МЕТОДИКА

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MEANING MAKING FOR SECOND-LANGUAGE STUDENTS

This article devotes particular attention to current research on language acquisition and cooperative learning. The author presents a practical introduction to Direct Reading Activities and explains how to teach reading as a thinking process.

Keywords*: learning subject matter, meaning making process, meaning-finding process, a facilitator-teacher, language acquisition, affective filter.*

Бесараб Т.П. Усвідомлення тексту в процесі вивчення іноземної мови. *Стаття присвячена сучасним дослідженням стратегії орієнтованого іншомовного спілкування. Особливу увагу автор приділяє популярній методиці навчання читання як розумової діяльності.*

Ключові слова*: процес усвідомлення тексту, визначання значення слів, опановування мовою, педагог-методист.*

Бесараб Т.П. Понимание текста в процессе изучения иностранного языка. *Статья посвящена современным исследованиям стратегии ориентированного общения на иностранном языке. Особое внимание автор уделяет популярной методике обучения чтению как мыслительной деятельности.*

Ключевые слова*: процесс осмысления текста, определение значения слова, овладение языком, эмоциональное влияние, педагог-методист.*

Traditionally, reading has been treated as a meaning-finding process. It has been assumed that meaning resides in the text and the readers can find the meaning if they are diligent enough. However, recently a more dynamic view of reading has been emerging due to different backgrounds, knowledge and experience of people. They are likely to hear, see and interpret the same text in different ways. Moreover, because people are influenced by context, they may have different responses to the same words in different texts or to the same text encountered in different settings [6: 9]. Because readers bring different attitudes and experiences to texts, we find it more accurate to think of reading as a **meaning making process**.

Making meaning involves using what we know about language when we read as well as using our experience. "Text is gobbledygook unless the reader possesses an interpretive framework to breathe meaning into it" [2: 367]. The framework is made up of loosely organized and overlapping collections of concepts that comprise our various experiences with objects, people, and events in the world along with our knowledge of language. We bring what know to the text, and in the process of reading, our knowledge is modified by the meanings that the text prompt us to construct [3: 64]. It is this constant interchange between reader and text, driven by the reader's situation and expectations, that is at the heart of the process of comprehension and that leads us to describe the process as constructing meaning rather than getting or finding meaning. It can be explained as follows:

We do not, as we read, add word meaning to word meaning — like watching coaches come out of a tunnel; rather it is like watching a photographic negative in a developing-dish, a shadowy outline that becomes etched in with more of the detail as we proceed. The finished picture represents a transformation of our initial expectations. [4: 134].

When we focus our attention on the reader and speak of reading as a meaning making process, we cannot, of course ignore the author. There are meanings in the text, in that authors have certain ideas or impressions that they intend to communicate. To the extent that readers in tune with an author, they will construct meanings that are in line with the author's intentions. Of course, varying interpretations, and thus different meanings, will arise even when readers and authors are thinking along the same lines. What interests us here are not these minor differences in interpretations - the nuances of meaning that are like shades of the same colour. Rather, we are concerned with the barriers to understanding that exist when readers can find virtually no common ground on which to meet each other and the authors from whom they are trying to learn [5: 23].

Let's consider what is meant by common ground.

Readers with similar experience and language backgrounds will be able not only to construct nearly similar meanings when they read the same text, but to appreciate the other's meaning, even though the meanings are not identical. When, in turn, the readers' backgrounds are shared by the author, the readers are likely to construct meanings close to the author's intended meanings.

On the other hand, when readers have experience and language backgrounds, they are likely to construct dissimilar meanings when reading a text and may find it very difficult to reconcile these differences. What's more when the author's background is different from readers' backgrounds, whatever meaning the readers construct may be far from what the author intended. For example, a student from a tropical island, and a student from an inland desert, neither of whom has seen snow, will have face the difficulty when they encounter the author's discussion of the exhilaration of skiing on powder snow.

Students who study English as a second language (ESL) often experience such kind of dissonance due to the fact that their language backgrounds and cultural experiences are very different from author's whose native language is English. Even if ESL students manage to construct a meaning that makes sense to them, that meaning may not resemble the meaning that their classmates or teachers make when they read the same text. In order to be involved in the proceedings, ESL students may learn to parrot words. But their inability to transfer those responses to appropriately to new settings will make it clear that they have not been able to construct truly useful meanings.

The teacher who holds to a meaning making approach to reading will accept all interpretations that the students give in the process of reading, even those deviate from what appears to be an obvious meaning for the teacher. Still, the teacher will want to help students become able to make meanings which are considered reasonable by majority of readers in the mainstream culture. The intent is not to make sure the students 'fall in line' and 'get the right answers' but rather that the students gradually come to understand how people around them interpret and words and

experiences. The better able they are to establish a common ground with their class-mates or native speakers, the more comfortable and confident they will feel and the more empowered they will be as learners and readers.

How can the teacher help ESL students with the process of meaning making? To start it is necessary to consider some basic elements of the classroom situation: the teacher's role, classroom climate, and the ways in which talk is used as a means of learning.

The teacher's role.

When reading is treated as a meaning-finding process, the teacher plays a rel-atively straightforward role of a teller and tester. The teacher explains, questions and expects certain responses, judging the students' comprehension according to how well they produce the expected answers. However, this approach can lead the teacher to make erroneous judgments.

When reading is treated as a meaning-making process, the teacher avoids be-ing an examiner and acts as a facilitator or a mentor. The facilitator-teacher lis-tens carefully for the different meanings that students construct and encourages discussion of various responses. Instead of judging unexpected replies as wrong, the teacher asks students to explain their viewpoints. For example, a facilitator will not be disconcerted when a student says that a story character speaks out of turn because he wants to have a fun or make a noise. By accepting such answers and ex-ploring them, the teacher will recognize that students are making inferences based on different backgrounds and experiences.

To become a facilitator-teacher, the following assumptions should be exam-ined and often abandoned:

This is such a basic, obvious concept that it doesn't need any explanations. What seems obvious to the teacher may be foreign to the students. For example, bedtime stories are familiar to most people who grow up in the mainstream of American society, but these so-called basic experiences and concepts are unfamil-iar to many students from other cultures.

This is a suitable text for second- language students because it comprises many easy words and simple sentences. What seems easy and simple to the teacher may be incomprehensible to the students. Without taking readers' language backgrounds and experience into account, one cannot label the text 'easy' or 'difficult' [1: 66].

I'll explain it and they will understand. The intentions are worthy, but expla-nations may not make any more sense than the text did.

If they read it aloud, they will understand it better. If the problem is that the readers and authors do not share common ground, oral reading is not the solution.

They would understand if they would just pay attention. The students may be inattentive, but think: can you be attentive to a conversation conducted in a famil-iar language? Can you be an attentive reader when most of the words on a page are incomprehensible?

By carefully examining these kinds of assumptions, teachers are more likely to put themselves in the students' place. In this case they naturally move away from an authoritarian role and become more sympathetic listeners, who are more able to analyze and honour the different meanings that the students are making.

The classroom climate.

For second language students to make progress in meaning making, the classroom climate must bolster their confidence in using the new language to explore different interpretations. Many classroom features contribute to it. For instance, the physical layout of the room, the amount of light and heat, the number and kind of decorations all help to create the climate. Students and teachers alike feel good about their work when the physical surroundings are comfortable and cheerful. But a climate that provides confidence does not depend solely on a well-appointed room. Even more important are the prevailing patterns of interaction among students and teachers and the overall sense of purpose and expectation that guides their work.

The first priority for second language students is basic communication - engaging in simple conversations, expressing personal needs, understanding directions, and so on. Such language use requires a command of basic syntax and vocabulary. Beyond these basics, students must also use the new language for learning subject matter – interpretation of historical events, cause-effect relationships in the natural world, themes of literature, etc. The relationship between these two purposes for using language is not simply sequential. That is, students do not learn basic language skills once and for all and, as a result, become readily able to use those basics in learning subject matter. When readings and discussion topics become more complex, students may begin to feel overwhelmed. At any time, their confidence may falter and they may experience a partial or total lapse in receptive or expressive ability. Anyone who has participated in extended discussions in a second language or who has read widely in that language is likely to have had this experience. One is keeping up nicely, and than a string of unfamiliar words or phrases suddenly confounds, or one understands what has been said bur can't find the words to respond. Such unsettling confusions arise even in students who ordinarily fare reasonably well in the new language, and their ability to make meaning is thereby reduced.

Observations of the first or 'home' language acquisition can tell us a great deal about the conditions that foster confidence and competence in using a new language [7: 379]. If teachers can simulate these conditions in the classroom, students' confidence will be bolstered. Such confidence, in turn, enhances the students' abilities to make meaning. Four conditions are especially important.

1. Participation is encouraged, but production is not required.

Second language students need chances to listening without having to respond and to offer ideas only as they are ready to do so. Accepting the necessity of an extensive silent period is important as students are first acquiring a second language. But even when students are reasonably fluent and are reading and discussing texts, they may still need 'think time' to make meanings. For example, they may need brief silent periods to formulate responses to what they read and hear, and they may need to listen to responses from others before being able to formulate their own.

2. Errors are expected.

Dulay and Burt proposed a psychological construct, the affective filter, which helps to explain reduced and delayed language production. The affective filter may be thought of as acting like a screen or window shade. When we are placed in stressful situations the affective filter closes and, like the lowered window shade, blocks incoming information. We are less able to use the incoming information to produce a response.

The process of meaning making can take place only if students are encouraged to state their ideas as best they can without worrying about the finer points of usage. When they are discussing what they have heard or read, they need the freedom to concentrate on meaning rather than form. If the teacher stresses meaning making rather then correct usage, the students' affective filters can operate in low gear.

3. Participate is ongoing and occurs naturally in a variety of contexts.

Classrooms must be places where the use of new language skills is encouraged in a variety of contexts, for different purposes, with multiple audiences. To engage actively in the process of meaning making, students must be given frequent opportunities to talk and write in natural communication settings. The more time they spend actually using the new language, the more confident they will become and the better able they will be to make meanings with that language.

4. The activity is motivating because it has obvious utility.

Second language students will develop confidence and skill with the new language to extent that they perceive classroom activities to have obvious utility. For instance, students who have posed questions that they want answered will see the utility of reading or viewing a film that have relevant information. Meaning making is enhanced because the students motivated to attend closely to the written or visual text to find information. When students are motivated to discuss the ideas among themselves, meanings are refined and extended [6: 15].

If the classroom climate is marked by these four conditions mentioned above, second language students develop and maintain confidence about expressing themselves in a new language. Their fears about sounding funny or making mistakes gradually abate: they become more willing to use the new language because their attempts are accepted and encouraged. Their sense of competence with the new language grows, and this makes them feel that, indeed, they are making progress as learners. It is vital for each student to develop a strong believe in their competence. Such fundamental confidence is critical to the process of meaning making.

Summary. Reading is best described as a meaning making process. The degree to which students use this process effectively depends on a teacher being facilitator, on a classroom climate that develops confidence, and on the extent to which students are encouraged to use talk as a tool. When students are ready to read materials written by someone else, they need guidance in the process of meaning making.

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