

Extensive Reading and Identity Negotiation

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Abstract

The author gives a brief, selective history of SLA developments relevant to the topic at hand and the shifting paradigm is described. Extensive Reading and identity negotiation is explored. Finally the possibility of Extensive Reading as play, which makes available to students a place to explore identity, is examined .

A Brief, Selective History of SLA Relevant to the Topic at Hand

The shared views of how we learn and specifically how we learn languages has shifted in recent years. Perhaps it's a continual shifting as we look at different aspects and come up with different interpretations of the process.

Examinations of early methods of language learning show a close examination of the mechanics of the language itself. Early texts for learning Chinese for English speakers begin with English words put into sentence patterns that were based on Chinese grammar. Of course the mechanics of grammar is fascinating still and turned out to be more complex than was first assumed.

Words were examined as artifacts and the mapping of the common elements began by tracing similar sounds that showed that in many languages the cognates showed regular sound shifts over time and then in different places.

From the mechanics of the language itself there was a shift in emphasis to look at the learning itself. Stimulus response theory was embraced at one time. An orthodoxy was established spurred by dreams of religious conversions and military need. the mind was described as a computer like machine, in the way that computers were understood at that time.

More recently we have a proliferation of ideas about how learning takes place. Communities of learners ideas, zone of proximal development, neural networking, narrative integration and post-structuralism, to mention a few, now compete for our attention as possibly the most relevant models.

Finally what goes on in the classroom is idiosyncratic, a blend of all the people there bring to it, testable or non-testable, efficient or inefficient, the particular blend of the dynamics present. Maybe it will never be completely understood but it's ability to continue opening up new complexities is what keeps us interested.

In retrospect yesterday's revelations seem simple though still amazing. The progression of discovery leads us on to further refinements and adjustments. A student tells me she was surprised when she found out that Romeo loved someone else before Juliet. It was more complicated than she had first imagined. I understand completely what she means.

Language learning, too, is full of such surprises. From a limited number of sounds and meanings a continuous expansion occurs.

The centrality of meaning in our brains, rather than word first, has been described by neurobiologists (Damasio, 1992)¹⁾. The concepts precede the words: we know what floats and sinks, what is flat or curved, etc., and we attach sounds so we can talk about it and sort out the exceptions.

The exceptions are particularly interesting from a narrative point of view (Bruner, 1990)²⁾ and when infants listen for the patterns and the exception that will occur, then be made into patterns, a continuous shifting of foreground to background that signals our provisional understanding.

The eclecticism of recent endeavors in SLA speaks to a diversity that can be bewildering but mirrors growth in the field and the situation in classrooms.

The guidelines I have found most practical so far I have gleaned from Paul Nation (Nation, 2001).³⁾ My fundamentals are a simple vision of classroom practice divided into four components: comprehensible input plus one, comprehensible output, focus on form, and fluency practice. These guidelines work for me in a variety of contexts with varied students. The next question inspired by Nation is 'what are the visible signs of learning?' (Mayumi Tsubaki shared this question with me in conversation.) The furrowed brow, the pursed lips, making notes, etc. that indicate the processing, the revision of understanding, the establishment of a more complex foreground that then again becomes a background for a yet more complex vision, a tapestry against which we play out our life. Initially appearing in a reduced form so we won't be overwhelmed, and then in our safety zone, our zone of proximal development, a stepping stone to a broader, deeper understanding.

Parallel to the development of a field of inquiry, like linguistics, the individual places the self in the world. Nishino (Nishino, 2007)⁴⁾ and Kanno (Kanno, 2003)⁵⁾ both worked with case studies of adolescent second language learners. Nishino worked with junior high school students and Kanno with students in their last stage of high school and first years of university. Nishino does not address the issue of identity per se, but in the course of the extensive reading she

examines, the idea of autonomy becomes apparent. I think it is obvious when students decide to discontinue extensive reading to focus on entrance exams that they are taking charge. This is a clear shift in priorities, probably a good decision and one of the facts of life for students wanting to get into universities here. Kanno follows her students over time as well and they make decisions relative to which of two cultures to join once they return to Japan. They have the choice of joining the ‘returnee’s culture’ or the more mainstream. It is particularly telling when one student assumes at first that Japanese culture is monolithic, that there is only one way he can fit in. He eventually makes decisions that show he has learned to negotiate identity. The Kanno work demonstrates the shift in identity by using the narrative produced by the students themselves in journal dialogs with the researcher. Nishino worked with personal interviews. The point here is that people need to run their own narrative.

Narrative and Identity Negotiation

Narrative is important for maintaining our sense of self (Linde, 1993)⁶ I will not attempt here to offer any more than my own working definition of narrative, or self, for that matter. My provisional definitions need not be as finely parsed as Linde’s, with the fine distinction she makes between journals, chronicles, and narrative. My definition of self will also be more like common usage.

I will address the possible ways that extensive reading offers students a window of opportunity to expand their own possibilities for identity and offers models of narratives of identity. Linde does analysis of several situations in which people who are working in groups, seek to clarify local problems and work toward a common moral stance compatible with their identity. One situation involves police helicopter crews. Their conversation affirms the difficulties of staying within the law to enforce the law. In a particularly telling description by one of the officers in pursuit of a provocative motorcyclist bumped his motorcycle, throwing the rider off. Whereas the act was rationalized as perhaps a faulty braking problem, there was tacit agreement by the officers that these kinds of things happen and are acceptable.

Here I would like to offer my own analysis of an ongoing identity negotiation in a documentary film I saw. This is particularly germane as the things my students read, view and interact with (videogames, for instance) offer them models of negotiated identity complete with the moral taglines that establish cultural values. Each of us has an ongoing dialog within ourselves that aligns and reconciles our values with the iconic values of our particular culture. This happens most often within what I call our sphere of intimates, our family and closest friends and it provides us with a sense of who we are. Then we negotiate further with our work

colleagues and virtually everyone we make contact with. In the documentary that I will describe the filmmaker had an opportunity, in which she was an active participant, to record negotiating of identity first hand intertwined with very practical issues over an extended time.

The film ‘The Cats of Mirikitani’⁷⁾ begins with an encounter with a street person in New York City. The filmmaker had ongoing conversations with Mirikitani who was sleeping in cardboard boxes and working on his drawings during the day near a Korean market. Through the course of the film we discover that Mirikitani is a Japanese-American, who was put in an internment camp during the second World War. The trauma of this event, his betrayal by his country, is so sensitive that it is usually only portrayed by him through repeated drawings of the camp. He does other drawings as well, large sized cats and flowers. Mirikitani’s spot on the streets of New York is in the shadow of the World Trade Center. On September 11th when the trade center was destroyed, the area around it was filled with ash and soot. Concerned about Mirikitani’s health the filmmaker brought Mirikitani back to her small apartment. It becomes clear very quickly that the filmmaker, understandably, feels more than a little crowded by her new apartment mate. This is handled very discreetly, she never mentions the demands of Mirikitani; at one point, for instance, she talks to her cat, who is begging for attention, and explains that sometimes she needs a little space for herself. Of course Mirikitani can hear this conversation, the apartment is very small. With amazing patience, the filmmaker chronicles the events as she deals with the social service agencies on the one hand and Mirikitani on the other. Mirikitani is a somewhat demanding guest but adamant that social services are not needed. She broaches the subject several times and is dismissed out of hand. Finally, through the ruse of talking about his art, with the collusion of the social service people, and by way of finally getting a way to confirm his eligibility for social security benefits, the filmmaker gets Mirikitani into an apartment of his own. Given a place to work, his art expands and flourishes. In the final part of the film the filmmaker and Mirikitani return to Tule Lake internment camp. Mirikitani says that he is no longer angry, that now that people know about the camps, he is satisfied.

The documentary is exemplary. We all need to negotiate our selves, hopefully not on the traumatic scale of Mirikitani but none the less on a daily basis we use language for this purpose.

Linde, continuing her analysis, goes on to describe specific features of English, the sequencing and selecting, that she asserts are constrained by language. She feels that the tenses in English, past-present-future, and other features predetermine the way the narratives are constructed in English. I haven’t completely reconciled this with the neurobiological point of view that the concepts are available in different languages and are the basis from which we operate. I will consider that point further but I think the basic premise for establishing and maintaining who we are is a sound and very important one as Linde has presented it.

Is this consideration of narrative relevant to students at the beginning stages of English study? My inclination for my own teaching is to say yes. I think the more fully informed a teacher is, the more fully the students can progress. This serves more as background to my classes rather than any particular activity but it fully informs my choice of topics and especially the choice of extensive reading as a pathway for relevant material for each individual. Even within the beginning exercises in many textbooks we encounter what seem at first blush like innocuous questions. They can, however, be nuanced and important question even though it's not always obvious at a glance. They often represent pragmatic considerations as well.

One common question in English is 'What do you do?' Whereas not all cultures, times and places attach the same importance to what people do it is a common enough question in English. The answer will vary for a person depending on who they're talking to but there is an internal component as well and the ideas meet in the middle where the person defines who they are. The story changes over time and we can describe how our views changed and portray ourselves as relevant, moral people as we talk with others. The background as well as the facility with language to do this can be assisted by reading, and particularly by an extensive reading program as I understand it. That extensive reading facilitates language learning is supported by research (Day & Bamford, 1998)⁸⁾ so I want to turn my attention to one component of extensive reading that I think is relevant, the possibility that extensive reading is a tool for realizing part of narrative component that is needed for a bilingual identity. There are two ways I will address this issue: one, I will look at the gains possible from the program itself and, two, I will look at the possibilities for modeling by using the materials in such a program.

Extensive Reading in My Classes

My use of extensive reading in the classroom is based on two principles; that the text should be easy (I recommend 98% of the vocabulary be known as it is a fluency building exercise) and that it be interesting to the student. There is no restriction on what the students can read, they could read manga, or catalogs, and sometimes do, as long as they are in English. In all my locations there are graded readers available to the students and I orient them to these. The majority of students opt for the readers. On the face of it just allowing the students to select in empowering. I give them a chart in which they write down the title, pages read today, total pages, comments, and a place to rate the text. The rating system by way of check-off boxes allows the student to say that the book is: very interesting, interesting, ok or boring. If as I read the chart the student has listed the book as boring, I suggest they change and get another book. If in the comments they state the book is difficult then I negotiate with them. I would like the

exercise to be one for fluency but sometimes interest will trump fluency and the student will go on reading knowing they have the option of bailing out. So the student has this autonomy with their book. No book reports or discussion is required. I do talk with them about their book by commenting on their comments but if they seem reluctant for any reason then I let them alone. We devote about fifteen minutes of class time to just reading. A side benefit of extensive reading in the beginning of a class is that it gives the students time to shift into 'English mode.' Sometimes students talk amongst themselves during this time but usually everyone settles down and is reading on their own and ready to work at activities by the time reading time is up.

I have about 160 students spread over two universities and a high school. My assessment of how extensive reading works is impressionistic, derived from the comments that my students have made and what I can determine from the reading reports. I will not replicate others findings here so much as speculate on what I see as positive results and what the long term advantages may be. Teaching is necessarily a long-term investment made with incomplete data. Still there is ample information around to base our practice on and one key element is that we think through as carefully as possible what the components of what we are doing are, how we can make sense of them and put them to the best possible use.

I have mentioned the empowerment of the relative autonomy of book selection within my classes. I would now like to address what sorts of things go on in people's head when they read narratives and how they integrate those into their own narratives. This is part of that escalating complexity that parallels the development of disciplines, language development and individuals, and who knows what else. The spiraling trajectory of intertwining development continues.

Language for Play and Identity

For modeling, play is the thing. I think the primary use of language is for play. I mean play here to represent the activities of enjoyment or fascination or just casual exchanges of good will between colleagues that occur on a regular basis throughout any given day. These would include, depending on the individual, talk about sports, seeing plays and films, reading books, interactive video games (the manual of which are sometimes 100 pages long I've heard), sports events, etc. I maintain that the majority of what we use language for is not simply transaction in the narrow sense. We certainly go to the convenience store and buy tea, or whatever, but I can't see how that simple type of transaction in itself accounts for the bulk of our usage of language. The something else that is going on is play. This play began with our first efforts in learning a language and then continues as perhaps a habit, a way of extending our understanding and to form the basis, coherence and continuity of our image of who we are.

A discussion of films and anime will be instructive at this point. The common love of film by audiences in America and Japan is well known. The cross-cultural borrowings include films that go back and forth, a steady stream of cross-fertilization that goes in both directions. The popularity of Kurosawa's 'The Seven Samurai' in America was sufficient that an American cowboy version was made. Kurosawa, of course, had been influenced by American cowboy films in the first place. More recently Hayao Miyazaki won acclaim in America for anime he created that were intended for Japanese audiences. This is indicative of the borrowing back and forth of cultural artifacts and probably cultural icons as well that, incidentally, also reflects the exchange of loanwords.

The question is, what do we do with all these films? The answer is that no two people come away with the same film. Like folk stories, films are available to the viewers as a vehicle of understanding that they then interpret according to the particular needs they have. We can identify with the villain and put all of our unpleasant qualities on that character and still feel justified if he is then punished for his wrongdoing. In this way there is no doubt a vicarious outlet for a lot of things we feel. I won't address the issue of whether sometimes these villains provoke wrongdoing in the viewers as that is discussed elsewhere and I suspect is a non-linear problem.

Still we have standards for our film heroines, they must fit our image of what is the right thing to do. I have discussed 'Roman Holiday' in my classes. It is a film that seems pretty straight forward on the face of it but agreement on the details of the action is not universal. For instance, when the princess (the Audrey Hepburn character) becomes stressed out she takes some medicine before going to bed. At least that is my take on what happened. One of my students was adamant that she did not take medicine, would not drink champagne, etc. At the end of that discussion we left the issue unresolved. There was a sense I had, and that the other members of the class seemed to share, that this person's interpretation of the film was important to her and we deemed that to be a legitimate use of the film. At first I was astounded but then I realized that films, stories, all sorts of narrative, are not just artifacts but things we interact with. The trading and transformation of cultural icons is surely not new and there will always be a blending of these that again reflects the blending of the loanwords. Often the meanings shift nuance sometimes they change completely and are almost unrecognizable but surely that is the point; and that each individual is changing these texts as needed to fill a particular need at that time. I am not concerned with presenting a particular interpretation of any given text. Sometimes the text will offer a revelation about a particular character that can be constructed in a number of ways. My students usually grasp the basic qualities and then more are forthcoming, again like the language itself. 'Alice Through the Looking Glass' is one text that can most obviously be

read at a number of levels. Appealing, quality texts generally support several readings. Shakespeare is another obvious example. But my students reading the graded reader versions continue to impress me with their sensitivity to the narrative. Sometimes people talk about comparative rhetoric and emphasize the differences but I think that, with my students at least, that people adjust very quickly to reading different kinds of text. This is attributable, at least in part, to the modeling of text. I believe for communication and writing that modeling is an extremely productive tool for students.

This sort of language interaction can begin with the basic language. Allowing students to select their own reading material by interest is a good first step to empower students in this way. Coupled with fluency practice, students can become adept at understanding how any given text works at the basic level of understanding.

So what do I do for my Monday morning class? Inspire growth. I hope that this eclectic journey through the developments in my thinking can be as helpful to others as it is to me to get it down on paper and share it with others. I think in the classroom preparation is important, and the principled background of being informed as much as possible. There is a plethora of information to sort through that informs good teaching and it hails from as many disciplines as possible. Coming to grips with it can sometimes be daunting but my brief journey here through my current thinking and influences can tell us that teaching is an organic process. Identity is fungible, in our roles as educators, family people, students, etc. our narratives vary in the telling but the ability to keep the thread of who we are is telling. Typical young students are robust and in the formative stages they certainly need to be. Negotiation, in the broadest sense here, takes place at a rapid fire pace as any one who has talked with students, or read student essays can attest. Negotiating meaning in the more restricted, grammatical, etc., sense cannot be completely disentangled from this enterprise.

I hope that the dovetailing of extensive reading and the job of learning English can prove as helpful for others as they do for me. I propose that reading is a form of play, in the broadest sense, and that it is a helpful tool for forming identity.

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Notes

- 1) Damasio, A. R. & Damasio, H. (1992) *Brain and language* in *Scientific American* 267 (3): 89-95
- 2) Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- 3) Nation, P. (2001) *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- 4) Nishino, T. (2007) *Beginning to read extensively: a case study of Mako and Fumi* in *Reading in a foreign language*, 19, 2: 76-105.
- 5) Kanno, Y. (2003) *Negotiating Bilingual and Bicultural Identities: Japanese Returnees Betwixt Two Worlds*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers
- 6) Linde, C. (1993) *Life Stories* NY: Oxford
- 7) Hattendorf, L. (2006) *The Cats of Mirikitani*. Produced by Lucid Dreaming Inc. in association with The Independent Television Service (ITVS) and The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) with funding provided by The Corporation for Public Broadcasting
- 8) Day, R. R. & Bamford, J. (1998) *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press