

Reflective Reading: A Tool for Understanding

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Reading as an interactive and reflective process

"Reading is a picnic where the author brings the words and the reader brings the meaning."

(Paul Ricoeur)

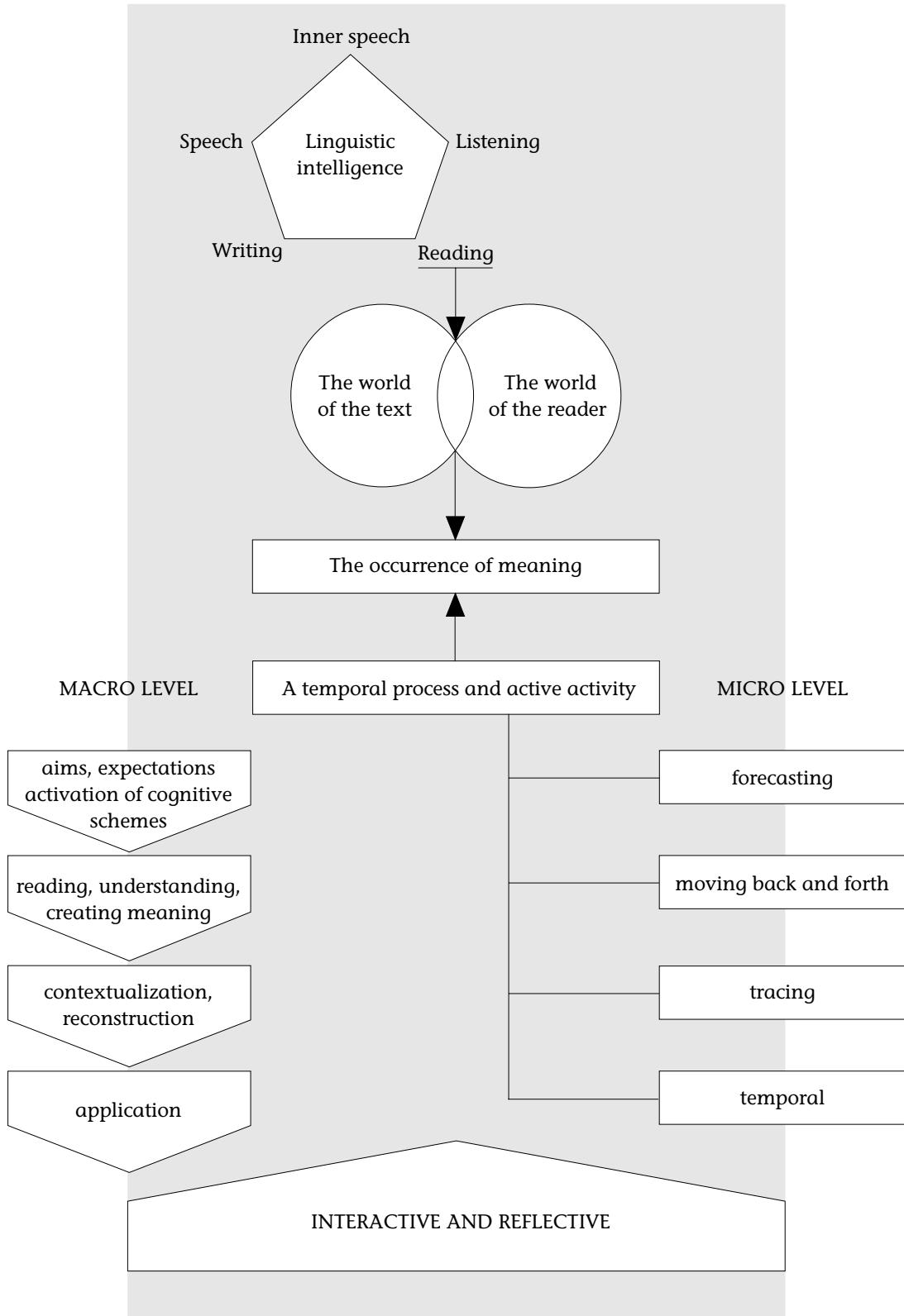
Recent work in cognition, information processing, and linguistics, and studies of the relationship between reading and memory, have significantly expanded upon the behavioural investigations of reading processes done in the 1960's. The passive image of humans represented by behaviourism has been replaced by a theory of learning involving "agency" – the notion that people actively process and use the information received from their environment. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) laid the groundwork for this change, and his notions of research subject and method have had a great impact on reading research today. The other predecessor of the cognitive tendency in psychology was the development of the information sciences. Human intelligence, according to cognitive theories, is largely a function of the information processing ability of the brain.

Reading is one of the most important instruments of human learning, and it has always been one of the most effective forms of obtaining information. Researchers agree that reading as a process has two main components. One is the ability to recognise words, and the other is the ability to understand and process a text, to assign meaning to the text. The reader collects information about the text, using previous knowledge, knowledge of the world, and cognitive schemes organised in meanings

and structures, in order to create meaning. Reading as a tool for understanding and applied learning is goal-oriented, and an effective reader must also be a motivated reader. When reading for comprehension, the reader is continuously forming hypotheses and making assumptions about what s/he can expect next in the text. Since the reader is checking these hypotheses while reading, he or she moves forward and backward through the text. Therefore the reader's understanding is temporal, since it changes based upon interpretation of the information received.

A good reader takes an active part in the understanding process ... incorporating the text into his or her own personal context through reflection

Understanding comes ultimately from the application of acquired information. Thus the result of reading is the construction of a different kind of knowledge, a different way of thinking, and a different way of behaving; that is, the creation of new individual schemas. A good reader takes an active part in the understanding process with his or her full personality, in both its cognitive and affective aspects, incorporating the text into his or her own personal context through reflection. The following figure demonstrates this:



The following three examples demonstrate how a classroom instructor/facilitator can help to increase reading comprehension, by using a process-based, interactive and

reflective approach to reading. The first example uses literature, the second uses historical sources, and the third uses technical texts specific to teacher education.

Teaching literature as a special instrument of learning about the self and the world

"A work of art is not 'eternal' because it constrains one meaning to different people, but because it suggests different meanings to the same person."

(Roland Barthes)

In a literary text the linguistic forms are the result of conscious and deliberate creative activity. This means that the conventional relation of the sign and the signified is temporarily suspended, a characteristic that presents a special problem in reading and understanding literature.

In addition, literary texts are interdependent, and are linked to each other, playing different roles in different ages and cultures, a characteristic referred to as intertextuality. Recent theories in reader-response criticism also consider the reader to be a culturally and historically determined factor. The reader's historical context determines how he or she forms meaning. In addition these theories contend that the reader is not a passive recipient, but is a participant in an interactive process – the reader plays the primary role in creating meaning. Therefore, the reading process encourages the reader to reflect not only on the text, but also on himself or herself. What the reader comprehends depends on his or her prior knowledge, but it also is influenced by whether or not the reader can initiate a dialogue with the text; that is, whether the reader can ask questions, and identify key issues in the text.

In a classroom setting, the instructor can help students increase their comprehension of literature by:

1. helping the recipients (the reading students) use their previous knowledge, in a goal-oriented way;
2. promoting thinking about the literary use of signs;
3. encouraging the recipient to question and reflect, and to consider the aesthetic and experiential aspects of the reading experience in a personal aesthetic context.

Great Books: An American Teacher's Perspective

I'm a firm believer in reader response and transactional theory*, so to me a text is just words on a page until a reader brings his or her background and experience to it. In department meetings and on discussion listserves, the literary merit of various titles has often come up. I am occasionally told, "You may not personally like this book, but we *all* have to admit that it is funny." Without at all meaning to be confrontational, I disagree.

I don't really feel that I *have* to admit that any book is funny (or great, for that matter!), regardless of author's intent. For example, I adore puns and so would walk across fire to get anything new by British fantasy author Terry Pratchett, but my husband only groans and hides under the covers when I gloatingly settle in to read the latest. He despises puns as humor and finds nothing funny about Pratchett's Discworld. To me, Pratchett is humorous. To him, Pratchett is torture.

A book is just treated wood without a reader, and readers can't relate to a story without bringing their life experience to it. "Great" books speak to large numbers of people and therefore earn that label. I feel perfectly happy to disagree with those labels if the book doesn't speak to me. (I have vivid memories of watching my high school English teachers cringe when I wouldn't agree with them that the canon was "great" literature. When I was 17, *Moby Dick* had no relevance at all to my life, and I wasn't shy about saying so!)

Now that I'm in a classroom of my own, I have tried very hard to empower my students to relate to books through their own lenses. Do I tell my students that a book is "great" or "funny"? No. I do go to great pains to "sell" books to kids. I work very hard staying current on new titles and reading young adult literature in depth so that I can find books that they will love. But I *never* tell my kids that a book is "great" without making it very clear that that is my personal reaction to it, and they are perfectly free to disagree. I think they have as much right as I to judge the books they read. Their schema isn't my schema. You can't divorce the reader from the text.

And that's a good thing. Or at least my husband would think so. He never has to worry about me taking his Hemingway. And I never have to wait for my turn with the newest Pratchett.

Adapted from a post to an electronic listserve

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* see Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press; (1994). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press.

Reading historical sources – a special tool for linking past and present

"We do not want to know about past and present, but about a history of existence and human relations made simultaneous."

(Miklós Mészöly)

Secondary level history teaching aims to familiarise students with the broadest possible array of historical sources. Any object or document that carries a message from the past is considered a source of history. Reading history source material helps students reach the following goals:

1. By reading, students acquire knowledge, interpret it, and eventually, reach a new level of understanding, allowing them to better connect the past with the present.
2. Students will become reflective readers. They will learn to read in a way that involves reflecting on the text, and forming an opinion about what they have read.

The skill of source reading must be developed gradually. The first skill to be developed is thinking critically about the

main ideas of the text. For this, a number of techniques could be taught to them, such as *re-focusing*, in which, after students clarify the meaning of the words and thoughts, they focus on posing good questions. Good questions, in this sense, are aimed at clarifying, looking for arguments, reasons and consequences. To clarify the text, it can also be helpful to translate what has been read into a visual code. For example, students studying the Middle Ages might make a map of a medieval town.

On the next level, students learn to compare sources written from different perspectives. They must not only interpret what they have read, but also find points of comparison among the texts. This leads to a dialogue between the texts being read. Making a table to illustrate similarities and differences could facilitate the students' thinking. The table below outlines how a Catholic and a Protestant source describe the roles of István Bocskai (military leader in Hungary's struggle against the Turks and Germans, and Prince of Transylvania 1604–1606) and Gábor Bethlen (Protestant Prince of Transylvania 1613–1629).

CATHOLIC SOURCE ABOUT ISTVÁN BOCSKAI Vilmos Fraknói 1863	COMMON POINTS	PROTESTANT SOURCE ABOUT ISTVÁN BOCSKAI Károly Szász 1865
Bocskai was evasive and mean, deceived gullible people; was egoistical; and greedy. Protestants were malcontents, who desired expansion, leading to civil war and suffering. They attacked Catholic monasteries and monks.	People in the country were discontent due to incursions of foreign mercenaries, and the persecution of Protestants. Bocskai occupied the country quickly.	Bocskai took up arms to avenge his injuries. He wanted to restore freedom of religion. He was proclaimed Monarch of Hungary and Transylvania.
ABOUT GÁBOR BETHLEN Combative. Waited for the optimal time to attack the Habsburg monarch. In Besztercebánya (Banská Bistrica) he forced the Catholic and loyal high priests and lords from the country. He had the country destroyed by Tartars.	In Besztercebánya (Banská Bistrica) he was proclaimed King of Hungary. Interfered with the Czech war.	ABOUT BETHLEN GÁBORRÓL (GÁBOR BETHLEN) Loved truth, was wise, tolerant in religious policies. Seeing the unrest in Bohemia, he joined the Protestant cause in the "holy common affair" (Thirty Years War). Had unexpected and quick success. The national assembly in Beszercebánya and the Protestant majority proclaimed his rights.

During source analyses, it is crucial to elicit students' opinions about the topic being discussed. Ideally, conflict over the ideas in the texts will develop into a debate, where the students can make use of their previous knowledge. This can lead to a discussion of why it is important to examine historic figures and their deeds from several points of view.

In order to reveal simplifications and distortions (in addition to merely comparing sources with differing viewpoints), it is necessary to reconstruct

the author's motives and underlying interests. It is at this level that we achieve critical comprehension. The students may reach this level if they are encouraged to summarise (and if needed, supplement) their knowledge, while sharing it with each other.

The following chart shows the views revealed in various accounts of the Spanish encounter with the Aztecs (e.g. How did the Indians see the conquering Spanish, and vice versa? What are some possible reasons for the distortion?):

AUTHOR, SOURCE	INDIANS natives	SPANISH	WHAT IS HIGHLIGHTED BY THE DISTORTION?
AZTEC CHRONICLE 1528	They are afraid, have no idea what to do, defenselessly awaiting the Spanish.	They have cannons and armour, they ride on deer and they are as white as lime.	Points out the unknown and different things. They believe the conquerors are gods.
BITTERLI'S NOTES	They are pagan. They worship totems, they steal, they practice cannibalism and polygamy.	-	All negative features of the Indians are rooted in their being pagan. Misgiving. Exaggeration of cannibalism.
ANTONIO PIGAFETTA'S DIARY	Primitive arms. They attack with terrible roaring.	Seeing that the natives are superior in numbers, most of the Spanish flee. Some continue fighting with their heroic captain (Magellan).	Exaggerates the natives' number. The aim is to perpetuate the heroic image of the captain.
LAS CASAS, A SPANISH BLACK FRIAR. HISTORIA DE LES INDIAS	Badly armed, they protect themselves against their oppressors.	Well-armed and extremely cruel.	Tries to give an objective picture, sympathetic with the Indians; might exaggerate the cruelty of the Spanish.

The instructor may demonstrate that critical reading is vitally important in present times as well, by comparing articles or commentaries on current events from different newspapers. The

ultimate aim of reading and discussing historical sources is the recognition that the past is prologue to present, and that they are inseparably linked.

Reading professional texts as preparation for the teaching profession

"I think – I have always thought – that texts, professional texts, should not be memorised, but they should be understood, experienced, considered, so that they flow through your veins."

(a student's reflection)

Inevitably, students in teacher training programs have preconceived notions about their future profession – preconceptions about learners and learning, teaching, the subject and the teaching materials, and the teacher's roles. These views are formed based on previous personal experience, during their 12 years of schooling. The teacher candidate must uncover his preconceptions, ideas, and inner images (which are often implicit) before he can decide whether they need to be changed; and if so, how and to what level they must be altered. If this analysis does not take place, the theoretical knowledge conveyed during the training program will be ineffective, and the new teacher will teach in the same way he or she was taught.

We contend that a student teacher's previous attitudes about learning can be exposed by reading professional texts, if this reading involves collecting, analysing, interpreting and reflecting on the student teacher's own experiences. Given an opportunity to compare their personal experiences with professional texts, student teachers can realise an interactive and reflective process of learning. In this comparative process, the student teachers make their personal views and presuppositions conscious, and have an opportunity to modify them.

In the course "Introduction to Education and Learning the Teacher's Profession", a multi-stage process can be planned to achieve the goals outlined above. At the first stage, students are familiarised with journals on education, books and introductory studies that describe how to prepare for the teaching profession. For most first-year students, this is the first time they have read such books and journals.

After that, assignments may be organised to help students articulate their own viewpoints on teaching and learning. Possible topics include the functions of school (schoolchildren's ideas about school), the "hidden curriculum" (what

happens in school in addition to academics), sources of the teacher's self-knowledge, and the significance of the teacher's behavioural patterns. While reading the assigned texts, the students are encouraged to think about the following: Does the content of the text correspond with my experiences? Can I add anything to it? Are there any contradictions? Do I have questions about this issue? Does what I have read make me think? Does it remind me of something? Can I fit what I have read into my knowledge or not? Do the others think about it in the same way? etc.

As a closing stage of the process, the student teachers can recommend texts, books, and research accounts to one another. They now have a new consciousness of their own thinking processes, knowledge, and approach to learning, and this consciousness will persist after their training ends.

In our experience, reflections written by the students during this process are concerned with both the content of the texts and the methods used in the class, which allowed them to interact with their classmates and reflect on the experiences and opinions of their peers.

Some examples of the written reflections of the students follow:

"[T]he lessons... not only called our attention to reading, but also to the 'how' and 'why' aspects of this kind of reading... Student teachers can take part in this process if they do not remain passive readers, but if they try to integrate [the texts] into their own thoughts, and attempt to relate the problems discussed in the literature to their previous experiences."

"Reading and talking about the professional texts was a bit difficult because understanding the text was very hard for me. It was full of special terminology, but I also found the content interesting."

"I think – I have always thought – that texts, professional texts, should not be memorised, but they should be understood, experienced, and considered, so that they flow through your veins. I think these lessons are also good because the students can discuss, accept, alter or reject the suggested topics at once."

"It is impossible to learn professional texts thoroughly because they are too long and there are too many of them. The most important thing is to analyse parts that correspond with our previous experiences. I

like reading critically. It is easier to process a text this way."

"What I liked most was that we had a chance to debate with our classmates when we had differing viewpoints. For this reason, I think, the best lessons were the lessons in which all of us could freely talk about our reflections and experiences in response to a text. Even a short excerpt, maybe one or two lines, turned out to evoke so many different opinions."

(from the written reflections of Szilvia Dobai, Boglárka Bencze, Gábor Imre, Nóra Czvikli and István Bódi, all first year students. 29 March 2001)

To summarise, it can be said that reading and interactively (reflectively) processing professional texts is a valuable tool in preparing for the teaching profession. It allows students in the initial stages – and throughout their training – an opportunity to uncover their experiences and previous knowledge, to make implicit knowledge explicit. And, since revealing underlying assumptions about learning is an ongoing process, it may help not only the student teachers, but also the instructor, contributing to the development of his thinking as well.

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