

# ESTABLISHING PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATIONAL TEXT DESIGN AND CLASSROOM READING ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING FOR SECOND LANGUAGE READERS: THE CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND TO A CENTRAL QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY RESEARCH STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning is facilitated when access to learning opportunities is expanded to include people of diverse demographic characteristics, cultural backgrounds, and geographic locations. This paper explains the theoretical framework for a research study exploring the effect of cross-linguistic variations on comprehension for second-language students reading expository text in the medium of English within the knowledge domain of Australian law.

## INTRODUCTION

Current trends in higher education in Australia mean that reading comprehension and the cognitive skills that facilitate it are increasingly important factors in the learning process. Flexible delivery modes, including traditional print-based distance learning and increasingly popular online learning modes, make higher education more accessible and also increase the learner's dependence on processing written text – that is, reading – for understanding and learning. Another trend in Australian higher education is the increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students enrolling in university courses, both online and face to face, in offshore and onshore “Australian” campuses (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2002, 2003, 2004). The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of learners has implications for all universities attempting to produce relevant and accessible academic text in the medium of English for multiple delivery modes. Understanding the L2 (second language) reading process, particularly in English, is increasingly significant due to the dominant position of English as a global language in both paper-based print and hypertextual formats (Bryson, 1990; Crystal, 1997; Pennycook, 1995). This dominance of English persists in academic teaching, learning, and publishing to the extent that Tercanlioglu (2004) has claimed that “in order to operate effectively in the academic world, postgraduate students must read English” (p. 568). At Central Queensland University (CQU), approximately half of the student population is made up of L2 learners and a significant majority of these are postgraduate students. Current studies are beginning to identify important ways in which

L2 reading comprehension processes differ from first language (L1) reading comprehension (Koda, 2005). This conceptual paper reviews current literature on this topic in order to (a) devise a theoretical framework for a research study involving L2 learner-readers at CQU, which is described in detail in a subsequent paper; and (b) identify textual characteristics and associated pedagogical strategies that may facilitate L2 reading comprehension of academic text in the Australian university context.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: READING COMPREHENSION THEORY

Reading comprehension, in general, “...occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already known” (Koda, 2005, p. 4). What is already known dramatically distinguishes the typical L2 reader from the L1 reader in terms of prior literacy experience, cognitive maturity, and culturally – specific knowledge. Dominant theoretical models of reading comprehension derive from studies of first language learner readers (generally children) and are frequently borrowed as frameworks for analysis of the L2 reader experience (generally adult) in the absence of a viable and comprehensive L2 reading model. The most influential of these theoretical models explaining both listening and reading comprehension is the “interactive process model” which holds that “...comprehension is the outcome of the interaction between linguistic and background knowledge” (Park, 2004, p. 2).

This model was recently applied by Park (2004) in a study of L2 reading and listening

comprehension and was able to explain a total variance of only 20% in reading comprehension of L2 university students. As Park points out, L2 reading comprehension appears to be the outcome of a more complex set of variables than what linguistic knowledge and background knowledge can account for. It may be that the term “background knowledge” itself is so comprehensive that its effects are almost impossible to isolate and measure. In the interactive process’ theoretical framework, “linguistic knowledge” refers to a reader’s knowledge of the *target* language, whilst background knowledge seems to refer to knowledge of everything else, including knowledge of other languages. As reading habits are developed in the experience of learning a first language, L2 readers can be expected to read differently as a consequence of these specific L1 experiences. A consideration of the effects of different linguistic background knowledge and specific cultural background knowledge on the reading comprehension of expository English study text is provided in a later section of this paper.

Several studies into L2 reading comprehension have focused on differential L2 reader use of cognitive, metacognitive, and support strategies to explain L2 reading comprehension variance (Tercanlioglu, 2004; Anderson, 2003), and the ability of an L2 reader to deploy efficient reading strategies has been found to positively effect L2 reader comprehension (Braun, (1985) in Tercanlioglu, 2004; Koda, 2005). The interactive process model of reading identifies three processes that constitute comprehension: Decoding, where linguistic information is extracted from print; text information building, where extracted ideas are integrated to uncover text meanings; and situation-model building, where the amalgamated text information is synthesized with prior knowledge, (Koda, 2005). Whilst linguistic (L2) knowledge is conventionally acknowledged to account for 30-40% of L2 reading variance (Bernhardt and Kamil as cited in Morrison, 2004; Bossers, 1991; Carrol as cited in Koda, 2005), efficient reading strategies can enhance comprehension at the level of decoding, information building, and situation-model building to go some way to compensate for the comprehension shortfall caused by limited L2 knowledge.

A further theory of reading comprehension, particularly important in relation to a study of university learners, is the reading gear theory, which suggests that reading *purpose* needs to be considered in any study of reading

comprehension (Hudson, 1996; Carver as cited in Koda, 2005). Reading for academic purposes, involves “reading to learn” rather than “learning to read”, and reading to learn in a second language at university level has been described as “formidable” (Cummins as cited in Koda, 2005, p. 22). Reading strategy theory and reading gear theory contribute useful insights into the reading comprehension experiences and performances of L2 university students. As strategies are selected in order to achieve specific purposes (Paris, Wasik and Turner as cited in Koda, 2005), identification of reading strategies that work for L2 readers, with the clear purpose of learning from academic text, and the explicit teaching of these strategies in university courses, would seem both possible and desirable. The interactive process model, as well as reading strategy and reading gear theory, were considered in the design of the research study which was conducted in two phases. The first phase sought to identify the effects of different background knowledge – specifically, different *linguistic* background knowledge – on L2 reading comprehension of authentic and manipulated versions of the same academic text. The second phase sought to identify and distinguish reading strategies deployed by the most successful and the least successful readers from the first phase of the research. The reading purpose in both phases of the research was learning from expository academic text. The research method, data collection, and data analysis process are explained in detail in a subsequent paper. This paper reviews the current literature addressing the second language reading comprehension process in order to provide a theoretical rationale for the research study and also to identify general pedagogical principles and strategies that teachers may usefully deploy to facilitate comprehension of university study materials for their L2 students. The specific pedagogical strategies of text simplification and elaboration are explored in detail.

### **Examining the components of background knowledge affecting L2 university readers**

From the perspective of the interactive process model, as university students in their first year of study at Australian campuses are tested for English competency of 0.6 IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or above, linguistic knowledge in L2 can be expected to be less of a variable to reading comprehension than background knowledge. L2 learners

generally have less linguistic knowledge in the target language than L1 learners, and studies suggest that L2 learners may compensate for this by activating background knowledge more rigorously, particularly in listening comprehension (Park, 2004). However, background knowledge is a complex concept that can be broken down into sub-categories of knowledge which are conventionally understood as general knowledge, domain knowledge, and formal knowledge (Anderson and Pearson as cited in Koda, 2005). General knowledge refers to mental schema by which abstract information can be generalized to various contexts. Domain knowledge refers to what is known about a specialised field of knowledge. Formal knowledge refers to an individual's expectations of text structure and the textual inter-relationships which create meaning. Problematically, the background knowledge that L1 learners bring to L2 texts involves culturally specific information, values habits, and beliefs that affect all aspects of meaning making and understanding.

### **Culturally specific background knowledge: the effects of culturally different mental schema on L2 reading comprehension**

Mental schema or ways of generalizing the world are fundamentally different across cultures. Theorists in intercultural communication studies have identified conceptual models that demonstrate culturally specific differences in values, beliefs, and practices that fundamentally influence the way a member of a particular culture interprets the world (Hofstede, 1984, 1981; Hall, 1959; Stewart, 1972). The dominant mental schema for successful academic practice in the Western tradition is critical thinking. A significant range of studies identify L2 university students as non-critical thinkers (Ward, 2003; Paton, 2004; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004; Chalmers and Volet, 1997). As cultural difference permeates all categories of knowledge, general background knowledge may be of limited use to cross-cultural L2 university students and may even negatively affect their performance in the Australian teaching and learning context. Many studies argue that teachers with culturally diverse students need to explicitly model methods of thought central to the Western academic method, particularly critical thinking and argumentation skills, in order to promote mental schema that are conducive to academic

success in this context (Egege and Kutielieh, 2004; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004) .

Macro-level inferential textual processes facilitating comprehension of more complex meanings at the level of paragraph, chapter, and whole text are significantly affected by the culturally different background knowledge that diverse L2 readers bring to a text. For example, such knowledge will influence a reader's ability to differentiate thematic knowledge from peripheral information:

Because this process is dictated by readers' appraisals of the comparative significance of individual text ideas, what is considered thematic information is heavily prejudiced by their content knowledge. Consequently, the thematic/peripheral distinction varies across readers to the extent that their knowledge bases differ. Therefore, background knowledge strongly affects inference generation by influencing thematic status decisions. (Koda, 2005, p. 135)

Culturally specific background knowledge has also been observed to affect discourse processing in that text recall is more successful for L2 learners when the text content is culturally familiar information (see Iranian study [p. 141] and Korean study [p. 149] in Koda, 2005). Such studies suggest that "...L2 text information is filtered through L1 cultural knowledge for semantic interpretation" (Koda, 2005 p.149). Hence, background knowledge differentially affects L2 reading comprehension depending on the culturally-specific mental schema of the reader and the degree of homogeneity between the reader's original culture and the "new" or "second" culture in which they are studying.

Unlike the first language learner, the second language learner is already literate: they have learned how to read and write in a specific language at least once before. This makes the L2 learning and reading experience fundamentally different from the L1 experience and brings both advantages and disadvantages. As most L2 learners are adult, they can be expected to have greater capacity for metacognitive processes in support of comprehension and learning: "...metacognition, or cognition of cognition, refers to a learner's understanding and control of their own thinking and learning", (Koda, 2005, p. 211).

...although underdeveloped metacognition prohibits inexperienced L1 readers from using a broad range of strategies, metacognitively mature adult L2 readers should be aware of strategies and their merits. (p. 222)

Problematically, as L2 readers import reading habits and strategies from one language system to another, strategies that work in one language may not transfer effectively to another. For example, scanning skills developed by readers from cultures employing right-to-left textual organization may impede comprehension for such readers in left-to-right text cultures. Hence, mental schema which are influenced by linguistic traditions and conventions mean that whilst L2 university students can be expected to deploy metacognitive strategies to aid comprehension, the metacognitive processes that they import into comprehension of English may not be calibrated to the system of linguistic and textual organization conventional to the language.

As well as affecting the processes of comprehension of text, culturally different mental schema affects the L2 reader's *attitude* to educational text. Rather than engage critically with academic text, students in collectivist cultures, for example, are encouraged to approach canonical texts as legitimately authoritative and are not expected to question "expert" positions, such as the position of the collectivist teacher (Hofstede, 1984, 1991). This can lead to Australian teacher perceptions of L2 students as passive and disinterested (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Ward, 2001). Collectivist students may memorise canonical texts and reproduce these texts with inappropriate citation methods in their assessment tasks, and this leads to the frequent observation by Australian teachers that L2 students tend to plagiarise (Anyanwu, 2004). Hence, culturally different prior teaching and learning experiences can fundamentally affect how students approach texts and respond to them.

### **Domain specific background knowledge: the significance of domain knowledge in L2 reading comprehension**

An important observation of recent studies into reading comprehension for L2 learners is that domain knowledge has more effect on L2 comprehension than linguistic knowledge. Importantly in the context of academic texts for prescribed courses of study, domain knowledge, or knowledge of a specialised field can assist L2 learners extract information from texts; in fact, "L2 proficiency limitations can often be reduced when reading domain relevant texts" (Koda, 2005, p. 150). This is partly because highly

specialised texts are generally structured in a particular presentation format commonly accepted among domain specialists, and the technical terms and domain-specific jargon produce a more restricted range of terms that can be used to aid comprehension (Koda, 2005). Hence, L2 reading comprehension can be significantly enhanced when domain-specific study texts are presented in a consistent format which is conventional to the field of discourse and exclude language that is not commonly associated with the specific knowledge domain. Study texts also need to be scaffolded so that component concepts of domain knowledge are gradually introduced and reiterated across the specific text, the course, and/or the program.

### **Linguistic background knowledge: the effects of specific language background on reading comprehension of English text**

L2 readers differ to L1 readers in several important ways. Namely, L2 readers have prior or dual literacy experience, limited linguistic sophistication in L2, and dual language involvement in the comprehension process. Frequent L2 learner-reader use of translation and/or code switching in comprehending discursive text has been documented (Upton, 1997). This linguistic interaction has multiple effects, the most obvious being the extended time required for L2 readers to absorb an L2 text – the time being approximately 30% longer than for an L1 reader (Anderson, 2003, Koda, 2005). This has important implications for university teachers, particularly in the context of time-restricted examinations which remain a dominant assessment format of Australian universities.

The interaction of dual or multiple languages in the process of reading comprehension has complex effects, and this complexity is to some extent governed by the degree of conformity or variance between the lexical, syntactical, and semantic rules of the specific first and second languages involved. "Because L2 reading involves various combinations of languages, sharing their structural and functional properties in varying degrees, L1 and L2 distance in virtually all aspects of linguistic elements ... needs to be considered as [a] ... potential factor determining ... L2 proficiency," (Koda, 2005, p. 24). This linguistic "distance" differentially affects the component processes that go together to engender comprehension for readers from various language backgrounds. Fundamental

letter and word recognition requires orthographic and phonological knowledge which is different across languages. Sentence processing and inter-sentential processing relies on an understanding of morphosyntactic structures which are also distinct. The morphosyntactic differentials between the first language and the second language significantly affect comprehension: "... considerable research makes it plain that L2 sentence processing is heavily constrained by L1 morphosyntactic properties" (Koda, 2005, p.120). Understanding some of the key differentials for readers from distinct language backgrounds may assist identify principles for English-medium academic text design that facilitate L2 reading comprehension for culturally diverse L2 readers. Such readers make up part of the CQU student population.

### **The effects of orthographic distance**

The specific orthographical features of a first language will differentially affect the learner's ability to recognise words in a second language. That is, learners with typographic alphabet language backgrounds, such as French or Arabic, will find word recognition in English easier than those from logographic language backgrounds, such as Mandarin or Japanese (Koda, 2005) and vice-versa (Upton, 1997). Typographic languages feature a visual system of code (the alphabet) which corresponds to a total number of possible sounds. These sounds can be combined in a limited number of ways, according to the lexical rules of the particular language, to form sound combinations that become words; that is, meaningful concepts. The letters of the alphabet have no intrinsic meaning of themselves. In contrast, in logographic languages the smallest unit of symbolic meaning in an "alphabet" is the full word. This means that far more code needs to be committed to memory as visual representations than must be remembered by typographic readers.

Efficient decoding is possible only as letter and word recognition develop and the learner's vocabulary knowledge develops so that the process of word recognition becomes increasingly automated. This "automaticity" frees up the limited space of working memory and allows for the higher order cognitive processes of text meaning building. "Because working memory resources are restricted, its dual functions – storage and computation – compete for its limited capacity" (Koda, 2005, p.199). A significant handicap has been

identified for L2 learners from non-alphabetic backgrounds in developing such automaticity in letter and word recognition.

Shared orthographic knowledge provides long term facilitation in L2 reading development, first by promoting mastery of L2 visual information sampling skills and then facilitating information integration from multiple sources,' (Koda, 2005, p. 43).

Because decoding is unique to visual communication, it is acquired through print processing experience. In typologically similar languages, the extensive print processing skills established in L1 can be fairly easily transferred, which allows the reader's working memory to engage more quickly and develop automated word recognition. This automaticity thereby frees up memory to engage more quickly and effectively in its simultaneous task of processing the information extracted from words to construct complex meanings through a cross-referential process incorporating background knowledge. L2 readers from typologically distant language backgrounds "...require more extensive print processing experience to develop sufficient automaticity in letter and word recognition before they can efficiently develop the cognitive associations and processes central to complex meaning construction and learning," (Koda, 2005, p. 40). Hence, it is important for teachers to encourage extensive reading in culturally diverse classrooms, particularly for non-alphabet background students, and to facilitate this by careful organization of study text materials.

Because of their own ingrained automaticity, experts sometimes have difficulty reflecting on their own text-meaning construction processes, which may create impediments to their attention to the text's structural element. As a result, they overlook essential structure building instructions, thus requiring readers to construct the intended structure without explicit guidelines, (Koda, 2005, p.166).

This leads to a consideration of the role of formal knowledge in L2 reading comprehension.

### **Formal background knowledge: the effects of text-form knowledge and expectations on L2 reading comprehension**

In addition to the differences in lexical, morphological, and syntactical knowledge, and in the semantic processes deployed in meaning construction, L1 and L2 reading comprehension is also differentiated by culturally-specific

expectations of generic textual rules, including the rules central to academic text structure and style in the critical tradition of Australian universities.

In some cultures, the primary function of writing is basically referential, whereas in others it seems both cognitive and expressive. Consequently, the relative emphasis placed on a particular function within a cultural group shapes perceptions of both text content and form appropriateness. (Koda, 2005, p. 168)

Expository and discursive texts dominate Australian university texts. Even in cultures where such cognitive and expressive text types are common, the manner in which successful exposition and argument are achieved in academic texts can differ in critical ways. For example, German and Japanese academic textual tradition incorporates digression as a legitimate feature of academic argument (Kreutz and Klein, 1987; Mieko, 1997), whereas digression is generally considered a negative feature to Western academic argument. Exposition in Western texts is conventionally achieved through linear argument whereas it may be achieved in Confucian type texts through circular argument (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004). Various studies indicate that the rhetorical distance between L1 and L2 will affect L2 discourse processing (Koda, 2005, p.173) and that formal text-structure knowledge greatly enhances text comprehension and memory (Koda, 2005). However, this knowledge of text structure is "... only acquired through formal learning and substantial reading experience," (Koda, 2005, p.139). Hence, explicit training in top-level structures of texts which conform to the generic critical conventions of Western academic text should enhance reading comprehension for L2 students. Extensive practice in reading such texts is also requisite for developing text-form knowledge. Incorporating reading activity into classroom tutorial exercises – for first-year L2 students in particular – is critical in order to train them in top-down structures, to assist their comprehension and retention of textual ideas and, also, for them to enhance their automatic recognition of words and sentence meanings, which is only achieved through experience.

#### **PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING L2 READING COMPREHENSION OF ACADEMIC STUDY MATERIALS**

In accounting for the various impacts of culturally different background knowledge and

mental schema on reading comprehension for L2 university students, teachers should consider both what can be done *to* a text and what can be done *with* a text to facilitate their students' learning. The following recommendations offer general pedagogical strategies for study text selection and design as well as strategies for incorporating reading activities into classroom exercises that may promote L2 reading comprehension attending to culturally-specific differences in mental schema, linguistic knowledge, and formal knowledge.

- Make reading social: Australian university teachers often perceive reading as an "out-of-class" activity, but incorporating reading into classroom activity has multiple benefits for L2 learners. Cooperative learning activities are particularly beneficial as they help address "new" student anxieties, create unthreatening opportunities for acculturation into a specific academic community, motivate students to learn more, and improve overall academic performance (Koda, 2005). They may include cognitive modelling, oral reading, peer tutoring, peer editing, and composition revising (Koda, 2005).
- Create opportunities for extensive reading practice. This will promote the development of automaticity and free up working memory for the complex cognitive processes involved in learning.
- Devise class activities and reading materials that make culturally different mental schema and alternative approaches to knowledge construction, such as critical thinking, explicit.
- Design critical reading tasks in order to prepare students for a major assignment in which these "readings" will be incorporated. For example, an annotated bibliography can be set as a "low-weight", first assignment. This allows teachers to assess the reading and citation skills of their L2 students *before* they submit a major piece for assessment. The major assessment task would then require the students to incorporate and respond to the texts they have read in addressing a domain-specific, critical question.
- Scaffold terms and concepts within the text, the course, and across programs. Design pre-read and post-read activities for vocabulary development and retention. Vocabulary instruction is even more efficacious when it incorporates scaffolding

for subsequent text-content understanding (Hudson, 1996) as well as when it provides multiple exposures in a variety of contexts (Hudson, 1996; Koda, 2005).

- Teach strategic reading: encourage self-regulation through core strategies – prediction, self questioning, clarification, and summarisation.
- Retain a tight focus on the specific knowledge domain and exclude non-domain information.
- Exclude or explain culturally-specific information in texts: “L2 situation modeling may become more difficult as the quantity of culturally specific text increases” (Koda, 2005, p. 141). For example, an American textbook may confound an L2 student’s ability to situation model in a course that teaches Australian accounting standards.
- Maintain industry-consistent and internally consistent text structure. Teach top-level textual rules of specific academic text types, such as essay, report, and case study.
- Teach the conventional formal organization of ideas in academic and professional texts to L2 students.
- Engage students in critical thinking exercises (argument, analysis, evaluation, and creative thinking) across a range of oral, written, and reading exercises or activities.
- Create modified academic text.

## CONCLUSION

Reading supports independent learning and extends lifelong learning options. Understanding the second language reading comprehension process is important for teachers in the Australian university system because their courses attract increasingly diverse students across flexible and varied delivery modes. This paper has reviewed current literature in order to (a) establish a theoretical framework and rationale for a L2 reading comprehension research study reported in a subsequent paper, and (b) establish general pedagogical principles and strategies for facilitating second language reading comprehension in academic contexts.

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