



Field : Distant Education

Type : Research Article

Recieved:10.07.2017 - Corrected:----- - Accepted:25.12.2017

Making Meaning and Not Just Sounds in Reading

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Abstract

The purpose of this study in order to obtain efficacious material to try and answer my research question I have chosen to use the protocol analysis and verbal reports on thinking as a research method. This research generates verbal reports of thought sequences as a source of data about thinking. The relevance of this investigation in my own professional practice is of great importance as the school I work in has a vast majority of students whom are non-native English speakers and therefore the issue in reading without comprehension has arisen many times over the years. According to the findings, although the research was small scale the results have overall been very satisfying. The student reached understanding through various models. First by understanding through performance as he was able to think and act flexibly with what he knew (Perkins p.42) and therefore recognize the word night on the flash card. Moreover, by following the constructive model of understanding, the student was able” to construct and perfect his own performance through problem solving. recognizing....’what sounds right’ he has a target against which he can measure and evaluate his own performance” (Wood, p136). Wood’s description of the student’s meaning construction has similarities with Piaget’s theory of assimilation and accommodation where by assimilation the student uses the external environment, in this case the teacher and flash cards, to increase his previous knowledge (Piaget, 2013). As a result, the importance of the teacher’s role in being a facilitator for the student through this process towards understanding, because as stated by Wells, ” children are born with a drive to make sense of the world. They are active seekers of meaning” (1986,Wells cited in Arizona Department of Education, 1990, p.7) and we as teacher have the responsibility to insure students have all the necessary tools to be able to understand and make sense of this world.

Keywords: student; teacher; language



1. Introduction

In this assignment the focus will be to investigate a student's understanding of the meaning of words. During my teaching years I have very often encountered students (mainly E.A.L. English as an Additional Language) that have an excellent knowledge of both sounds and decoding and know how to apply this knowledge when reading, unfortunately this does not mean they understand what they are reading. The research question I will investigate is:

- How do we know if students have understood the meaning of the words they can read/sound out?
- how does teacher intervention enable the student to better understand the words/sentences he is reading?

The investigation I have carried out has 1 participant, a 5 year old boy from a transition class in an International school in Italy wherein English is the language we teach in and where the majority of students have English as an additional language (E.A.L). The student's mother-tongue is Italian, English is his second language and this school year is his second in the English speaking school. He currently has no other languages. Furthermore, the student has been assessed as gifted and talented. I have noticed he is a very active boy with a low attention span, very inquisitive and when engaged his attention span improves a bit. In order to investigate his understanding of words I have carried out a series of reading sessions with him. I have defined these as reading sessions and not lessons as in a transition class we do not have formal reading lessons. I will focus on one session in particular because it was the most interesting as it gave me the chance to investigate the student's understanding through different models. The student loves books and reading and very often chooses to read over other activities during the so called, quiet time, when students have a choice of activities set up at various stations within the classroom.

The student's spontaneity in wanting to read with me, helped in relation with making the research ethical and valid as I did not have to ask him to sit down and read and consequently it minimized the risks of what Labov (cited in Swann, 1994, p.27) calls 'the observer's paradox' where "although there are various ways of minimising the intrusion, the mere act of observing people's language behaviour (or, for that matter, other aspects of their behaviour) is inclined to change that behaviour". Furthermore, as pointed out by Hammersley and Atkinson (cited in Scott and Usher, 2010, p.138), it may be better not to give the student a full picture at the beginning in order not to compromise validity. Moreover, I have worked with EAL students for a big part of my life I therefore know how best to deal with these students in showing sensitivity towards their problems with regards to learning in a second language. Finally, hopefully these data results will be used across the school in order to help reinforce the E.A.L department and consequently increase the possibility of EAL students to learn the language whilst acquiring the curriculum (Arizona Department of Education, 1990).

In this assignment firstly, I will discuss the models of understanding. Then I will explain the reasons behind the chosen research methods. I will then proceed to present the results of my investigation weighing out the strengths and the limitations. Finally, in the last section of the assignment, I will draw conclusions and a final reflection.



Models of understanding

Perkins' model of understanding which distinguishes knowledge and understanding is relevant to my research (Perkins, 1997). This distinction applies to my investigation as my students have the knowledge of sounds and know how to apply this knowledge. Unfortunately this does not mean they understand what they are reading. This problem may be due to the fact that the majority of my students have English as a second language. In my area of inquiry and context the term understanding will mean not only to know the meaning of the words which have been read in order to make sense of the book, but to then be able to use them in different contexts such as conversations, to use them to socialize and to better understand the instructions given by the teacher. Furthermore, understanding the words will here mean to have them embedded in the language in a way that we can define the student as perfectly bilingual. The investigation will explore the nature and quality of my student's understanding through observation, talk and questioning. This is where I believe dialogical accounts of understanding will also help find answers to my initial questions. In my context understanding is more social and grounded in dialogue as words are used and learnt together with the others on a daily basis. This model of understanding will be used in order to define how, why and when the student applies and uses different skills to help himself reach the meaning of words. It will guide me through the investigation on how my student understands or how he doesn't understand words. Furthermore, this investigation will help distinguish if the student has learnt or understood. The difference is that learning can be limited to that context (e.g. a word can be recognized in a book but not when seen out of context like in another book). On the contrary, understanding will allow the student to take a step further in his learning and to recognize that word out of context. When you learn you acquire new information or facts or in this specific case a word, but to understand it has to imply that what has been learnt can be used in a different context. The difference between learning and understanding is that learning has its limitations. With respect to words and spelling, learning implies knowing how to spell properly. This can easily get forgotten. Whilst to understand how words work (e.g.: all words that describe pain derive from Greek hence the "k" sound is spelt "ch"- ache) is a step further than learning. Moreover, to understand is to acquire a skill that can be used in time and across subjects hence its importance.

2. Research Methods

In order to obtain efficacious material to try and answer my research question I have chosen to use the protocol analysis and verbal reports on thinking as a research method. This research generates verbal reports of thought sequences as a source of data about thinking (Ericson, 2002). This research technique is the most suitable for my research as it has frequently been used in reading research, for example, with novice readers who are asked to report on any difficulties they are encountering as they read a text. As my student is bilingual and will be reading in English, which is his second language, sources about his thinking process will be ideal to analyse how the student understands or does not understand the meaning of words by following his thoughts and reasoning. The protocol and verbal reports on thinking will also be helpful with working with such a young student, as at this stage (transition class) they are not writing as such and verbal exchange with teachers, peers and teaching assistants is part of the normal routine for them. Furthermore, my investigation will research how the student understands and modifies his understanding through speech as



according to Barnes, speech helps to try out new ways of arranging what we know (Barnes, 1992).

As I am one of the teachers of the class involved in the research and the teaching I carried out for the research is part of the daily routine with the student, no permission was needed from the participant or his parents. In order to safeguard the student's anonymity no name shall be mentioned in this assignment and the school the student attends, shall be referred to as an International school in Italy wherein English is the language students are taught in. As for the ethical considerations, permission was granted with a research consent form by the Deputy head of the school (Appendix 1).

The relevance of this investigation in my own professional practice is of great importance as the school I work in has a vast majority of students whom are non-native English speakers and therefore the issue in reading without comprehension has arisen many times over the years. Furthermore, teachers working in the school come from English speaking countries wherein EAL students have a different background to our students as English is the primary language used in the wider context on a daily basis. Whereas in our context, English is limited to the school day as outside school and in the playground the language used is Italian. Context has a major impact on EAL students and they therefore need tailored EAL support which teachers coming from English speaking countries might not have experienced.

3. Results

The student's enthusiasm for reading and love of books have enabled this research to be carried out without particular problems. The student is very lively and has a curious nature. He loves all types of books in general but his great passion are books on animals. Because it is a transition class (4-5- year olds) and reading is not formally part of the curriculum I have always waited for the student to come up to me with his books. The reading session I will refer to is when the student started reading the back cover of an Osbourne book where there were many titles of the other book series and he came across "Night Animals" as a title (Appendix 2). He read the title without problems sounding out the two words correctly and when asked by me, was able to explain what the title referred to in his native language. To explore his understanding of words through performance, I asked the student to read the word "night" again but this time decontextualized so with no picture clue. The picture clue he had previously was the front cover of Night Animals' book which represented a hedgehog and a sky filled with stars (Appendix 2). The student was not able to read the word "night" out of context. This proved that the student, although having the skills to decode the words, was lacking the vocabulary which would have helped him understand the meaning of the decontextualized decoded word. This issue is supported by Johnston and Afflerbach's research (cited in Paris and Hamilton, 2009,p.44) which shows that children are more focused on the decoding of the words rather than assessing their understanding of the sentence as they read. Furthermore in this particular case, a major hindrance to the student's understanding of the word's meaning when reading it out of context, was the fact that he read it following the Italian letter sound correspondence which led him to sound out the word incorrectly and therefore not to be able to recognize it. This is because according to Adams (cited in Paris and Hamilton,2009, p.44) children between 3 and 5 years, develop early awareness of reading from their early exposure to print as it is a crucial moment for improving their ability to identify and name letters. The student's first exposure has been of the Italian letter sounds



correspondence consequently this has influenced his letters and words sounding out and moreover, his understanding of the words he reads out of context. This supports Perkins's theory where, although the student has a mental model of understanding, in this case the Italian letter sound correspondence, this does not mean the student's understanding has taken place. This is where dialogical accounts of understanding were necessary to allow me to investigate the student's constructivist model of understanding and was ideal to get the student to reflect on what he had just read and try and fill the "gap" of his lack of letter sound knowledge. Perkins (cited in Wiske, 1997) describes that what learners do in response not only shows their current level of understanding but can also increase it. This increase of understanding happened when I questioned the student about the word and asked him to think about it and to have a look back at the Osbourne back cover. He immediately realized the decontextualized word was "night". When I further questioned him as to why did he think he could recognize the word on the book cover and not the one I had written on a blank piece of paper he knew that the picture of the sky with stars was the key to complete his understanding of the word "night" which is a tricky one at this stage (transition class) because of the -ght grapheme which is only thought in a grade 2 class (7-8 year olds). Furthermore the student was never exposed to this word before as his environment is an Italian one as both parents are Italian and he lives in Italy. This supports Pardo's view where teachers have a major role in creating contexts and learning opportunities that will support the construction of meaning (Pardo, 2004). Environments that value reading and writing, that contain a wide variety of texts, that allow students to take risks, and that find time for reading aloud and reading independently are contexts that effectively promote the construction of meaning (Keene and Zimmermann, 1997, cited in Pardo, 2002). I find Pardo's analyses, as to how students can improve their knowledge of vocabulary, very accurate, particularly when the student is an E.A.L student and hasn't been exposed enough to the language he is learning in, in this case English. This is why I believe a socio cultural theory to be a valid help in supporting student's understanding as it enables the student to explore the same word in a different context. The sociocultural context was a precious support to reinforce the student's understanding of the word "night" and for me to check for understanding through performance. When by exploring life cycles, which is part of our current unit, and in particular plant's life cycle, we came across the word "night" on a flash card, I checked if the student knew its meaning by questioning him. He sounded it out and recognized it and could explain how plants need sunlight, air, water and the night time to grow and live. The student's previous interaction with a more knowledgeable other, the teacher, was paramount for him to internalize the language and carry it into further performance such as the explanation of what plants need to live (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, cited in Lantolf). As argued by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000, cited in, Bancovic) children have agency and intentions which enable them to learn and construct their understandings through interaction with the environment. Questioning was crucial throughout my research to check understanding as a performance and for the student to follow the constructivist model of understanding. The IBO curriculum (International Baccalaureate Organization) encourages students to be active and independent learners through reflection and consequently to take action upon their thinking (www.IBO.org). With my simple but effective questioning regarding the word "night" with no picture clues, I led the student to build from his previous knowledge (the Italian sounds) towards new knowledge. This helped the student understand how he can capitalize on his mother tongue language knowledge in the development of his additional language (Watts and Truscott, 2000). The importance of questioning is highlighted by Wragg and Brown when they



state that students' own learning and thinking can improve significantly if they have the opportunity to respond to teacher's questions and to enjoy the process of interaction with them (Wragg and Brown, 2003).

Although the research was small scale the results have overall been very satisfying. The student reached understanding through various models. First by understanding through performance as he was able to think and act flexibly with what he knew (Perkins p.42) and therefore recognize the word night on the flash card. Moreover, by following the constructive model of understanding, the student was able to construct and perfect his own performance through problem solving. Recognizing... 'what sounds right' he has a target against which he can measure and evaluate his own performance" (Wood, p136). Wood's description of the student's meaning construction has similarities with Piaget's theory of assimilation and accommodation where by assimilation the student uses the external environment, in this case the teacher and flash cards, to increase his previous knowledge (Piaget, 2013).

4. Limitation of the investigation

Although the investigation gave satisfying results, a limitation was carrying out a small scale research which focused on a type of student in a specific context. The student besides being assessed as gifted and talented has a passion for animals and the possibility to choose freely the genre of books to read, as we were conducting the reading sessions, led to monothematic books where animals were the protagonists. I therefore did not investigate the student's understanding in a context that does not contemplate intrinsic motivation. This is a limitation to this research as stated by Gardner and Lambert (1972), although language aptitude accounts for a considerable proportion of individual variability in language learning achievement, motivational factors can override the aptitude effect (Zolt'n Dörnyei, 1998).

5. Conclusions

During this research I have gained valuable insights into students' understanding. Firstly, how various types of understanding are necessary to guide the student through his process of understanding and towards his next level of development as described by Vygotsky in his Zone of Proximal Development theory. Secondly, how the various types of understanding develop better in a meaningful, rich, engaging and active environment. Finally, the importance of the teacher's role in being a facilitator for the student through this process towards understanding, because as stated by Wells, " children are born with a drive to make sense of the world. They are active seekers of meaning" (1986, Wells cited in Arizona Department of Education, 1990, p.7) and we as teacher have the responsibility to insure students have all the necessary tools to be able to understand and make sense of this world.

"Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand."
Chinese Proverb



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Book Cover

