Reading in a Foreign Language January 2010, Volume 22, Supplement 1
ISSN 1539-0578 pp. 5–10

The role of reading in fostering transcultural competence

Keiko Koda
Carnegie Mellon University
United States

This response was constructed based on my experience as a language program coordinator and my expertise in second language (L2) reading development. Because *transcultural competence,* as defined in the MLA Report (2007), shares much of its underlying capacities with *reading ability*, in principle, reading instruction could play a significant role in fostering *transcultural competence*. In actuality, however, this potential has never been fully realized. This paper first offers possible explanations for the discrepancy between what is feasible in theory and what actually transpires in practice, and then, makes research-based recommendations for the effective use of reading instruction in promoting transcultural understanding.

Focal constructs: *Transcultural competence* and *reading ability*

Transcultural competence is defined as "the ability to *comprehend and analyze* the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form" (MLA Ad Hoc Committee, italics added). This definition coincides largely with the way *reading ability* is conceptualized in the current reading literature. By clarifying what reading entails, this section examines what the two focal constructs have in common as shared underlying capacities.

The ultimate goal of reading is to construct text meaning based on visually encoded linguistic information. As such, it entails three major operations: (a) *decoding*, (b) *text-information building*, and (c) *reader-model construction*. Decoding involves extracting lexical information from printed words through two sequential processing components: analyzing a word into its phonological and morphological elements, and then mapping those elements onto the units of graphic symbols that encode them. Both these components necessitate a good grasp of grapheme-phoneme, as well as grapheme-morpheme, relationships in the language in which reading is learned. In turn, this knowledge evolves through continual input analysis for identifying regularly co-occurring word-internal elements to be mapped onto one another (e.g., Adams, 1990; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989).

In the next, text information building, operation, extracted lexical information (word meanings, in particular) is incrementally integrated into larger text units by incorporating words' syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information. The integration involves two major steps: (a) creating phrases through lexical information integration, and (b) assigning case-roles to the created phrases. Both these steps require a clear understanding of how phrases may co-occur and may be ordered to form sentences. Here again, the formation of such knowledge occurs gradually as a result of incessant analysis of linguistic input in establishing mappings between language forms

and their corresponding functions (e.g., MacWhinney & Bates, 1989).

Finally, reader-model construction involves the integration of locally constructed text segments into a coherent whole. Because texts do not always provide relational information necessary for the required integration, semantic gaps created by such omission need to be filled with prior knowledge through inference (e.g., van den Broek, 1994). The integration thus necessitates sequential analyses of semantic relationships among locally constructed text segments based on explicitly presented information. The emerging interpretation of the larger, integrated, segment is then subjected to further analysis for its plausibility against the reader's prior knowledge and the subsequent text content. Hence, semantic and conceptual analyses are integral to the final phase of text meaning construction.

In sum, reading entails extracting and integrating visually encoded linguistic information to construct an accurate textbase. Once constructed, the textbase must be integrated into the reader's prior knowledge through a sequence of content analyses. Obviously, text meaning construction relies heavily on linguistic and conceptual analyses. Because comprehension is the eventual outcome of reading, comprehension and analysis are inseparable in describing the reading process, and equally essential in defining *reading ability*. Given that comprehending and analyzing are central to *transcultural competence*, the main contention here is that *reading ability* and *transcultral competence* share much of their underlying capacities. Therefore, in principle, *transcultural competence* could be promoted through focused training designed to improve *reading ability*. In actuality, *transcultural competence* rarely emerges from current foreign language instruction. The fundamental question is why the potential utility of reading instruction, despite its plausibility in theory, has not been fully realized in practice.

Misconceptions of reading in FL instruction

Traditionally, in foreign language instruction, reading ability and linguistic knowledge are not clearly distinguished. Reading is often treated as one of the four language skills and reading ability as a facet of language proficiency. Such linguistic biases are evident in many of the conventional practices widely used in foreign language reading instruction, including linguistic (vocabulary and grammar, in particular) control in reading materials, text glossing, translation, grammar explanation, paired associative word learning and so on. Seemingly, three implicit assumptions underlie these practices: (1) L2 reading skills develop automatically as a by-product of increased L2 linguistic knowledge; (2) linguistic knowledge (grammar and vocabulary, in particular) can be learned through explanation and memorization; and therefore, (3) L2 reading fluency can be achieved through explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary. Empirical evidence provides little support for these assumptions.

Is linguistic knowledge sufficient for reading sub-skills development? Because reading involves the extraction and integration of visually encoded linguistic information, its operations are heavily constrained by linguistic properties, and their execution demands knowledge of those properties. Despite its intimate connection with reading, however, linguistic knowledge alone does not guarantee successful reading sub-skills development. In fact, first language (L1) reading studies have repeatedly demonstrated that considerable variance exists in decoding and other sub-skills among native English speaking children with normal oral language development (e.g.,

Stanovich, 1988, 1991; Perfetti, 1985, 1990). L2 studies have also shown that high-levels of oral proficiency do not always lead to efficient decoding skills among otherwise fluent bilingual learners (Segalowitz, 1986; Segalowitz, Poulsen, & Komoda, 1991). Evidently, linguistic knowledge provides a necessary, but insufficient, condition for reading acquisition.

Can linguistic knowledge be learned through explanation and memorization? Current psycholinguistic theories view language as a set of relationships between forms and functions, and language learning as the process of establishing and internalizing those relationships (MacWhinney & Bates, 1989). In this view, linguistic knowledge is treated as a continually developing, ever changing, entity, rather than static, all-or-nothing, state, and its acquisition described as probabilistic in that the likelihood of learning is systematically predicted by input frequency. The clear implication is that what is learned and stored is not a set of rules; rather, it is patterns of activation for interlinked form-function relationships. This being the case, it does not seem possible that linguistic knowledge can be promoted through explanation and memorization of grammatical rules.

Can L2 reading fluency be achieved through explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary? Fluent reading requires rapid and effortless access to word meanings. It may appear that good readers recognize many words instantly and access their meanings and sounds holistically without analyzing them. In reality, however, skilled readers do engage in analyzing and manipulating word-internal elements, such as phonemes and morphemes (e.g., Ehri, 1998; Shankweiler & Liberman, 1972). Clearly, what seems like seamless performance is not attributable to whole-word retrievals, but rather to well-developed word segmentation and mapping skills (e.g., Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1994, 1998). It seems improbable therefore that reading fluency can be enhanced via explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary.

Research-based recommendations

What can we do then to promote *reading ability* and *transcultural competence* in tandem in foreign language classrooms? Gray (1960) observed nearly five decades ago that comprehension entails three levels of endeavor—reading *lines*, reading *between lines*, and reading *beyond lines*. This section explores possible ways of utilizing reading instruction to enhance *transcultural competence* at the three levels of endeavor suggested by Gray.

Reading lines: Improving mapping skills. As noted repeatedly, successful comprehension depends on well-established mapping skills. However, mapping skills do not develop automatically as a by-product of language development. Current psycholinguistic theories hold that learning—be it of language or reading—is the process of detecting, abstracting, and internalizing structural regularities implicit in input. Under this view of learning, input frequency and input experience are the key determinants of what is learned and how well it is learned (e.g., Adams, 1990; Ellis, 2002; Seidenberg and McClelland, 1989). The clear implication is that instruction can help learners improve mapping skills by increasing the quality and quantity of print input available to learners. Although simulating print exposure typically available in L1 reading development is not feasible, it is possible to provide learners with ample opportunities to engage in input analysis and mapping practice.

Reading between lines: Enhancing text-based inference skills. The construction of coherent text information requires the integration of successive text elements into a meaningful whole. As mentioned above, texts do not always provide the relational information necessary for the required integration. When conceptual gaps occur during text meaning construction, a missing link must be created through inference by activating prior knowledge. Inference skills are thus critical for text comprehension. Because inference refers to "information that is activated during reading yet not explicitly stated in the text" (van den Broek, p. 556), its generation necessitates both semantic and conceptual analyses to mentally bridge voids in explicitly stated text elements. The question is whether such analytical skills can be taught directly. Inasmuch as readers' active involvement in encoding causal relations among text statements is known to produce increased L2 text comprehension and retention (Horiba, 1996), it seems feasible to enhance inference skills through focused sub-skills training.

Reading beyond lines: Promoting knowledge incorporation. To gain new insight from text, reading must go beyond basic comprehension. According to Lonergan (1970), *insight* is enhanced understanding occurring when the reader senses either a new relationship among conceptual elements within a knowledge base, or new conceptual relationships between multiple knowledge bases. For enhanced understanding to occur, therefore, assembled text information must be incorporated in the reader's prior knowledge. This indicates that what one can *learn* from a particular text is largely determined by how much s/he knows about its topic, as well as how well s/he can incorporate the knowledge in the assembled text information.

Although teaching background knowledge, however vital, is impractical, instruction can assist learners in using knowledge effectively during reading. Because demonstrating how to activate content-relevant knowledge and to conjoin new text information with the existing knowledge base can reap clear-cut benefits (e.g., Dole et al., 1991; Spires et al., 1992), explicit training on the effective use of knowledge during text comprehension could be easily incorporated in foreign language reading instruction. Because "viewing the world and themselves through the lens of another culture" is a critical component of *transcultural competence*, providing learners with opportunities to reflect on the text's content and evaluate its plausibility should be helpful in molding the analytical ability fundamental to *transcultural competence*.

In closing, *reading ability* and *transcultural competence* share much of their underlying capacities. Systematic training designed to improve one should also enhance the other. In principle, therefore, reading instruction could play a pivotal role in promoting *transcultural competence*. This potential, however, has not fully realized in practice seemingly because foreign language reading instruction relies on teaching tactics stemming from dated theoretical assumptions. Fostering *transcultural competence* is certainly a worthy goal in post 9/11 foreign language programs in higher education. The present exploration makes it plain that this goal should be attainable once empirical evidence emanating from cumulative research on L1 and L2 reading development is properly incorporated in foreign language instruction.

References

Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Dole, J. A., Valencia, S. W., Greer, E. A., & Wardrop, J. L. (1991). Effects of two types of prereading instruction on the comprehension of narrative and expository text. *Reading Research Quarterly, 26,* 142–159.

Ehri, L. C. (1994). Development of the ability to read words: Update. In R. Ruddell, M. Ruddell, & H. Singer (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading 4th ed.* (pp. 323–358). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ehri, L. C. (1998). Grapheme-phoneme knowledge is essential to learning to read words in English. In J. L. Metsala & L. C. Ehri (Eds.), *Word recognition in beginning literacy.* (pp. 3–40). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ellis, N. (2002). Frequency effects in language processing: A review with implications for theories of implicit and explicit language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 24,* 143–188.

Gray, W. S. (1960). The major aspects of reading. In J. Robinson (Ed.), *Sequential development of reading abilities* (Vol. 90, pp. 8–24). Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Horiba, Y. (1996). The role of elaborations in L2 text memory: The effect of encoding task on recall of causally related sentences. *Modern Language Journal, 80,* 151–164.

Lonergan, B. (1970). *Insight.* New York: Philosophical Library.

MacWhinney, B. & Bates, E. (Eds.). (1989). *The crosslinguistic study of sentence processing.* New York: Cambridge University Press

MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages. (2007). *Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a changed world*. Retrieved from http://www.mla.org/pdf /forlang_news_pdf.pdf

Perfetti, C. A. (1985). *Reading ability.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Perfetti, C. A. (1990). The cooperative language processors: Semantic influences in an autonomous syntax. In D. A. Balota, G. B. Flores d'Arcais, & K. Rainer (Eds.), *Comprehension processes in reading* (pp. 205–230). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Segalowitz, N. S. (1986). Skilled reading in the second language. In J. Vaid (Ed.), *Language processing in bilinguals: Psycholinguistic and neurological perspectives* (pp. 3–19). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Segalowitz, N. S., Poulsen, C., & Komoda, M. (1991). Lower level components or reading skill in higher level bilinguals: Implications for reading instruction. *AILA Review, 8,* 15–30.

Seidenberg, M. S., & McClelland, J. L. (1989). A distributed, developmental model of word recognition and naming. *Psychological Review, 96,* 523–568.

Shankweiler, D., & Liberman, I. Y. (1972). Misreading: A search for causes. In J. F. Kavanaugh & I. G. Mattingly (Eds.), *Language by eye and by ear* (pp. 293–317). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Spires, H. A., Gallini, J., & Riggsbee, J. (1992). Effects of schema-based and text structure-based cues on expository prose comprehension in fourth graders. *Journal of Experimental Education, 60,* 307–320.

Stanovich, K. E. (1988). The language code: Issues in word recognition. In S. R. Yussen and M. C. Smith (Eds.), *Reading across the life span*. New York: Spring-Verlag.

Stanovich, K. E. (1991). Changing models of reading and acquisition. In L. Rieben, & C. A. Perfetti (Eds.), *Learning to read* (pp.19–32). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

van den Broek, P. (1994). Comprehension and memory of narrative texts: Inferences and coherence. In M. A. Gernsbacher (Ed.), *Handbook of psycholinguistics* (pp. 539–588). San Diego: Academic Press.

About the Author

Keiko Koda (PhD, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) is a professor of Japanese and Second Language Acquisition in the Department of Modern Languages at Carnegie Mellon University. Her research interests center on the development of second language reading competence. The primary emphasis of her work has been clarifying the unique nature of second language reading as a consequence of the dual-language involvement. To date, much of her effort has been devoted to explorations of cross-linguistic interactions. Address for correspondence: Baker Hall 160, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA. E-mail: kkoda@andrew.cmu.edu