

# A Case for Using First Language Group Discussions to Facilitate Second Language Reading Comprehension

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**Abstract.** This paper presents a case for using first language (L1) group discussions to facilitate reading and enhance comprehension of texts in the second language classroom. It argues that allowing second language (L2) learners to use their first languages in discussions after a first reading of an L2 text, is beneficial for a variety of reasons. It points out that comprehension is a necessary component of all learning and plays a significant role in second language learning. Reading comprehension is also a prerequisite for academic learning. Brief overviews are provided of perspectives on first and second language reading comprehension, followed by a discussion of research findings by the present author on individual preferences for and apparent benefits of using the first language to discuss texts read in the second language. Against the backdrop of evidence of the positive effects of group collaboration, text discussion and the use (by learners), of the first language in second language classrooms, an argument is then made for the use of reading groups to discuss second language texts in the first language in second language classrooms.

**Keywords:** L2 Reading, L1 Use in L2 Classroom, Mental Text, Reading Comprehension, Enhancing Comprehension, Facilitating Comprehension, Collaborative Group Discussions, Reading Groups, Learning

## 1. Introduction – Comprehension and Learning

Because comprehension is at the very foundation of what any teacher wants learners to accomplish, strategies to enhance comprehension are crucial. Comprehension is an essential step in all learning [1], for noticing and for intake [2] and is vital in second language acquisition [3]. Underlying comprehension and the cognitive strategies that are involved in arriving at comprehension, is the important element of an individual's prior or existing knowledge. The characteristic cognitive processes involved in learning, namely mapping, matching, elaborating, inferencing, encoding, storing [4] are very similar to the comprehension strategies used by skilled readers. In both cases individuals have to activate existing stored background knowledge, match it to incoming information and make inferences and elaborations to adapt both the incoming textual information and existing stored knowledge. Comprehension has to occur before long-term memory storage (i.e. true learning as opposed to rote memorisation), can take place. Comprehended texts serve as input for optimum second-language intake and acquisition.

## 2. Reading Comprehension

An essential principle in reading theory and research is that textual meaning comes about by interaction between texts and readers [5]. Readers construct and manage dynamic mental representations of incoming texts [6]. These mental texts continue to be updated even after reading and are what readers recall and on what they base their interpretations. A mental text has different levels of representation – the surface structure (words from the actual incoming written, or spoken text), the textbase (the gist in macro-propositions) and the situation model (an episodic representation, including inferences based on background knowledge). Situation models contain information ordered according to situations and events, spatio-temporal settings, causal links, explanations and interpretations of character and writer perspectives, intentions and plans [7]. Skilled readers construct strong situation models and textbases in their mental texts. Less skilled readers – especially if they focus on understanding individual words instead of reading for general comprehension – form mental texts organised round words and phrases which are selected from surface texts and which are not linked to overall meaning and coherence [8]. Once a strong mental text has

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been constructed, the text is comprehended, meaning is constructed and texts can be interpreted, remembered and recalled.

Because they aim for overall coherent meaning [9], skilled readers constantly monitor their reading comprehension [10], re-reading, questioning texts, linking textual features and producing their own explanations for actions and situations. Other higher order cognitive strategies that skilled readers use include activating and using background knowledge; constructing and revising inferences, hypotheses, expectations and predictions; elaborating on and attending selectively to textual detail and suppressing irrelevant information [11], [12], [6]. When these procedures are strategically and consciously applied, they form part of overall comprehension monitoring.

### **3. Second Language Reading**

Skilled first language reading tends to be the yardstick on which reading theories are based and second language readers are often considered to share characteristics with ineffective, less skilled first language readers. Second language reading is commonly characterised as effortful and lacking automaticity [13], because L2 readers do not access their existing higher order L1 reading strategies [14]. Part of the reason for this is often taken to be that their working memories are overloaded with unprocessed textual elements for which they are unable to find explanations or which they cannot link to existing knowledge. If one compares L2 readers who are not totally fluent in their L2 with generally less skilled readers, then it is apparent that they are likely to form relatively unstructured mental texts as their primary mental representations, rather than strong situation models and textbases, because they tend to focus on decoding individual words rather than making local global inferences and reading for overall coherence.

Second language readers frequently do not activate relevant background knowledge and do not make the necessary inferences and elaborations. They do not construct meaning by interaction with texts, focussing almost exclusively on textual details as they decode words and sentences to establish literal meaning [15]. Bernhardt's 1991 study [16] showed that L2 readers did not monitor their own comprehension, did not backtrack to confirm or disconfirm inferences and did not question their own decisions about textual information once they had made them. However, research on bilingual reading is starting to show that L2 readers do monitor their comprehension under certain conditions. This monitoring may be linked to L2 proficiency ([17], but is carried out less effectively [10] and/or less frequently than it is by L1 readers [18], [16].

### **4. The Use of the L1 in L2 Reading**

Although the use of the L1 in L2 reading is still a relatively under-researched domain, it is becoming clear that the L1 is ever-present for bilingual individuals. While they are reading in the L2, bilinguals think about texts in their L1 [19], and mentally translate and paraphrase texts into the L1 [20], [21], effectively using their L1 to facilitate comprehension [22]. For more cognitively-demanding activities, the use of the L1 tends to lower the cognitive load and the use of the L2 tends to raise it [23].

Comprehension monitoring and the use of higher order comprehension processes in bilingual reading seem to be facilitated if readers feel free to use their first languages. In a study by the present author, opportunities for code-switching and the use of the L1 in responses to L2 texts [24], [25] allowed readers to monitor their comprehension and to use higher order reading comprehension strategies and processes.

In the research study by Sweetnam Evans [24], the reading comprehension, higher order strategy use and comprehension monitoring of a cohort of Korean L1 undergraduates did not appear to have been impaired by limitations of competence in their L2. The participants applied a variety of different comprehension and monitoring strategies and, in contrast to the Bernhardt study mentioned above and did indeed backtrack as they read and did re-read texts, possibly because they were allowed to do so in their L1. In their delayed written recalls of and comments on five different texts, the participants used their L1 (Korean) by preference and switched back and forth between their L1 and the L2. The findings indicate that participants used their L1 in tasks they perceived as more difficult than simple recalls, for example to comment on textual structure. They seem to have been attempting to reduce their cognitive loads by using their L1, possibly as a kind of

self-scaffolding. The use of the L1 as the preferred overall language (with and without code switching), suggested that participants used their L1 to facilitate and monitor their comprehension of L2 texts.

If, as some evidence suggests, individuals are better able to comprehend L2 texts when they are able to use their first languages while reading, recalling and responding to the texts, then one can assume that they have constructed relatively strong mental texts (situation models and textbases) which are the foundation for comprehension. If most of the free voluntary recalls and responses, evidence of comprehension, are presented in the L1, then it should be safe to assume that mental texts have been constructed in the L1 too. This supposition is made by other researchers too, e.g. Kern [20]. This assumption is strengthened by evidence (from the Sweetnam Evans, [24],[25] project) that readers recall episodic elements of texts such as feature in situation models, namely situations, events, actions, inferences, causality, intentions, plans and spatio-temporal settings in the L1. If they are clearly able to monitor their own comprehension and provide evidence in their L1 of using higher level comprehension processes in their L2 reading, then it is also fair to assume that they are accessing their existing reading strategies via their L1 and that the L1 is facilitating their L2 reading comprehension.

Despite these findings, however, the tendency among many second language teachers is still to insist on the use of the target language only in the classroom. This is possibly because so many second language classrooms nominally espouse communicative language teaching methods which were in reaction to the first language dominance of traditional grammar-translation classrooms.

## **5. Collaborative Groups**

Collaborative group work is generally implemented in the L2 classroom as an accepted aspect of both Communicative Language Teaching and of Task-based Learning and Teaching [26], [27]. It provides the input [28], [3], intake [29], communication and output [30] required for second language acquisition. Collaborative group work is accepted as having many positive effects [31], [32] including providing a safe environment for learner communication, promoting learner confidence, enhancing problem solving, developing learner autonomy and so on. Collaborative groups achieve more than the sum of what each individual can achieve because the groups themselves create optimal knowledge-building environments [33]. Collaborative groups also provide for the social co-construction of knowledge [34].

The use of collaborative groups specifically for reading, enhances comprehension and encourages strategy use [35]. Discussion of texts – especially literary texts, interesting texts, difficult texts and audio-visual texts such as films – is commonplace amongst readers, is considered a natural part of the comprehension process of skilled readers [36] and ties in with Bakhtin's [37] notion of the dialogic nature of language and literature. Discussing texts with peers allows for the social construction of meaning, provides for a more student-centred classroom [38], promotes textual engagement and responses and enhances comprehension and learning [39], [40]. Guided discussion of texts have been shown to enhance comprehension and promote peer interaction, as in reciprocal teaching to foster comprehension, devised by Palincsar and Brown [41], which focusses on the four processes of predicting, questioning of texts, summarising and clarifying. When discussing texts, readers are inspired to refer back to the texts, to postdict [42], [43] and to re-read. They thus reap benefits associated with re-reading [13], such as facilitated textual processing and enhanced coherence construction and comprehension [44].

## **6. Reading Discussion Groups Using the L1**

Given that the use of the L1 has been shown to facilitate L2 comprehension and encourage comprehension monitoring and that collaborative group discussions of texts also enhance comprehension, L2 learners should be provided with opportunities to respond in groups to L2 texts in the L1. Discussions with peers mirror the interactions individual readers have with texts, and provide for reciprocal peer scaffolding. Discussion itself serves as a form of comprehension monitoring and provides opportunities for backtracking and re-reading. Learners can ask one another questions about sections of the texts that they don't understand. They can work together, scaffolding one another as they construct meaning socially by activating and pooling their background knowledge, comparing their inferences and constructing coherent mental texts based on their joint input. Group discussions of L2 texts in the L1 as the first activity after reading, or even

during reading, will allow L2 readers to access their L1 reading skills and promote the construction of strong situation model and textbases characteristic of skilled L1 reading and essential to any comprehension, learning or long-term memory storage.

In a type of cognitive apprenticeship [45], learners can progress gradually from these group discussions, to questioning the texts themselves and to interacting more efficiently with L2 texts as they read alone. They can write about texts in their L1 and make notes and ask questions of the texts in the L1. This can be done in a number of ways – initially underlining words and passages that are not immediately comprehended, then writing down questions which a following reading of the text can attempt to answer. As they progress in their L1 discussions of texts, they can gradually move to L2 discussions, or engage in code-switching. Moving from peer scaffolding to self-scaffolding, L2 learners become efficient bilingual readers, become more independent and autonomous second language learners and simultaneously prepare themselves for tertiary academic study or for future careers involving reading in the L2.

## 7. Future Research

A planned research project will compare the second language reading comprehension of different groups of undergraduate participants in a further effort to gauge the affect on comprehension of L1 group discussions of second language texts. Participants will all read the same texts in the second language. Participant comprehension will be evaluated directly after individual reading in a second language for the first group. For the second group, participant comprehension will be evaluated after class discussions in the second language. For the third group, participant comprehension will be evaluated after class discussions in the participants' first language. For the fourth group, participant comprehension will be evaluated after group discussions in the second language. For the final group, participant comprehension will be evaluated after group discussions in the participants' first language. This project will be undertaken with Japanese students reading in English as their second language and then repeated with English students reading in Japanese as their second language.

## 8. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the fact that reading comprehension is facilitated by the use of the first language, many second language teachers routinely forbid the use of the first language in the L2 classroom. However new research is slowly starting to turn this tide and arguments for the use of the L1 alongside the target language and for code-switching in the second language classroom are starting to be heard [46], [19], [27]. Future research will serve to strengthen these arguments. If second language teachers accept that comprehension of all texts (including instructions, the written and spoken texts used in tasks, student-student communication and teacher-student communication before and during tasks), can be facilitated by group discussions in the L1, this will start to erode the belief that the L1 has no place in the L2 classroom.

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