

## READING LITERARY WORKS IN A SECOND LANGUAGE; TRANSACTION AND INTERACTION

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### ABSTRACT

This discussion explores how linguistic and/or cultural barriers can affect the aesthetic response to a literary text in proficient second language readers. As the theoretical frame supporting this discussion both schema theory and Rosenblatt's transactional theory have been used. It is suggested here that second language readers already possess sufficient schemata of the foreign language and culture as to transact with a text aesthetically. In this transaction reading comprehension can be evidenced.

Literary works are one of the most effective vehicles of linguistic and cultural experience in second language reading\*. Assuming that the readers have a fair command of the basic structures of the target language -its grammar and vocabulary-, poems, novels and short stories represent a multi-faceted source to expand their linguistic skills. Moreover, exposure to the foreign language through its literature is a stimulating and more authentic way to deal with the cultural and historical factors involved in the whole process of foreign language reading.

Besides their cultural and linguistic values, literary texts are also sources of aesthetic experience which can be reflected in the reader's response. In the context of research of second language reading, this response can be used as evidence of reading comprehension. Taking account of Purves's theory (1985) that texts have a "discernible meaning" variations in interpretation or "dispersion", as Purves would put it, are expected among readers, but it is also "central tendencies" (Purves) or agreement across interpretations that can reveal more or less

"defensible readings" (Rosenblatt). It seems that this aspect of reading a second language has received little attention, and reader response to a literary text in a second language has been underestimated as an aspect of learning to read fluently and with comprehension.

The present discussion attempts to explore how linguistic and/or cultural barriers can affect the aesthetic response to a literary text in proficient second language readers. For this purpose, a psycholinguistic theory and a theory of literary criticism; that is, schema theory and L.M. Fosenblatt's transactional theory respectively, will conform the theoretical frame of this discussion.

The terms "transaction" and "interaction" are frequently associated with literary criticism and theory on the one hand, and with the cognitive theories underlying reading research on the other. In her book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, L.M. Rosenblatt (1978) proposes the concept of the "literary transaction" that establishes an epistemological difference in her conception of the reading phenomenon as compared to the philosophy underlying traditional reading research.

Interactive theories, according to Rosenblatt, are based on a "dualistic, mechanistic, linear, interactional view" in which both reader and text are seen as two separate entities acting upon the other, but without realizing any

\* The expression "second language reading" is used here in a general sense to describe the situation of reading a text reflecting a foreign language and culture.



"organic" transformation as a result of their encounter (1981, 1985). Transactional theory, instead, sees the reader-text relationship as an experiential exchange mutually shared between the author and the reader, and out of which a transformation will take place in the form of the literary work of art (1978, 1985).

Koenke (1984) classifies both transactional and interactional theories into the category of information processing theories, since both deal with comprehension as "an interaction between the processing of the text and the use of the reader's experiences and expectancies" (p.116). However, Rosenblatt (1985) reacts to Koenke's categorization arguing that "transaction and interaction are reflections of differing paradigms"; and that "[t]he transactional theory of reading is dissociated from information-processing and interactive processing" (p.98).

Despite conceptual and paradigmatic differences, a common denominator between transaction and interaction can be discovered. Both see reading as a constructivist process in which reader and text appear as two equally active components. The interactionist theories are concerned more with what happens during the reading process "locally"; that is, at the level of the cognitive structures in the brain. The transactional theory, instead, is interested in the results of the encounter reader-text in aesthetic terms; that is, in the reader's personal reaction to a text as a result of a lived-through experience with it.

Rosenblatt's distinction between transaction and interaction, however, seems particularly important in terms of pedagogical implications (1981, 1984, 1985). Reading literary texts transactionally puts emphasis on the aesthetic response resulting from the reader's experience with "the personal, the qualitative, kinesthetic, sensuous inner resonances of the words" (Rosenblatt, 1981, p.271); not so much on the mechanical skills frequently pursued and for the sake of which literary pieces have been misused.

In the context of second language reading a distinction between transaction and interaction is closely linked to the reader's command of the target language. In this context the transactional process is gradually acquired as the reader becomes more proficient in the structures of the target language and culture. This means that an efficient interaction with the "mechanics" of the language is necessary before the reader be able to

really draw on "the experiential matrix" of the foreign language and culture. In this sense, in contrast to reading development in the native language, the transactional stage in second language reading is an *a posteriori* rather than an *a priori* stage.

In other words, the child's earliest approach to language is, by definition, transactional (Rosenblatt, 1981, 1982, 1985). The young child's experience with a story, for instance, is not detached from what she hears, sees, or smells. It is a lived-through experience in which the sensorial plays a central role.

However, this transaction is not only "aesthetic". As Rosenblatt (1978) conceives of this process the child's attention moves in a two-way fashion. At the same time that the child is aesthetically enjoying with the language in the story, she is also "efferently" (from the Latin *efferre*, to carry away) learning information that will be carried away and transformed into questions and comparisons with lived experiences. Her attention moves from the "aesthetics" to the "efferent", in a balanced fashion. As Prest & Prest (1988) would put it, the child "goes with the text as a creative partner" or "goes to the text" for information to be carried away. Hence, that Rosenblatt states that "the adult's capacity to engage in the tremendously complex processes of either efferent or aesthetic reading depends ultimately on the child's development of habits of selective attention to these various components of meaning" (1985, pp. 14-15).

In contrast, in second language reading, the acquisition of language structures precedes the acquisition of its bond with the "experiential matrix". In second language reading, as Harper points out, the skills needed to comprehend and enjoy a literary text in all its dimensions "must be carefully built and sequenced", following a series of stages in which mastery of the mechanics of the language must come first (1988, p. 403).

In the analysis of a second language reading situation the transactional and the interactional theories can be seen as complementary. In fact, the relationship between the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic components involved in second language reading suggests a response worth examining within this broader theoretical framework. It can be expected that the linguistic and cultural schemata of a proficient second language reader enrich rather than prevent the literary transaction with a foreign text. Therefore, it is claimed here that schema



theory while explaining the readers' behavior, can also contribute to the understanding of their aesthetic response to a literary text.

Schema theory explains that the readers' cultural background underlies the differences in the reading process between first and second language readers. Numerous second language studies on processing texts reflecting different cultures, but containing similar syntactic and rhetorical complexity, show that familiarity with the cultural features is a more determining component of reading comprehension than are syntactic difficulties. Steffensen et al. (1979), Johnson (1981), and Carrell and Floyd (1987) found that a text on one's own culture is easier to read than texts based on a foreign culture, even if both present a similar syntactic and rhetoric stance.

Given possible linguistic and cultural variables it seems reasonable to believe that the second language readers' overall aesthetic experience during and after reading be affected significantly by them. However, second language readers with a proficient level in the target language can be expected to possess already sufficient schemata of the foreign language and culture to enter the stage of aesthetic transaction with a literary text. In this transition reading comprehension can also be evidenced.

A central point in the theory of transaction lies in what Rosenblatt (1978) calls the reader's "selective attention" resulting from either the aesthetic or efferent stance adopted in the "continuum" of the reading event. Rosenblatt explains this as follows:

Any reading event falls somewhere on the continuum between the aesthetic and the efferent poles.. I speak of a predominantly efferent stance, because according to the text and the reader's purpose, some attention to qualitative elements of consciousness may enter. Similarly, aesthetic reading involves or includes referential or cognitive elements. Hence the importance of the reader's selective attention in the reading process (1982, p.269).

The reader's "selective attention" will determine the nature of the process during their transaction with the text. That is, the text can be approached merely as a source of information that the reader will carry away after the transaction, or it can become a part of a more vital, lived-through experience out of which the "poem" evolves. Both modes occur during the transaction in a continuous exchange between reader and text.

Concerning the literary experience, proficient second language readers can also grasp and enjoy the "gist" of a literary piece. That is, they can establish a meaningful "dialogue" with the message in the text in a way that might not differ significantly from their native peers. Idiosyncratic responses due to the reader's own perception of the world and cultural schemata may obviously appear in the "making of the poem", to use Rosenblatt's expression. However, their transaction with the text can become a real literary experience that goes beyond cultural and linguistic frontiers.

From a schema-theoretic perspective second language reading means that expected personal and culture-based interpretations depend on the readers' schemata or background knowledge. If the incoming information contains unknown material, the readers may either adapt it to their own schemata -which might result in misinterpretation-, or they can also modify existing schemata in order to give "room" to the new information. The comprehension process is, then, made possible on the basis of this mutual adaptation between the readers' schemata and the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980). As a result, the readers' comprehension can also be reflected in what they make of the text transactionally.

Reading literary texts in a second language is, in fact, a cultural and linguistic event adding to the reader's overall experience with the target language. The encounter between the reader's and the author's culture through the reading act gives it a singular cross-cultural trait that contributes to its *uniqueness*. In terms of what Rosenblatt calls a "live circuit" between the reader and the text, this singular trait in second language reading is the core of the set of specifications determining the literary transaction. She points out:

The poem' comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and 'the text'... A specific reader and a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event -a different poem" (1978, p.14. *My emphasis*).

In addition to their background knowledge, readers sometimes bring to the reading act a special attitude. This depends on their stance and selective attention at a particular point in the reader-text coordinates. In a second language reading event this may mean not only a fusion of two different worldviews and two different



cultures, but the particularity of the aesthetic response resulting from this fusion. We can expect even a "different" interpretation of the text, but not necessarily a response that could suggest total misunderstanding or distortion.

In relation to other kinds of reading material, literary texts may offer a more integral view of the foreign language and culture. Not only can they express better more subtle aspects of the language and culture, but through literary texts the reader may be able to pick up a deeper sense of the author's world view and expand their own knowledge of the world. These elements make literary texts valuable sources to pursue transactional and schema-theoretic approaches to second language reading.

Keeping in mind these cultural and linguistic considerations surrounding literary texts and second language reading, a set of questions in relation to the second language reader's response arises. These questions refer to, a) the way second language readers process texts in relation to their native counterparts; b) the role their cultural schemata, both content and formal, play in their reading process and final reading experience, and c) the so-called "discernible meaning" of literary texts which can be reflected in the second language reader's interpretation despite cultural and linguistic hindrances. Although the present discussion does not explore these questions empirically, a new perspective of reading research is suggested. From this perspective, the study of both the cognitive and the aesthetic elements present in the reader's response might throw more light to our understanding of the reading phenomenon, in general, and to reading in a second language, in particular.

Investigation on second language reading comprehension from a schema-theoretic perspective is relatively new. However, seminal studies on the role of schemata in reading comprehension have served as a guideline for approaching this phenomenon in a second or foreign language as well. Some of the studies specifically deal with the processing of narratives (Kintsch & Greene, 1978; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Thorndyke, 1980), and all of them empirically support the constructivist view of reading comprehension as a reader-text interaction, in which the reader's background knowledge acts as an organizing principle in the whole process.

In the line of narratives, research on reading comprehension and interpretation of stories is supported on the assumption claimed by schema-theory that the readers develop a story schema as a result of their contact with stories. There is evidence that story schema develops earlier than schemata for expository texts (Goetz & Ambruster, 1980; Mandler, 1978) and that it is more cross-culturally universal and less culture-specific (Mandler, 1980). This early development accounts for readers' ability to process stories: their story schema makes them sensitive to this type of discourse and guides them in its processing (Mandler & Johnson, 1977).

Studies on comprehension of narratives reflecting a foreign language and culture lead to better understanding of the second language reading process of more complex literary texts. Some of those studies deal with the role of the reader's background knowledge in the comprehension of familiar (Adams and Bruce 1982; Golden 1985) and unfamiliar folk tales and fables (Kintsch & Greene, 1978; Rice, 1980). Others are comparative studies focusing on the behavior of native and nonnative readers processing narratives (Carrell, 1983, Lee, 1986 a). The role of cross-cultural "content" and "formal" schemata (Carrell, 1983) in the processing of stories written in a foreign language and reflecting a foreign culture have received particular attention in second language reading research (Carrell, 1984, 1985; Carrell & Floyd, 1987; Johnson 1981).

The most important contribution of these and other studies (Barnett, 1981; Bernhardt, 1983; Hudson, 1982; Lee, 1986 b) lies in their having provided a theoretical framework and strong evidence to ratify the importance of the role of cultural content and formal schemata in easing second language reading processing and comprehension.

Comprehending a text from a schema-theoretic perspective means, as Anderson and Pearson (1984) would put it, finding or modifying existing "mental homes" for the information in the text. In a second or foreign language reading situation this "accomodation" of schemata involves a cross-cultural element that might affect comprehension of and transaction with literary texts.

In the first place, literary transaction in either first or second language reading is based on the same ecological assumptions. After all, transacting with the text implies a vital, lived



experience through which the readers bring their world to the world of the text. The cross-cultural experiences become a challenging addition to the whole activity implicit in the transaction.

However, it can be expected that when traits of the reader's native language and culture interact with those of the foreign language, processing of the material will be either interrupted or eased. This depends on the cultural and linguistic distance between the reader and the text. The farther the distance the harder the comprehension process (Barnitz, 1986; Carrell and Floyd, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Marshal, 1979; McKay, 1982) and the more difficult the transaction. Conversely, as the reader acquires more proficiency in the target language and more understanding of the target culture the literary transaction is expected to improve.

In order to understand the second language reading process we need to compare it with that of the native language. Although there are basic similarities in the reading strategies across languages (Barnitz, 1986), differences in linguistic and cultural structures between native and foreign languages may affect the second language reading process.

In the first place, as part of their knowledge of the world and knowledge of text structure, proficient native readers can construct meaning as they read; that is, as cognitive operations interact with the incoming information. In this way, the reader utilizes the top-down cognitive processing mode in order to narrow down the meaning of the text, while using graphic cues to determine the specific linguistic expression of the meaning. Ideally, this interaction is in balance.

In a second language reading situation the assumed balance between bottom-up and top-down processes is less liable to occur. Given, for instance, a situation of second language proficient readers processing a narrative or story, it is possible that they come across more unfamiliar cultural and linguistic features than their native counterparts as their cultural schemata might differ from those of their native peers. Also, the nonnative readers might lack sufficient pragmatic knowledge of the target culture and language (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). In this case, important information implied on the top level structures of the text (Kintsch & Greene, 1978) can be missed. As a result, misinterpretation or failure to interpret the text or part of it may occur.

Further, unlike native language readers, the second language readers are more liable to face an unfamiliar text structure. As in any reading situation in which processing foreign stories is involved, this eventuality can result in possible distortions in the reader's recall, summary, or evocation of the story (Barlett, 1932). In summary, the whole situation would turn the L2 reading into a more text-based process in relation to a native language reading situation.

Carrell (1983) and Lee (1986) can partially illustrate the native and second language interactive process. They report comparative studies showing differences between native and nonnative readers interacting with narratives. Both researchers found that the presence or absence of different background components in a narrative (a title, transparency of lexical items, knowledge of content area of the text), would not affect comprehension among proficient native language and second language readers alike.

Carrell concluded that her readers -readers of English as a second language-, did not show *any* significant effect of background knowledge in their reading as normally occurs in a native reading situation (Carrell, 1983). In Lee's study, although his subjects displayed a more complex interaction with the text, those components of background knowledge seemed not to act uniformly across each other as in proficient native readers. Lee concluded that his "advanced" learners were far from being ready to deal with literary texts at all (1986, p. 353).

It is worth mentioning two facts in relation to Carrell's and Lee's studies. First, the passages used were "Doing laundry" and "Serenade", both used in Bransford and Johnson's study (1972). Both are very "opaque" narratives far comparable with most of the texts readers have to deal with. Secondly, in contrast to Carrell's subjects, a multicultural group, Lee's American subjects were allowed to write their recalls in their native language. This, besides the additional fact that one of the passages used, "Doing laundry", depicts a clear cultural angle of American life, obviously familiar to Lee's subjects, could have biased his results. For these reasons both Carrell's and Lee's conclusions might be considered premature.

In contrast, Allen et al, (1988) report another study showing the complex dynamics of the reading process in a second language. This study reports a higher degree of interaction



among secondary school students coping with authentic expository texts on familiar subjects in a foreign language. The researchers conclude: "The protocols illustrate that regardless of level all subjects were at the very least able to capture... a surprising amount of information" (p. 168); this even against their own teachers' expectations.

These studies on the cognitive aspect of second language can lead to a comparison and better understanding of the literary transaction in first and second or foreign languages. As a universal phenomenon, the reading process is a sort of recreation resulting from the reader/text dynamics. The readers' expectations, emotions, and knowledge of the world become their raw material for their response. This can help us glimpse the uniqueness of the reading act, in general, and reading in a second language, in particular, which, at the same time, is not totally idiosyncratic, but is also controlled by the text's openness and constraints. As Rosenblatt puts it: "To say that a text possesses 'significant form' seems actually tautological, a judgment on the quality of the potential transaction" (1978, p. 90).

Keeping in mind schema-theory explanation for reader-text interactive processing, we can also see more clearly what Rosenblatt means when she equates the reader's and the text's role in the reading act. Schema theory claims that reader-text interaction occurs because the reader finds in the text information that has meaning for him. That is, the text guides the readers' construction of meaning as they fit in its schemata into theirs. Likewise, transactional theory points out that reader and text are taken to be such because of their mutual relationship. In Rosenblatt's terms: "a person becomes a reader by virtue of its activity in relationship to a text and a text becomes a poem or a scientific formula by virtue of its relationship with a reader who can thus interpret it..." (1978, p.18). In other words, the text has a potentiality for transaction that guides the reader in their stance selection.

The plot organization of stories is contained in the reader's story schema. On contact with the text, the reader tries to fit in this knowledge with the text's structure. Although more complex narratives, such as some modern short stories, are not necessarily ruled by the same underlying schema as simple ones, the reader uses this basic underlying structure to process them.

Brewer & Lichtenstein (1982), for instance, mention the fact that some stories are not goal-

oriented. That is, they do not follow the hero's fight-to-achieve-a-goal sort of a story. However, research on induced schemata shows that the basic internal representation for stories can be efficiently used by the reader in comprehending more complex stories if taught to do so. Singer and Dolan explain this as follows:

[W]hen students have to apply schemata to complex short stories, in which the fit between the schema-structures and the story is not readily apparent, then effective instruction for acquiring story-general questions and generating story-specific questions for instantiating schema slots must continue over more than one story, so that students can learn these complex metacognitive processes and have practice in applying them (1982, p.179).

Understanding the relationships between schema-theory and transactional theory may bring significant importations to the research on reading literary texts in a second or foreign language. Keeping in mind that the processing of narratives appears earlier in reading development and that, according to the Universal Hypothesis, the reading process presumably follows basically the same patterns in all languages (Bernhardt, 1991), it is possible that, second language readers meet less difficulty in understanding short stories than in processing expository texts. As opposed to expository texts, literary texts are more closely linked to the matrix of language. This sole reason can explain both their simplicity and complexity in terms of the transactional process.

M. Marshall's experience with foreign language students in Puerto Rico is a good example of this. She explains how cultural differences are reflected, for instance, in their "obvious unfamiliarity of [the] cyclical seasonal change which provides the fundamental mutability mythology of English literature", but can be compensated for with other elements perhaps closer to their culture than to that of modern Anglo-American readers. She illustrates: "Hamlet's horror at his mother's hasty remarriage is natural, not psychopathic, to our students" (1979, p.334).

Finally, linguistic and cultural obstacles can be stimulating and challenging in second language reading of literary texts. The presence of new linguistic and cultural traits can provoke significant features in the response evidencing an aesthetic stance that may be culturally determined, but not less valid in terms of measuring comprehension.