



## "It's Not the English Thing": Bringing Reading Research into the ESL Classroom

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# ***“It’s Not the English Thing”: Bringing Reading Research Into the ESL Classroom***

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Recent L2 reading research suggests that readers’ metacognitive awareness of their reading processes and strategies enhances proficiency. This article presents a retrospective account of an undergraduate ESL reading course that takes the implications of this research one step further by bringing the research process directly into the ESL classroom: In this course, students were trained to investigate their own reading as part of the pedagogical process and invited to apply what they discovered to their reading. The article presents an overview of the course design and pedagogical processes, the ways students were involved in inquiry, and their findings. Students’ voices are integrated throughout the article as they reflect on changes in their strategies, conceptions, awareness, and feelings about reading in English. Their findings are corroborated by evidence from pre- and postcourse interviews, think-aloud protocols, and comprehension tests. Taken together, these findings suggest that transferring L2 research tools into the hands of learners and inviting them to reflect critically on their own reading can not only increase their metacognitive awareness and control in L2 reading but also significantly increase their enjoyment of English reading.

I used to believe that I have to know all the words in the English readings in order to understand the readings. Therefore, I read in English with the dictionary beside me all the time. I read English readings only for homework before I came to this reading class. I never read any English readings because I wanted to read them. I read them because they were my homework. I like to read in my first language, but I just could not read in English with the same feeling as I read in Chinese. The belief that I have to know all the words in order to understand the reading made me lose interest in reading . . . .

Li

Li's comments on the complex interaction between her ways of reading in English and her beliefs and feelings about it reflect much of what recent L2 reading research suggests concerning relationships between L2 reading strategies and conceptions. The way she characterizes her former approach to English reading mirrors that of many undergraduate ESL learners who feel they have to know all the words in a text in order to understand it, rely heavily on the dictionary, are unable to transfer productive L1 reading strategies or positive feelings about reading, spend long hours laboring over sentence-by-sentence translation, and attribute their difficulties to a lack of English proficiency. Reading research suggests that learners' conceptions of reading correlate with their strategies and that when they view reading as a sound- or word-centered process, they often rely on processing strategies that impede comprehension (Devine, 1988). At the same time, however, there is evidence that L2 readers can compensate for a lack of English proficiency by invoking interactive strategies, utilizing prior knowledge, and becoming aware of their strategy choices (Devine, 1993; Hudson, 1988). In addition, research demonstrates the effectiveness of targeted instruction in specific strategies, including those that foster metacognitive awareness (Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989). Taken together, these studies suggest that readers like Li can become aware of their existing strategies, expand their repertoire of strategies, revise their conceptions of reading, and gain control of strategy choices, enhancing comprehension and recall.

This article presents a retrospective account of an undergraduate ESL course whose aim was to apply the findings of L2 reading research in the classroom with readers like Li but to do so by actually involving the students in exploring their own conceptions of reading, investigating their L1 and L2 strategies, discovering for themselves the effects of various new strategies, and developing decision-making processes for selecting and monitoring text-specific strategies. Thus, whereas other studies have involved academic researchers designing and implementing experimental or training studies, this study goes one step further by bringing the research process directly into the ESL reading classroom: Students were trained to research their own reading as part of the pedagogical process and invited to apply what they discovered to their reading.

As such, the genre of this article is somewhat of a hybrid: It certainly does not fit the quantitative, empirical research paradigm, nor is it simply a description of practice; rather it is an attempt to report on both the process of integrating research with pedagogy and the results of this process. There were three levels of research involved in the work reported here. First, the processes and findings of prior reading research were introduced both explicitly and implicitly in the classroom. Second,

the students were taught to use specific research tools (such as self-observation through think-aloud and retrospective protocols) and were involved in analyzing data yielded by these investigations. Third, we, the teacher-researchers, documented, reflected on, and analyzed the process. Thus, this account fits more with the qualitative research paradigms of reflective teacher inquiry (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990) and participatory research (Cumming, 1994) to the extent that the learners were themselves involved in the research process. It reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of any qualitative research based on a case study. On the one hand, because the findings are based on actual classroom data rather than an experimental study, the investigation has the potential to yield a richness of description that is not possible with larger scale, quantitative studies, providing windows into the thinking of the various participants. On the other hand, because it is a single case study, it is limited in scope and thus generalizability.

Our hope is that by weaving together the voices of the various participants—the teacher (Elsa), the tutor/teacher-in-training (Diane), and the students—the article presents a multilayered rather than a singular perspective on the experience; we have done this in the spirit of Canagarajah's (1996) argument that the reporting of nontraditional research must be consistent with the content and assumptions of that research (i.e., the way you write cannot be separated from what you say). Each of the participants had different roles in the research process: Elsa designed the course, selected excerpts from students' writing, analyzed much of the data, and drafted this article. In addition to tutoring the students, Diane interviewed them individually at the beginning and the end of the course to assess their strategies, was a participant-observer in the classroom, and wrote a paper about the course; the students kept journals and strategy logs (explained below), took tests and quizzes, wrote two papers and regular assignments about themselves as readers and changes in their reading, and participated in interviews. Thus, perspectives from three sources are included in the reporting of this research. Because Elsa controlled the pen (the cursor) in drafting the article, her subjectivity is manifest in the selection of quotes and excerpts. Nonetheless, we hope that Diane's and the students' voices will give a sense of their perspectives as well.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Diane come from her paper and interview notes; quotes from students come from their assignments, interviews, and papers. Neither we nor the students knew that their work would become part of a study at the time they did it; we have preserved their syntax to indicate their language proficiency.

## CONTEXT FOR THE COURSE

The course took place in an intensive language program for pre-freshman composition students at an urban university. It was the reading half of a reading-writing pair of courses that are usually taught together by the same instructor but in this case were taught by different instructors. The reading and writing courses each met for 4 hours a week in back-to-back time slots. Twenty students participated; their countries of origin included Vietnam, China, Haiti, Ethiopia, Thailand, and several Latin American countries. Some students were new arrivals; others had lived in the U.S. for up to 10 years. The readings for this course were selected primarily by the writing teacher, who was focusing her curriculum on the themes of architectural space, the notion of comfort, and affordable housing. Many of the readings were very difficult, lengthy academic texts with little connection to students' prior knowledge (e.g., Bachelard, 1969). These texts were selected to prepare students for academic reading they might encounter in other university courses.

## RATIONALE

Several tenets from L2 reading research informed the design of the reading course. The first comes from schema theory research that indicates that comprehension and recall are shaped by readers' ability to access content and formal schemata, to use their prior knowledge, to identify text structure, and to read interactively, utilizing both top-down processing strategies and bottom-up strategies (e.g., Carrell, 1985; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

The second is the notion that L2 reading depends not just on language proficiency (e.g., syntactic knowledge, vocabulary) but on strategy use as well. Although readers with limited L2 proficiency may revert to bottom-up strategies (e.g., word-for-word reading, translation), they can compensate for a lack of L2 proficiency by invoking top-down and interactive strategies (e.g., making predictions, accessing prior knowledge); combining strategies can facilitate comprehension as well (Clarke, 1980; Nolan, 1991). Further research suggests that certain strategies may be more effective than others; for example, Block (1986) discusses the advantage that *integrators* (who are aware of text structure, make predictions, and monitor their understanding) have over *non-integrators* (who rely more on personal experiences and focus on details rather than main ideas).

A third tenet is that metacognitive awareness is key in proficient reading: It is not just a matter of utilizing productive strategies but of doing so consciously (Devine, 1993). This entails knowledge of strategies

for processing texts, the ability to monitor comprehension, and the ability to adjust strategies as needed. Effective readers are able to monitor and adjust strategies according to their purpose for reading and the type of text they are reading (Block, 1986). Casanave (1988) suggests that *strategy schemata* (knowledge about monitoring behaviors) are as important as content or formal schemata in shaping comprehension. She argues that students need to be taught to evaluate their understanding and to repair comprehension breakdowns.

A further dimension to the understanding of how L2 readers approach texts relates to their internalized model of the reading process. Devine (1988) argues that ESL readers have theoretical orientations toward reading that correspond to the kinds of textual information to which they attend (e.g., graphophonic, syntactic, or semantic). She argues further that their conception of reading corresponds to their success in comprehension: Readers with sound-centered reading models may attend to sound-symbol cues at the expense of comprehension, whereas readers with meaning-centered models may more successfully attend to semantic cues.

Building on this research, a number of training studies indicate that readers can be trained to utilize a range of strategies (Carrell, 1985; Hudson, 1988), to gain metacognitive awareness, and to monitor comprehension (Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989). Interestingly, the very process of being trained to participate in studies designed to discover what is going on inside readers' heads (through the use of think-aloud protocols) often benefits the subjects of the research (Block, 1986; Cohen & Hosenfeld, 1981). By virtue of being trained to articulate their mental processes while reading, participants become more aware of what they do, which in turn gives them greater control over strategy choices.

## **COURSE DESIGN**

The course reported on in this article was designed to enable students to discover for themselves many of the findings outlined above. In the course, students were invited to "become researchers" of their own reading in order to promote their metacognitive awareness and expand their repertoire of strategies. Thus, reading was both the object and the medium of study; the students were both subjects and objects of the research process. Whereas other training studies were often limited to 1- or 2-week training sessions focusing on specific strategies with pre- and posttests (e.g., Carrell, 1985; Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989), this course involved a semester-long process of exploring a comprehensive range of strategies (e.g., pre-, during-, and postreading; vocabulary), extensive investigation of students' reading histories and conceptions, discussion

of reading theory and research, student participation in the assessment of strategies, and multiple opportunities for students to reflect on changes in their reading.

Briefly, the course was organized as follows. At the beginning of the term, we investigated students' initial strategies and conceptions as well as their reading contexts, feelings about reading, and reading histories. Students wrote papers about what they had learned about themselves as readers through these initial investigations. The middle of the course focused on experimenting with new strategies and assessing their effects; students applied the new strategies to a range of texts for both academic and pleasure-reading purposes. At the end of the course, students wrote research papers based on their investigations during the semester. In addition, Diane did pre- and postcourse individual assessments using think-aloud protocols.

## **INITIAL INVESTIGATIONS**

Five research tools were used at the beginning of the semester to get a sense of students' reading as they came into the course.

### **Conceptions Questionnaire**

On the first day of class, students were asked to respond to a questionnaire to get at their conceptions of reading and L2 reading. They were told to write answers to the following questions (adapted from Devine, 1988):

- What do you think reading is?
- What do you think is the biggest problem for someone learning to read in a second language?
- What are four specific pieces of advice you would give someone learning to read in a second language?
- What do you do when you come to something you have a hard time with when you're reading?

### **Strategy Awareness and Comprehension Assessment**

On the second day of class, students were presented with an excerpt from Malcolm X's (1964) autobiography about his process of learning to read. They were told to pick up questions from the desk after they had finished reading it. The first questions included "Describe *how* you read

this article. What did you do from the moment you started until you finished?" "Did you know anything about Malcolm X before reading this?" These questions were designed to get at the kinds of strategies students used, their ability to articulate them, and their prior knowledge about the subject. In addition, there were comprehension questions. Through this assessment we were able to begin exploring with students the relationship between strategies, metacognitive awareness, prior knowledge, and comprehension (see below).

## **Reading Interviews**

Each student had an individual interview with Diane, who, as the tutor, used the time to get acquainted with students as well as to assess their initial strategies. During the interview, she did some preliminary think-aloud training based on Hosenfeld, Arnold, Kirchofer, Laciura, and Wilson's (1981) guidelines: She asked them to read a short passage about education, telling her what was going on inside their heads as they were reading. This gave her an indication not only of their approaches to a text and their strategies but of their ability to talk about how they were reading.

## **Reading Inventory**

During the 2nd week of the course, we focused on the question "What do you read and how do you read it?" For homework, students listed everything they read during a 1-day period, the language they read it in, why they read it, and whom they read it with (adapted from Wallace, 1992). In addition, they brought in something they would like to be able to read in English and something they enjoyed reading in their L1. They wrote in their journals about why they made the choices they did and how they felt about reading in each language.

## **Strategy Questionnaires in L1 and L2**

Students read an excerpt from Rodriguez (1983) in which he talks about his own L1 and L2 reading; after reading it, they answered a detailed questionnaire about what they did before reading it, while reading it, and after reading it (as well as responding to the content of the piece). They then chose a text from their L1 and, using the same questionnaire, compared what they did as they read the L1 and the L2 texts.



## Findings

The findings from this initial data are certainly no surprise to reading researchers or teachers. In general, students saw lack of L2 proficiency (vocabulary, grammar) as the biggest obstacle to L2 reading and had a sense of insecurity about their reading. Their advice to each other reflected contradictory models (some said, “Read slowly, use the dictionary,” whereas others said, “Read quickly, skip unknown words”); those who were able to articulate strategies and use more interactive strategies had better comprehension; many struggled at a sentence-by-sentence level and had great difficulties getting any overall meaning. Although many had difficulty articulating what they did when they read in their L1 (“I just read”), others said things like “I can guess the words or sentences that I don’t understand,” “All the points come out of my mind,” “I can put my thoughts in the reading,” and “If I don’t know the meaning I just skip it and go ahead. I just got some ideas that are important, I didn’t read every sentence.” Perhaps the strongest and most striking statement that emerged over and over was that students hated reading in English, only did it for school or functional reasons, and said they could not “feel” when they read in English.

Taken together, though, these five research tools did much more than yield initial data about models, strategies, awareness, and feelings: They immersed students in reflecting about reading from the outset of the course. Two key features contributed to this process. The first was the fact that the class received and participated in analyzing typed data representing patterns in the responses of the whole group to each tool. For example, a handout with quotes from students’ answers to the conceptions questionnaire elicited the analysis that there were three models of reading within the class: a sound/pronunciation-based model (“my problem is to pronounce every word correctly,” “read in a loud voice, pronounce accurately”), a word-based model (“look in the dictionary,” “read each word carefully,” “learn vocabulary, grammar”) and an interactive, meaning-based model (“listen for the concept,” “communicate with the author,” “ask yourself questions,” “write down what you are thinking while you are reading”). Through the analysis of this data, students were invited to begin thinking about formal models in relation to their own reading. This process introduced them to the concept of researching their own reading.

For the Malcolm X assessment, students received a chart of the responses with columns for strategies, prior knowledge, comprehension, and speed. The class figured out that those students who were unable to name any strategies at all had the greatest difficulty with comprehension and those with strategies like reading every single word or reading slowly

and carefully also had difficulty. They saw that those who had prior knowledge and used strategies like “ask self questions,” “read title and think about it; ask self questions, get main idea,” and “skip words I don’t know, try to find the main point” had better comprehension. After the strategies questionnaires, students compared their statements about L1 strategies with their L2 strategies, and this comparison became a basis for thinking about strategies that they might begin to transfer to English reading. Through these exercises students began to become familiar with a stance of inquiry, with research terminology (*theory, hypothesis, findings, data, effect, investigation*), and with key concepts in reading theory (*prior knowledge, schema, strategy, context, conceptions*). They were initiated into the discourse and the processes of research. In her paper, Diane noted that

The beginning of the course focused on ways to tap into the students’ own context for reading. They looked at the role of literacy and reading in their own lives which situated the course for them on more than an academic level. All [these exercises] built upon the students’ prior knowledge of themselves and the reading process, modeling in the classroom process itself one of the key strategies for reading—that of accessing a personal schema and background knowledge about the subject to be studied.

The second key feature of the early part of the course was that all of the assigned readings were narratives about reading—autobiographical accounts of the struggles and pleasures of a diverse range of people being initiated into literacy (including Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, Richard Rodriguez, and Paulo Freire). Students wrote journal responses to each of these texts, reflecting on the relationship between the text and their own experiences. In the first paper, students were asked to explore “who you are as a reader coming into this course,” connecting their thinking about themselves as readers, their reading process, and the content readings. They drew this information from their journal entries about early memories of reading and about the role of reading in their lives now; they also integrated information about the strategies that they had used up until then.

## **INVESTIGATION OF NEW STRATEGIES**

The middle part of the course was divided into three sections that focused on the exploration of prereading, during-reading, and postreading strategies respectively (see Appendix A). Many of the strategies were those mentioned in reading research and training studies (e.g., text structure identification and semantic mapping) (Carrell, 1985;

Carrell, Pharis, & Liberto, 1989). In each of the sections, we began by eliciting the strategies students already used, compiling a composite class list. Thus, students were introduced to a range of strategies by their peers. As Diane wrote,

These lists . . . never failed to show the diversity of approaches and became the basis for categorizing ideas into groups which Elsa referred back to later. Thus, students started with their own ideas, and as the class unfolded, they had an investment in seeing where it might lead.

The next step was a strategy lesson—a teacher-guided application of a new strategy to the reading of a text. Students were then asked to apply the same strategy in their homework (often to texts assigned by the writing teacher). The primary research tool in this part of the course was the strategy log. For each strategy, students filled out a printed form (see Figure 1). As with the initial investigations, students received typed excerpts from each others' logs.

The logs served three purposes. The first was to provide an opportunity for students to practice the targeted strategy independently and put it to real use as they read a text for another course; the second was to enable students to critically evaluate how the strategy shaped their reading of a particular text; the third was to show them the way their peers responded to the same strategy. Having to name the strategies as they learned them also gave students more control in that they developed specific language with which to discuss their reading. Strategies were presented as possibilities rather than as prescriptions or promises of enhanced reading; we tried not to attribute value to certain strategies over others. The emphasis was on investigation—on how a specific strategy or set of strategies would shape the reading of a given text.

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**FIGURE 1**  
**Strategy Log**

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1. Name of strategy:
  2. Description of what you did: What was the text you used this with? What kind of text was it? How did you use this strategy? What did you do?
  3. Effect of strategy: What was your reaction to this strategy? How did it work for you? Did it seem to help? Why or why not? Describe the effect of using this strategy on your speed and on your comprehension. How do you feel about this strategy? Would you try it again? If so, would you do it differently? Why or why not?
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Students were encouraged to think about which strategies were appropriate for different types of texts, purposes, contexts, and so on. As the semester progressed, students began to develop a stockpile of strategies that they could draw on as they worked with different text types. As one student said,

1. During this course I feel like I'm shopping in the store, and strategies are like the clothes in the store. I am free to choose any clothes (strategy) I want to choose, I just have to buy one or two clothes (strategy) that is really fit (work) to me and the one that I mostly like.

Students became increasingly comfortable, skilled, and critical in their evaluation of strategies within a few weeks, as the following excerpts from logs written after a lesson on using questions to guide reading indicate.

2. After I read this article, it was amazing that most of my answers were wrong on the particular numbers. Although my predictions were wrong, I felt easy to understand the text by asking questions. Because there are big differences between my answers and the answers from text, that can make me to remember them easily. The text answered all my questions and I felt more clear . . . . I think I will try this strategy on the short reading, because it is easier to ask questions on this kind of reading than the long reading.
3. However, I think that is more easier to ask question when I read something I have some prior knowledge with because I have something to base in to ask question. I will use this strategy again when I read, because this strategy make me so excited when I read. "What will going next?" this question make me read more.
4. This strategy helps me understand subject matter and appreciate what I think is right or wrong. Moreover, it give me a strong reasons to agree or disagree with the author's viewpoints.
5. For my opinion, this strategy is not really work for me, because it's hard to make the questions before I read the reading. And maybe the information of the reading are little bit confuse to me. So, I have a little difficult time to make the questions while and after the reading. Also I have to spend more time for this strategy. I spent more time to make the questions than the reading. Maybe I didn't use this kind of strategy much before, so I don't feel really help to me from this strategy.
6. This time is the second time that I use this strategy after practice in the class. However, I see that it work for me. Because that I want to know so I feel, I want to find the answer. From this point I can read to find the answer. I have a destination to read. I think if I use this strategy more, I might read faster and get more information. Moreover, I think that

making questions while reading makes me more careful because I have to think about monitoring questions such as do I understand clearly? or do I miss something else?

These quotes suggest that students were developing an ability to analyze not only whether a particular strategy was effective for them, but why or why not, and under what conditions. In some cases, students commented on how the strategy motivated their reading; in others, they noted that the effectiveness of the strategy would be contingent on prior knowledge. In several cases, students discussed which aspects of their reading were affected (speed, comprehension, recall, ability to read critically) and for which types of text they might invoke the strategy.

Midway through the term, we asked the students to design their own assignment based on the work to that point. Their writing teacher had assigned a long text about 17th-century Dutch architecture and use of domestic space. We asked students to develop a plan for how to approach it. We wanted to put control in their hands, to invite them to experiment with combining strategies, and to see to what extent they could bring decision making about strategies to a conscious level. Although the results were uneven, many demonstrated the ability not only to devise productive plans but also to monitor and revise strategies while reading. One student wrote, for example,

7. Here's what I'm going to do before I read this article to guide my reading:
  1. read the title and number the paragraphs because it will force me to get the structure of a long article.
  2. read the first and last paragraphs because it usually help me to find the main idea.
  3. glance the examples that the writer gave, because the examples are always the part the writer give to make readers understand more clearly. Therefore the examples will be easy to read and understand and help me to see the writers point.
  4. as I number the paragraph, I saw there are three other different styles of letters. So I decided to find out what the three different styles of letters stand for. Then, I found out the meaning of these three styles. It helped the same way as I glance the examples.
  5. I conclude what I got from the other steps, then, ask question that I have. If I ask question, and I can looking for the answer while I read will be easy to understand.

In this case, the student was able to detail a sequence of moves as well as her reasons for invoking those moves. Interestingly, many students

decided not to write their plans until after they had read the text, explaining that they could not fully decide what to do until they had begun to interact with it. The following is an excerpt from one such retroactive plan.

8. My strategy is making predictions. I chose this strategy because this text is long and I don't need to pay attention every sentences or words. First I read the topic and I think what it is going to talk about. Then I read the first paragraph. After I read first paragraph, I got nothing. Then I read the conclusion, and I got just a little idea that I think they might explain about Holland. So I came back to read the second paragraph, now it make more sense to me, I continued to read each paragraph. Sometimes, I used a dictionary to find the words that I didn't know and I think it can help me more understand. Before I use dictionary, I try to guess but sometimes it talks the same things so I will skip that paragraph. . . . I take note beside the paragraph that what they talked about. I also take note when Rybczynski talk about house, painting. About decorating the room, it is very easy to read for me because I think about in 100E class on Friday that Elsa showed the pictures to us. I can see the picture that the author explain.

Here the student uses one strategy (making predictions based on the title and first paragraph) to launch himself into the text but immediately revises it after realizing it is not productive. He moves around within the text, checking his comprehension, using the dictionary selectively, and skipping paragraphs that are repetitive. He notes points where he can invoke prior knowledge and connects his reading to class discussion. His reading reflects exactly the kind of behaviors that Casanave (1988) describes when she says, "Comprehension monitoring . . . consists of any behaviors that allow readers to judge whether comprehension is taking place and that help them decide whether and how to take compensatory action when necessary" (p. 288).

After this assignment, students began to take the initiative in developing their own strategies and combining strategies; they became increasingly critical about why they made particular decisions. For example, in the following excerpts from logs about vocabulary strategies, one student differentiates between the language learning and reading functions of her dictionary use; another explains a complex process for dealing with unknown words.

9. I still doing the same thing looking up the unknown words, except I do it backwards. I use the strategies for unknown words, and I guess it right most of the time. The reason why I am still looking up the words is for getting more words. It has nothing to do with my reading anymore since the strategies for unknown words work fine to me.

10. First, I read quickly a whole passage. If there is some unknown words, I skip it and underline these word which I don't understand. I continue to read next paragraph to find details to relate the first paragraph. After I guess a general idea. If I still don't understand them, I read slowly a sentence which contain these unknown words. If a structure of a sentence is listing, I can guess them to be synonym in a group. . . . In fact, if I think these unknown words on the important sentence of main point, I look in dictionary. Sometime I use a dictionary to have too much meanings I can't guess. I will skip them to find other details. It helps me not to spend too much time look at a dictionary, and I reduce confusing a meaning. Although I don't understand them exactly, I can guess a general idea. When I answered these questions, I appreciate that how much I do understand. . . .

## READING FOR PLEASURE

Halfway through the term, as students were struggling with dense academic texts, they seemed to be getting discouraged and bogged down in the somewhat mechanical aspects of our focus on strategies. Thinking back to what they had said at the beginning of the semester about not being able to feel or to enjoy reading in English, we decided to add a component to the course: pleasure reading of self-selected books. Modeling this component on Mlynarczyk's (1991) process, we asked students to form groups around novels they wanted to read (with some suggestions from us). They chose *The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway, 1950), *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Dandicat, 1994), *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984), and *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan, 1992). Each group assigned itself a certain number of chapters to read each week, wrote response journals, and used class time on Fridays to discuss what they had read. The addition of this component turned out to be a turning point for the students; it allowed them to transfer what they had learned in a relatively controlled context (with daily teacher-orchestrated assignments) to a freer one. Because the books they chose were all novels, the students had more opportunity to engage with their reading in a personal way. In the journals, they not only responded to the content of the novels and brought their own experiences into their reading but reflected on their reading processes and worked out problems they were having with the texts. The following excerpts indicate some the ways they used the journals.

- They applied strategies we had explored in class.

11. The main question is how will he handle the monsters of the sea in order to keep his fish? I will solve the question as soon as I read the next section.

- Some invented their own strategies for engaging with the text.
12. As I wrote in the preceding journal, I feel bored about this book. But in this two weeks, I used ways to make myself to interest in it. You suggested me to write a poem after reading each chapter because [I said] the chapter just like a poem. I didn't do that. . . . I made myself go back to the chapter, just like read again. I try to find the funny parts and the parts that I like. In addition, I have another way to make me feel boreless about the book. It is when I began to read each chapter, I read the first few paragraphs first. Usually each chapter has its own problem. I first try to familiar to the problem. then I stop reading. I imagine I'm one of the characters, try to solve the problem. Then I continue to read. . . . So in this way, I feel boreless about this book. Because I think I put my feeling into it. I pretend I'm living on Mango Street and I'm Sandra Cisneros.
- Some described working out comprehension problems.
13. Going to chapter 3, I get a little confused. I thought that maybe Pearl had two names, she was called Winnie when she was married Jimmy Louie. . . . Going to chapter four before I read it, I start to realize that Winnie is Pearl's mother. I go back and forth on the chapter three and find some sentences which say that Winnie is Jimmy's wife instead of Pearl. . . . Finally, [I figure out] that this story has two narrators because both of them talk to readers about themselves.
- Some made cross-cultural comparisons related to their own lives.
14. As I read through the chapters I discover that Pearl's mother shows her care and love differently than the American. Her mother doesn't show the love for her daughter by saying (telling her), but she shows the love that she has for her daughter by every question that she asks. . . . I think Pearl could not stand for the way her mother is because she is confusing two cultures. Her mother is every ordinary Chinese mother, and Pearl has grown up in a different culture around her. . . . I think Pearl didn't see how lonely her mother is, how her mother desires to stay with her.
- Some wrote about insights that the books gave them about their own lives.
15. Sandra Cisneros wrote about the old time "because the past seemed more interesting than my dull present." Yes, it is true. The one instant we had a good time in, that moment, we did not understand it. Always when it pass we regret it. Always we need more. We never think "now" is our gift.
  16. She build her own house inside her head, no one can bother her. . . . After I read this book, I ask myself, Do I have a house of my own? The



important point I got from this book is “What is my own house I have inside my head?”

- Some who had been reluctant readers became passionately involved.
17. You know! Elsa I was really bored on three first chapters, because the way of talking around of the author, names in Chinese. . . . But the story makes sense from chapter four and it seems to keep on. So it keeps me reading over the dinner, before I go to bed, and the bus to get to school and to go home, and sometimes I keep reading for the whole day, put other homeworks of other classes on the side. I just want to get to the end as soon as I can. May be by my curiosity, and maybe I just want to get to the end of a worse situation of woman that always makes me think and imagine those women in the story. In my mind, even I sometimes try to get rid of it, try to work hard other homeworks. But I am always obsessed by these women.

For many in the class, reading these novels was the first time that they had read a complete book in English. Several immediately started another book; in some cases, family members bought them books as presents. Most importantly, the books gave many of them what they said they wanted at the beginning of the semester: the ability to feel when they read in English.

## **THE END OF THE SEMESTER**

We assessed the overall impact of the course on students’ reading in three primary ways: a final individual interview, a final test similar to the Malcolm X assessment, and research papers in which students wrote about how their reading had changed using data they had collected throughout the term. In the interviews, Diane both did a think-aloud assessment and talked with students about how they felt their reading had changed. The following excerpt from Diane’s paper gives a sense of changes between before and after interviews. (Appendix B provides more detailed accounts of interviews with individual students.)

At the beginning of the course, I met with each student individually for an oral reading assessment. I allowed at least a half an hour for each student. . . . The reading was less than a page. I gave them the reading and asked them to read it aloud to me, trying to read for comprehension. I told them not to worry about pronunciation, asking them to stop in their reading whenever they would normally stop, as if they were reading to themselves, and to try to tell me what they were doing in order to figure out the meaning of the text. During the first interviews in September, it was usually difficult for them to

articulate what they were doing, so I frequently had to stop them and ask, "OK, now what are you doing? What are you looking at now? How are you understanding this?" I also stopped them to ask what they were understanding about the content of the text. This content aspect of the assessment gave me valuable insight into determining two levels of strategy use: first, how they read, if they guessed at contextual meaning, or skipped parts they did not understand, if they reread parts, if they connected meanings of the paragraphs as they developed, looking for general meanings, as opposed to taking the text apart in discrete units, one word or sentence at a time. Second, how did they process the text in relation to their own schema? Some were top down readers, mainly interacting with a few key words in the text and the rest of their content analysis came from their heads. Others (a much larger group) could hardly get through the text for focusing on the new words. Their ability to draw on their schema (or lack of ability) became apparent as they summarized, shown by the amount of outside, prior knowledge they brought into their discussions in order to help themselves make sense of the text.

My overwhelming impression during those first interviews was that it seemed that the text controlled the students, that they were afraid of it. They knew from the start that the text was the boss and thought that they could never win a struggle with it. . . . Several of them thought they had understood it well, yet their explanations did not match up with the content. . . . Some students were able to pull out words that they didn't know and figure them out from the context; this group was able to guess at meaning on sentence level, although it did not necessarily follow that they got meaning from the text as a whole. Others were prisoners of the unknown words. They would normally have relied heavily on the dictionary and so, without it, they could not access meaning on any level except the most fragmented. . . .

As they did not yet have consciousness of strategies or the vocabulary to describe them, I had to make inferences. This turned into one of the most important gauges of change. By the end of the semester, the students were able to step outside of their own reading process and clearly describe to me not only what they were doing, but why they made that choice. The simple fact that I no longer had to infer their process gave evidence of their growth.

In the second interviews in December, it was apparent how much they had learned in terms of strategies and confidence with a difficult text. They had many strategies to draw from, and an eagerness to pick and choose according to their needs. . . . Their newfound process of sampling from various parts of the text in order to take control of it was visible to me and seemed to come naturally to them. Their use of strategies never seemed forced, as each student gravitated toward the ones that felt comfortable to him or her. They had vocabulary to tell me what they were doing and proudly explained to me what they would do next if they were reading the text on their own. . . .

I found that most of the students were no longer bound to the level of words. They prioritized higher level, meaning-centered strategies. They had no worries about being dominated by words anymore! . . . I remember watching their eyes as they roved around on the page. The eye movement was

like a hawk in the sky, gliding above an area as she looks for prey. There is no noise at all, no motion of wings flapping. The feeling is still, slow, smooth. Watching the motion, the swiveling around, calculating, assessing the situation, silently scanning the area to find what she needs, is watching the mind of the hawk in action. That's how it was with the students' eyes.

Much of what Diane discovered in the interviews was confirmed by both the final test and the research papers. Although there is not space for a detailed analysis of test results, two points were striking. First, almost all of the students were able to articulate a detailed sequence of strategies that they used to approach the reading. Second, most also had improved their comprehension.

In the papers, students drew on the initial exercises, strategy logs, responses to readings, feedback from Diane's interviews, and book journals to assess how their reading had changed. The following quotes from students come from both the papers and the interviews. Some students, diligently following the assignment, wrote about specific strategy changes. For example, the student who wrote the following excerpt had been completely unable to articulate any strategies at the beginning of the semester; his main strategy at that time had been relying on the dictionary. What is striking about this excerpt is the sense of control it reflects: The student writes about finding new strategies for himself, setting himself a goal, allowing himself to finish, and so on.

18. But I was always get stuck when I got to unknown words or the difficult parts of the article. I was always get confused about the article by this problem. . . . So, during the course I find myself the other kind of new reading strategy to read the English article. In this strategy I'm have to read the article without stopping at the first time, pay attention to what I can understand, and don't get stuck by what I can't immediately grasp, try to get a general idea of the article, then reread that second time very slowly by paragraph and paragraph. At the each paragraph I would like to underline the main points and gloss with few words telling what the author is doing in the paragraph. In this time when I got the unknown words I would like to try to guess the meaning, if I still don't understand the word means then I will skip it, wait until I finish the reading if I have the time then I will try to find the meaning from the dictionary. And if I see those word or sentences doesn't important of the article then I will skip that too. Also in this strategy I would like to make myself a goal and time limit, I allow myself I have to finish the article at the limit time, and my goal is get the idea of the article, is not just find the definition of those words. . . . I can see a big change in myself as a reader from the beginning of the semester, because I find myself a goal for the reading, and I feel my reading skill just like reborn again. . . . I don't feel lost in the reading anymore. Anyway I feel I am start to love to read the English, too.

Other students wrote about specific new strategies that they found useful but went on to say that there really was no single strategy or set of strategies that were key.

19. Now I feel better, maybe because I have the strategies and I have like, that weapons to use to fight! When I start a text, I . . . I start like, maybe reading the first paragraph and maybe the last one and then if that doesn't work, I use another. Because I know a lot of strategies, I'm not tied to read [one way].
20. However, I don't have specific strategy which I will use all the time, because I think there is no strategy which works with every story. The most important is I have to apply which strategy will be appropriate with a text. But the most difference in my reading from before is I am not afraid to read in English and I can control the text more than before.

Many students wrote about changes in their conceptions of reading and their relationship with texts. Whereas before they saw their task as taking meaning from a text, at the end of the course they talked about how they brought their own thinking to a text.

21. I use to sit and dig in the text no matter what and without an action plan. . . . It is amazing how much you can guess without entering in the text. It helps in reading critically because you have the two versions, the one on the text and the one in your mind.
22. Now I read with my brain, not my eyes.
23. Before, I was in the text only. I was with [the author's] point of view. Everything that the author says, it was good. Now it's not like that.
24. My biggest problem when I started this course is that I did not want to include myself in the readings.

Some talked about the impact that the course had had on their L1 reading.

25. I was reading an article in Spanish. It was so difficult because there are so many words that I don't know in Spanish and I said "Oh, this is like I'm learning Spanish" and I had my dictionary in Spanish, but I know the dictionary won't help me, and I said, "I won't see the dictionary, I will look at the word that I don't know and I will read the text and I know I'm going to understand it!" And I did!

Some talked about realizing that it was not just the lack of L2 proficiency that impeded their reading.

26. Now I realize one thing. It is not the English thing. It is me. It is how I feel about myself to read in English. The more I read, the more I get confidence in myself.

Many concurred that, more than anything, the course had given them confidence, saying that the biggest change for them was how they felt about themselves reading in English.

27. I find that right now I have more confidence to read in English; I am brave to go everywhere in the text to make me get an idea.
28. And I can see the changes of myself when I read in English. I feel comfortable to read just like I read in Chinese. I read not just because my teacher wants me to read, I read not only for class. I read because I want to relax myself, I read because I want to read, I read because I love to read, I read because I want myself to feel that I read in my first language.

## CONCLUSION

The course fell short of our expectations in a number of ways. The most important was that we did little to explicitly address the question of reading critically. This was due to both logistical and substantive constraints: Time ran out before we were able to incorporate the planned section on critical reading; at the same time, we did not have a clear plan for how to integrate this aspect of the course. Yet, despite the fact that we did not explicitly explore critical reading, some students did gain a new ability to struggle with and challenge authors, as some of their quotes suggest. In addition, critical reading was addressed in the writing class through discussion and journals. Another persistent concern was whether the students were just learning a new discourse about reading or were also appropriating it for their own uses. In addition, the course felt quite mechanical at times (with the repertoire of strategies and tasks becoming almost overwhelming for students). We were afraid that we were sending the message that process is more important than content—that reading consists of applying strategies rather than engaging with a text. A parallel danger exists in the writing of this article—the danger that we are focusing on a method or a series of how-to steps. As Rich (1980) says,

The question is legitimate—How to do it?—but I am not sure that a description of strategies and exercises, readings, and writing topics can be [the way], however successful they have proven for one teacher. When I read such material, I may find it stimulating and heartening as it indicates the varieties of concern and struggle going on in other classrooms, but I end by feeling it is useless to me. X is not myself and X's students are not my students. (p. 65)

So at the end of this study, we cannot say that we demonstrated that any one strategy or combination of strategies is particularly effective in promoting metacognitive awareness; nor can we say that a particular training sequence will enhance students' reading proficiency. Perhaps this is precisely the point of our work—that it was a combination of factors cumulatively working together that contributed to students' sense of awareness, choice, and control. No one factor, set of strategies, or training procedure uniquely shaped the outcome. Rather, many factors contributed to the overall effect, including starting with students' experience, conceptions, and strategies; modeling the research process by feeding students' own collective data back to them for analysis and discussion; assigning readings about reading; developing a vocabulary for metatalk about reading and reading research; eliciting students' strategies; providing direct but nonprescriptive instruction in a wide range of strategies; encouraging a stance of inquiry; incorporating systematic and ongoing use of the strategy logs; including a self-selected pleasure reading component with response journals; interviewing students individually; and giving them feedback from the interviews. We became convinced that what was most important, regardless of the specific activities, was immersing students in discussion and reflection about reading.

Our “research,” thus, was not aimed at determining which sets of strategies were most effective and training students in their use; instead our aim was to transfer some of the research tools to the students themselves so that they could engage in guided inquiry about their own reading. It may be that this stance of inquiry was the single factor that ultimately gave them the greatest sense of control and confidence in approaching English reading. In the spirit of what we tried to do both in the course and in this article, we end with the words of one student that reflect this stance.

24. [After previewing it] then I can decide how I will fight with any particular text, and which other strategies I am going to combine to have better comprehension. . . . But I think that the most important thing that I am going to take away from this course is. . . . that there are many ways of fighting a text to get what it hides inside and they are all those strategies which one can use according to the structure of every text. You decide!

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Strategies

#### Prereading Strategies

- Accessing prior knowledge
- Writing your way into reading (writing about your experience related to the topic)
- Asking questions based on the title
- Semantic mapping
- Making predictions based on previewing
- Identifying the text structure
- Skimming for the general idea
- Reading the introduction and conclusion
- Writing a summary of the article based on previewing

#### During-Reading Strategies

- Skipping unknown words; guessing from context
- Predicting the main idea of each paragraph
- Glossing
- Responding while reading
- Relating glosses back to the text structure
- Drawing pictures to show what you see in your mind's eye

#### After-Reading Strategies

- Revisiting prereading expectations
- Reviewing notes, glosses, text markings
- Making an outline, chart, map, or diagram of the organization of the text
- Retelling what you think the author is saying
- Relating the text to your own experience
- Responding to the text or critiquing it



## APPENDIX B

### Excerpts From Diane's Accounts of Individual Assessments

The following condensed excerpts from Diane's account of the assessments give a sense of the range of ways students approached texts at the end of the course. The article they were reading at the beginning was about education; the article at the end was about a traveling exhibit of the Dutch artist Vermeer's work.

1. J. M. is very verbal about what he is doing and in class latches on to Elsa's key words and phrases. . . . So, his analysis was easy, because he explained to me what he was doing. "Now I am making questions about the title." And: "Here I would make a mind map of this, write down the key word and then write all the words that are related." And: "I kind of use predicting now." The most important thing I noticed about his reading is that whereas before he was a "top down" reader (relying mainly on what was in his head, and making assumptions regardless of what was in the text), now he made very few assumptions as he tried to get meaning from the text. He did make predictions before reading and during reading, but they were based on something more substantial than before . . . .

He made sense of the difficult first part by skipping to the end, but when that did not give much information, he skipped to the second column and then attached meaning and chronology by looking at the dates. He is Haitian and is a pro at memorization, so it makes sense to me that the dates jumped out at him and stuck in his mind. He "unpacked" the text in an interesting way towards the end. He understood the death and bankruptcy paragraph, and then as soon as he saw *Would that Vermeer's life . . .* he said "I kind of use predicting now, because it begins with XXX (text above) so I know it will talk about what might be." Following that, he read and did not understand *poetically precise as his pictures* and the first half of the next sentence. He stopped and said that he didn't know what *poetically precise* meant, but that the words were describing the pictures, and so the rest of the sentence (which he also did not know the majority of the words in) must be about describing "how he paints." He continued with the description following and said that here he used prior knowledge of the Dutch houses, how light and clean they were. . . .

2. S. used text structure to help him make sense of the text during the second evaluation, where during the first one, he was focused mainly on the word level of the reading process. The first time, he did quite well with the meta-awareness process of talking to me about what he was reading. I think he surprised even himself as he told me of his strategies, mainly related to guessing words. Initially he told me that he'd look up nearly all the words that he didn't know, but as he proceeded, he was able to explain to me the grammatical and context cues he was using to find meaning even without the dictionary. For example, he knew that *observers* were people because the word ends in *-ers*, and he wondered if *kindle* was related to kind. The first time, however, he did not use higher level strategies to access the text for meaning, to control the text.

The second assessment was quite different. S. skimmed the entire text first, as a prereading; he said that he was looking for new vocabulary. He also looked at the pictures and thought about his prior knowledge of Dutch people. He skipped a lot of words as he read, just looking for the meaning of the sentences and paragraphs. When he came to a word he wanted to know the meaning of, he'd try to sound it out carefully to try to understand it. He said that he was trying to see if he could remember the meaning from having seen it before by seeing how it sounds. Once he was inside the text, he did not use his knowledge of the Dutch people because "This is about the artist's life, so I do not have prior knowledge of that." What he did do was to make a mind map: He read the entire text through and then skipped back to the beginning which had been particularly difficult for him to understand. He got more meaning from it the second time and then made his map, which confirmed the text structure for

him. He used the dates and set up a time line, "I make a list in my mind. The first part is about general, before he married, the middle is about when he married and after that, after he's dead, and then it describe the paintings. . . ." Overall, he has much more control of the text now than he did before. Previously, there was a feeling of fear and intimidation, where now, S. is the boss, he knows what he wants and ways to go about getting it!

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