

Between the Lines: Teaching Inference to Students Who Don't Read

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This paper documents my experience using works of short fiction, mainly from Neil Gaiman, to teach inference skills and help students learn to interpret an author's unwritten words. The students, who previously had no interest in reading, identified long texts and lack of comprehension as the main barriers to reading.

この論文は、短編小説、主にニール・ゲイマンの作品を使い、リーディングの授業で推測力をどのように教えたか、どのように学生が作者のメッセージを読みとれるようになるかを、講師の体験に基づいて書かれている。学生たちは、それまでは読書に興味を持っていなかったが、長いテキストや理解の欠如が読書をする際の障害になっていたことを認識した。

“// **TEACHER, I'VE** never read a book.” This is what one student said to me at the beginning of a month-long literature course. He was quickly joined by a chorus of classmates, each one saying the same thing. I encouraged the students not to limit themselves to considering English-language texts, but also to consider books in their L1. Exasperation crossed the face of the self-appointed spokesperson, “No, teacher, I've *never* read a book.” A sea of concurring nods bobbed behind him.

This concern of having a limited experience with literature was voiced in response to a survey (see Appendix) given on the first day of the course. In fact, this day had been designed as more of a fact-finding mission than a proper lecture, the purpose of the survey being to gauge the interests and experiences of the students in order to adapt the course syllabus to their personal backgrounds and tastes. When prompted to give reasons for not reading, the students said there was no time, they had no interest, it was too difficult, it was not important, and that it was simply not entertaining. After a brief class discussion, the students determined that long texts and lack of comprehension were two of the biggest reasons they did not read.

I now had two questions that needed to be answered before I could develop the course outline. First, how does one teach literature to students who do not read? Moreover, how does one teach literature to students who *actively choose* not to read? In this paper, I will describe my approach of starting small and focusing on inference in order to give students the skills to read and comprehend longer texts.

Teaching Context

The institution was an intensive English program in the midwestern United States that had three broad levels (beginning, intermediate, advanced), with each level further divided into four sublevels, creating a total of 12 levels into which students were placed after taking an English placement test developed by the University of Michigan known as the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) and completing an oral interview with the program's assistant director. The majority of the students were from Saudi Arabia.

The courses focused on improving students' academic language and critical thinking skills to the point where they could pass the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL exam with a score high enough to gain entrance to an American university and be prepared for the teaching styles that are common in United States tertiary education. Part of this preparation included content-based instruction that focused less on metalanguage and more on developing the critical analysis skills needed for university coursework.

The literature course was similar to what one might find at an undergraduate level, the curriculum having been designed several years before for advanced students who could read academic texts. It primarily focused on exposing students to the concepts of literary devices (e.g., metaphor, allusion, symbolism), as well as encouraging development of the critical thinking skills represented in the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy, which outlines differences between the lower order thinking skills of remembering, understanding, and applying and the higher order thinking skills of analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Indeed, the objective of the course was to move beyond the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy into the higher levels (analyze and evaluate) through the use of unmodified texts. Furthermore, the curriculum operated on the understanding that most university coursework requires a substantial amount of out-of-class reading, and students must therefore also be expected to increase their reading fluency, reading rate, and comprehension of texts through reading practice.

Developing Overall Course Goals

Focusing on Inference

Because I was teaching a course that had been designed for students with a great deal more exposure to literature, I had to adapt the syllabus to better reflect the experiences and literacy levels of this particular group of students. This meant the students would not be exposed to as many concepts in the course, but they would have more in-depth study in certain areas, such as inference, that I felt would benefit them when they entered university.

Inference, which means forming a conclusion based on logical reasoning, encourages students to be active readers. Their comprehension is monitored by asking them to formulate ideas about the implicit meaning of the text. Making inferences, especially from academic texts, "requires the evaluation of many different linguistic cues, the prioritization of potentially conflicting cues, or the synthesis of evidence from multiple texts to build critical reading comprehension abilities" (Grabe, 2009, p. 70). Because making inferences demands a great deal of attention from the reader, I felt that explicit instruction and practice in making inferences would benefit the students and encourage them to become more active readers.

In order to achieve this, I used Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) technique of meaning creation through textual connections. This technique is separated into three parts:

1. Text-to-self: Can I relate this to something in my life?
2. Text-to-text: Can I relate this to something else I have read or seen?
3. Text-to-world: Can I relate this to something that has happened or is happening in the world?

By making these types of connections, meaning can be created and the accompanying thought processes can be traced by the student. It is important for students to be able to explain their opinions logically and express how and why they have come to a particular conclu-

sion. By using Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) technique of meaning creation, I believed that the interest levels of these students might be raised and they would become more engaged with the texts.

Starting Small

The course required that students read unmodified texts; graded readers were actively discouraged by the administrators. Although graded readers can ease students into reading longer texts by simplifying the language, I also believed that reading modified texts would do the students a disservice given the fact that they were unlikely to encounter simplified texts during their college careers. This meant that I had to find unmodified texts that were linguistically accessible to students who had had very little experience with reading, in either their L1 or their L2. Accuracy is an integral part of reading fluency, and in order for reading to be accurate the reader must be able to recognize words quickly and correctly, which in turn influences reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009).

Even though the students enrolled in the literature course ostensibly had intermediate-to-advanced levels of language proficiency, they could not be expected to complete the course materials, which had been designed for students who had more extensive reading backgrounds. Indeed, the materials selected by the administration—works by Hawthorne, Poe, Twain, and O'Connor—were not appropriate for the students due to both the dense language and the use of low frequency vocabulary. As the students had only had limited exposure to literature and written language, these texts would have forced them to rely on their dictionaries and they would have understood only the surface level meaning of the texts. Reliance on dictionaries could prevent the students from employing the higher order thinking skills that are needed to infer the subtextual meanings of the readings as per course objectives.

In order to maintain accuracy without sacrificing “authenticity” of the text and bearing in mind that these students had relatively low levels of reading stamina, I only used works of short fiction in

the course. Readers need to build stamina over time by starting with short texts and then slowly reading longer and longer texts (Burke, 2000). This is especially true of L2 learners because reading more than a few paragraphs at a time can be cognitively exhausting, even at intermediate levels. Hence, I chose a six-word story, which urban legend attributes to Ernest Hemingway, as the first text to read for both surface and subtextual meaning: “Baby shoes for sale, never worn.”

I chose this text not only for its brevity, but also for the opportunity it presented to introduce the concept of inference to the students. Though short, this six-word story can have multiple implicit meanings depending on one's experiences and personality and it allows for a quick segue from explicit to implicit meanings. I gave the students the following questions, individually at first, then shared in small groups, and finally they discussed them as a class.

1. What are the facts of the story? (explicit meaning)
2. What does the story mean? (implicit meaning)
3. Why do you think so? (metacognition)

Their answers indicated that they were indeed able to start making inferences and interpretations that reflected their own experiences. I then gave them an extension activity in which they had to create their own six-word stories. Once finished, they exchanged stories and tried to guess the implicit meanings of their classmates' texts.

The Writings of Neil Gaiman as Teaching Texts

In order to create a discernible theme for the readings I chose several works by author Neil Gaiman to use in class. This was partially due to the course being taught around the time of Halloween—Gaiman's stories are often macabre enough that one may consider them seasonally appropriate—and also because Gaiman writes across genres and for many levels. For those unfamiliar with Gaiman's work, he has written everything from children's picture

books to comic books, poetry, young adult novels, adult novels, and anthologies of short fiction, making it easy to create a list of texts that match the level of a particular class. Additionally, the fact that different texts from the same author can be chosen for different levels of student proficiency, while retaining some similar or recurring themes, can create a sense of textual cohesion within a course.

The course culminated in reading one of Gaiman's short stories from his *Fragile Things* anthology (2006). The students read this 10-page story during one class period and discussed the implicit meaning of the text, as well as which literary devices the author had used. The story, "Feeders and Eaters," is the tale of an unidentified narrator who listens to an old acquaintance's rather gruesome account of living with a frail woman who has an extraordinary appetite. At first, I only gave them the title and two questions:

1. What kind of story do you think this will be? Why?
2. What do you predict will happen in this story? Why?

After sharing their ideas as a class, I gave them the first page of the story and asked:

1. What is happening on this page? What specific sentences or words help me understand this?
2. Is there an implicit meaning that is not explicitly stated by the author? Why do I think this?
3. Can you connect what is happening to your own life, or something that happened in a different media (film, video game, and so forth)?

After they had discussed these questions about the first page, the students worked in pairs to read and analyze the rest of the story page-by-page. As they read each page, they paused to discuss what they were reading, checking comprehension through discussion, and making notes of any words they could not understand from

context. At the end of the story, each pair had to create a number of questions about the story—all focusing on inference and higher order thinking skills—and then present their questions to another pair. With this activity, the students found that although they were able to comprehend the text of the story with few discernible differences between pairs, there were often different inferences made about the subtext due to the personal experiences they had used to connect to the story.

Observations and Conclusions

The students seemed to respond well to this approach, saying that they liked creating meaning by linking the text with their own experiences and trying to guess the author's intent rather than being told by the teacher. As a result of sharing their ideas with a partner or with a small group, reading became less of an isolating activity and more of an opportunity to have social interaction through engaging with the text and each other. By creating questions and answering them together, they were able to utilize their preferred learning styles, and because they had to defend their ideas by referring to the text, they were able to make their arguments more reasoned and logical.

By the end of the course, most of the students appeared less intimidated by the task of reading. For example, they participated in the reading activities with an increasing level of interest as the course progressed. They benefitted from the gradual increase in length of the texts, and were able to gain a deeper understanding of the texts through guided questioning, making textual connections, and looking for implicit information within explicit texts. Given that their intent was always to enter university, which can have text-heavy courses, breaking lengthy texts into smaller components and learning how to question a text in order to create meaning is a technique that helped these reluctant readers approach reading with a more positive mindset.

Bio Data

Anna Twitchell is a lecturer at the Kanda University of International Studies English Language Institute. She is currently interested in gamification in the classroom as well as teaching language through discourse analysis.

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Appendix

Class Survey for Student Reading Background

Directions: Please write your answers to the following questions and share them with a partner. After you have compared your answers, you will share your partner's answers with the class.

1. What was the last book you read in your native language?
2. What was the last book you read in English?
3. How often do you read for pleasure outside the classroom?
4. How often do you read for work or homework outside the classroom?
5. What is your favorite book? Can you describe it to your partner?
6. What are your favorite genres? (fantasy, biography, etc.)