic ideas about the study design and possible ways to collect data. It is anticipated that the rationale of this study and its design be discussed during the LINC symposium.
Participants and text selection

A small number of participants (5 to 10) will be selected among the Intermediate and Advanced students enrolled in the French programme at Flinders University to participate in the study. When the experimental reading takes place, the Intermediate students will have had very little exposure, if any, to literary reading and cultural studies in French. The Advanced students (typically third- or fourth-year students) will have been exposed to Francophone literature and cultural studies for at least four semesters. Some of them will have spent substantial periods of time in a Francophone country as part of their study program. It could be also envisaged that Intermediate and Advanced groups of FL readers be compared and contrasted with a group of L1 readers.

Trying to replicate real-world reading conditions is an important factor motivating text selection. At this stage it is anticipated that three twentieth-century French literary passages be selected for the experiment. The selections will consist of short text of approximately 300 words in length featuring one or several cultural difficulties (as identified by two independent raters). A text extract will be provided at the Symposium as an example. We are aware that any text editing may tamper with the ‘naturalness’ of the original (Alderson and Uquhart, 1984). Consequently, each extract will be semantically and structurally as self-contained as possible.

(Please note that this design section is unfinished. Details about the experimental procedure and data collection will be provided at the symposium.)

REFERENCES


