

Using a Text-Based Discussion Instructional Strategy in the Teaching of Reading in Arabic as A Foreign Language

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Abstract

Reading comprehension in Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) could be a challenging task to Arabic language learners especially among limited proficient learners. One of the ways to assist AFL learners in reading comprehension is by using an instructional approach that nurtures efficiency in information processing via guided and meaningful interaction. Students' reading comprehension ability when reading in a foreign language has been an area of interest in the field of second language reading. In lieu of this concern, this paper attempts to discuss the more comprehensive theoretical and conceptual framework of a text-based reading comprehension instruction as a reading instructional model that might have potential to assist AFL readers enhance their reading ability. The instructional model presented in this paper for AFL reading instruction is adapted from English as a first language reading instructional model. The specific procedures in implementing the adapted model are also provided.

Keywords: Reading instruction, foreign language reading, text-based discussion, sociocognitive, sociocultural.

Introduction

When discussing reading, it is inevitable to connect reading to the cognitive theory in the form of information processing. Many past studies in foreign language (FL) reading have been conducted based on the information processing theory (e.g., Aweiss, 1993; Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012; Keshavarz, Atai, & Ahmadi, 2007; Leeser, 2007; Nassaji, 2007; Brantmier, 2005; Ko, 2005; Seng & Hashim, 2006; Shokrpour & Fotovation, 2007; Nassaji, 2006; Rott, 2007). Nonetheless, awareness on the role of context in language development has resulted in the emergence of the socio-cognitive and socio-cultural views which have attracted reading researchers to reconsider the view of reading process to be not only involved information processing, but also the role of context in enhancing reading comprehension. Such awareness

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has shifted FL reading researchers' focus towards the importance of having students to be actively engaged with the text as well as linking social context and cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1987). Some recent FL studies (e.g., Seng, 2007; Zhang, 2008) were conducted on the premise of socio-cognitive and socio-cultural view that focus on collaborative discussion as a context that may enhance engagement with text. The findings of these recent studies suggest that integrating distinct theoretical orientations as the fundamentals of reading comprehension instruction may support student comprehension of text in second language and FL. In lieu of this view, the need to construct an instructional framework that reconciles cognitive and sociocultural orientation becomes imperative in order to ensure instruction as an effective vehicle to improve text comprehension among second language and FL readers.

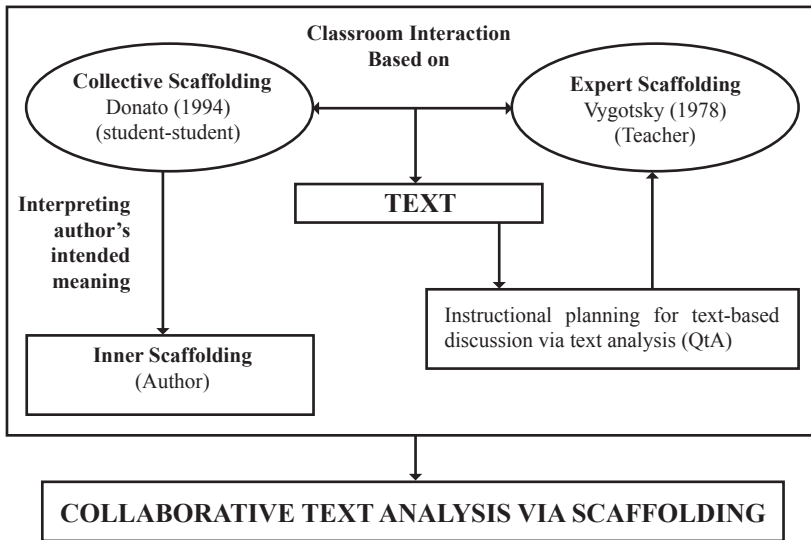
Theoretical Framework

Many studies have indicated and emphasized on the roles of classroom discussion (Beck et al., 1997; Bloom & Green, 1984; Roshenshine & Meister, 1994; Chi, de Leeuw, Chiu, & LaVancher, 1994). According to Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003), "social processes of the classroom create the context within which individuals develop the cognitive and linguistic processes—the tool for comprehension and understanding—associated with literacy" (p 688). Since classroom discourse is believed to enhance cognitive development for learning, developing discourse-based instructional approaches that integrate and reciprocally reinforce cognitive and socio-cognitive processing may help facilitate effective instruction. Within the context of reading comprehension instruction, such instructional approach which involves scaffolded interaction (refer to Figure 1) as well as process-oriented in nature enables the co-construction of meaning from the text (Palincsar, 2003) that helps facilitates text comprehension. This is the point where the sociocultural aspects blend in within text-based reading instruction framework. In addition, the interactions that occur among text-based discourse community members while reading provides plenty of room for comprehension monitoring.

The intrapersonal information and linguistic processing can be more efficient when these processes are externalized within the context which the reading activity occurs. In other words, purely cognitive reading process is being translated into a social process within classroom reading community. Student learning via participation in collaborative discussion in reading classrooms is a generic of Vygotsky's notion of internalization through which individuals transform social experiences into individual mental functions (Wertsch,

1991). This transformation is strengthened by expert scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986), which is the facilitation by the teacher, collective scaffolding by more capable peers as well as inner scaffolding by including the author as part of meaning co-construction process. When students verbalize their thinking, an open evaluation and shared exchanges occur that results in “a group environment in which students can observe peers’ responses, receive feedback on their own responses, as well as receive the guidance of an expert, the teacher” (Sandora et al., 1999, p. 179). Discussion serves as a rich context that promotes active learning and as a result, not only the teacher, but also students become visible models to one another. These interactive activities in the social context in reading classrooms form a sociocultural perspective.

Figure 1 : Scaffolding in Text-Based Interactions

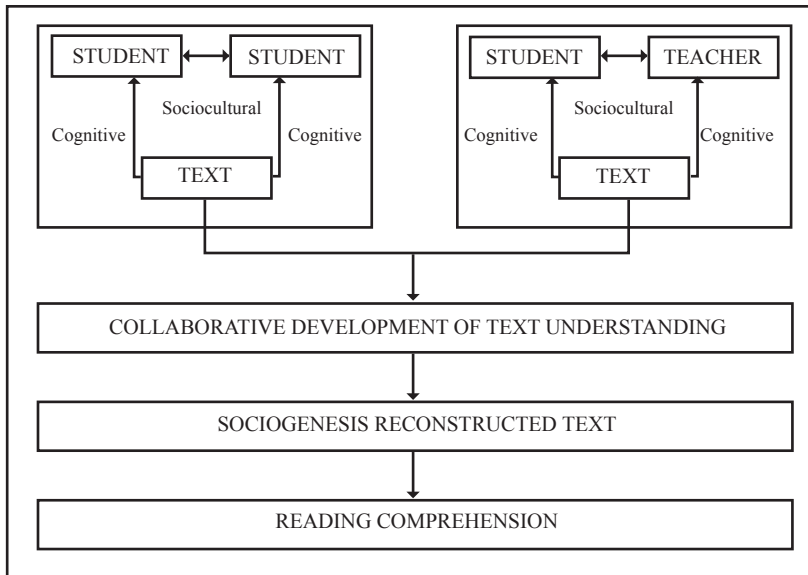


The interpersonal text-based interaction is embedded in the social context in discussion-based reading classrooms. Moving from individualized components to constellation, to process a text, three primary components must come into play. These components are cognition, language, and the reading context. Culture, language, and cognition are naturally and complexly intertwined (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). From the cognitive perspectives, “reading consists of a complex set of coordinated processes that include perceptual, linguistic, and conceptual operations” (Beck & Carpenter, 1986 p. 1098). Therefore, the processing of the language of the text or linguistic processing is primarily cognitive and occurs at individual level. Learning or information processing that is scaffolded by a social interaction that is socio-cognitive in nature occurs

in a social context. Social interactions provide “interpretive” dimension of reading (Bernhardt, 1991).

The collaborative social context represents a socio-cultural process which involves the culture of the classroom reading community. The socio cultural process includes the culture of the classroom which entails collaboration in the form of interactions among the members of the reading community. The interaction is geared towards unraveling the most logical interpretation of the author’s intention. The trilogic interactions occur between the teacher and the students with the author as well as between students and peers with the author as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 : Theories and Trilogic Interactions in Text-Based Discussion



The recursive interactions among the abovementioned three principle domains and their subcomponents translate to the re-construction of the meaning of the text that is required to achieve text comprehension as an outcome of sociogenesis process. It should be noted that cognitive restructuring occurs throughout this entire process. Social collaboration leads to individual competence at the end of the whole process when intended comprehension is achieved by individual reader. Nonetheless, as Bernhardt (1991) stated, “The reading process is multidimensional and multivariate, and it is critical at all times, to keep that fundamental concept in mind,” (p.72).

An Adapted Model for AFL Reading Text-Based Discussion Approach

One type of instructional practice for foreign language reading comprehension that incorporates the cognitive, socio-cognitive and sociocultural principles could be found within the framework of text-based discussion. One text-based discussion reading instructional approach that integrates the cognitive, socio-cognitive and socio-cultural principles in English as the first language (L1) is Questioning the Author (QtA), “an approach for text-based instruction that was designed to facilitate building understanding of text ideas” (Beck & McKeown, 2006 p 24).

Theoretical Framework of Questioning the Author

QtA stems on information processing instructional theory combined with socio-cognitive and sociocultural elements. The cognitive-processing view emphasizes the fundamental importance of reader attention and coherence building which involves the reader, language of the text, and cognition. Based on this view, comprehension is defined as a dynamic mental process where students actively attending to information in the text, making judgment on which idea is important, storing the information in memory as other information is encountered and making connection to new relevant propositions (e.g., Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Fletcher, van den Broek, & Arthur, 1996; van den Broek, Young, Tzeng, & Linderholm, 1999). This process occurs simultaneously with linguistic processing. The success of linguistic and information processing enhance students’ ability to construct logical relationship among text ideas that helps them build a coherent text representation as intended by the author.

The intrapersonal information and linguistic processing can be more efficient when these processes are externalized within the context which the reading activity occurs. In other words, purely cognitive reading process is being translated into a social process within classroom reading community. Student learning via participation in collaborative discussion in reading classrooms is a generic of Vygotsky’s notion of internalization through which individuals transform social experiences into individual mental functions (Wertsch, 1991). Another notion of Vygotsky used as the fundamental of text-based discussion is teachers and more capable peers scaffolding. When students verbalize their thinking, an open evaluation and shared exchanges occur that results in “a group environment in which students can observe peers’ responses, receive feedback on their own responses, as well as receive the guidance of an expert, the teacher” (Sandora et al., 1999, p. 179). Discussion serves as a rich context that promotes active learning and as a result, not only the teacher, but also students become visible models to one another.

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The orchestration among cognitive processing that starts at individual level when readers interact with the text, the sharing of ideas and knowledge when students listen to others, and the reconstruction of text as an outcome of multitude interactions during collaborative discussion converges to the refinement of cognitive functions. QtA as a text-based discussion instructional approach is formed based on these processes which are in tangent to the proposed integrative reading comprehension text-based instruction model.

Suggested Modifications

According to Koda (2005), due to the complexities of foreign language reading, there should be a point of departure between L1 and second language reading. Therefore, the QtA as being implemented in L1 reading classrooms would need modifications if it were to be implemented in second language reading classrooms.

To make text-based discussion work, oral participation among students is vital to exist. Since QtA is implemented with native speakers of English, therefore within the AFL classroom setting, the use of students' native language might compensate lack of oral proficiency in the foreign language that is used as a medium for the text-based discussion. Allowing AFL students to code-switch during text-based discussion would not only help keep the discussion going, but also encourage students of different language ability to join the discussion in the least intimidating environment. The findings of study by Seng and Hashim (2006) have shown that when second language learners were allowed to use their native language when necessary in processing foreign language information, their cognitive processing became more fluent and learners were more motivated to use the foreign language.

Although QtA is a well-known approach among first language reading teachers in the United States, this model is relatively new to foreign language reading teachers, particularly in the foreign language setting. Considering the status of the QtA-based instructional approach among EFL reading teachers, it is important to ensure that the teachers are able to considerably accept the potential usefulness of the approach. Teachers' acceptance may affect their beliefs, which subsequently affect what they implement in the classroom. According to Rich and Pressley (1987), teachers' reactions to reading comprehension strategies depend on their acceptability of the strategies.

Implementation Procedure

In general, the generic QtA model for second language classroom will adopt some of the basic principles of QtA such as pre-instruction text segmentation, while-reading feature, interactions among the teacher with students and the author as well as peer interactions using initial and follow-up queries, and also the use of discussion moves to maneuver and maintain engaging text-based discussions. QtA in L1 instruction is used for both expository and narrative genres. However, the discussion of QtA-based procedure in second language classroom in this proposal will be for expository genre.

One initial aspect of discussion-based instruction is to take into account the importance of room arrangement. Since discussion is the major part of the lesson, student seating may affect the efficiency of classroom discourse. One best suggestion is an arrangement such as horseshoe because it creates and enhances the interaction process where students are able to see each other without having to frequently turn back.

Since QtA involves oral reading, teachers should consider the issue of oral reading. Teachers should identify which of the segments of the text that might be particularly difficult for students to read. Also, decide whether these sections will be read by the teacher or capable students. Teachers could invite capable readers when the section of the text is more challenging and encourage more inhibited and less capable readers to participate in reading the other sections of the text in order to provide more opportunity for all students to be part of the lesson. However, oral reading is not the focal point of the instruction, instead as part of pronunciation and fluency practice as well as to increase classroom participation. Nonetheless, by having some general ideas of how oral reading should be conducted, inefficient time use can be evaded and more time can be spent on discussion to achieve the goal of meaning construction.

Using initial queries developed prior to classroom instruction and based on the pre-planned text segmentation, teachers should pose appropriate queries at every stopping point. The initial queries that teachers could use are such as:

- What is the author trying to say here?
- What message is the author trying to tell us in this phrase?
- What is the author talking about?
- What do you think the author wants us to know?
- What is the important message here?

Besides initial queries, teachers should also use follow-up queries, which are questions that are built up by the teacher based on students' responses to keep discussion moving along the most productive lines. Follow-up queries could be such as:

- That is what the author said, but what does the author mean?
- Does that make sense with what the author told us before?
- Does the author tell us why?

In order to initiate, sustain, and develop discussion toward the instructional goals (e.g., students will be able to identify the big ideas, key information in building those ideas, information in different parts of the text that needs to be connected, analyze major ideas in more depth), teachers may support and encourage students' involvement in the discussion through the effective and appropriate use of discussion moves (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997). From classroom observations, Beck et al. (1997) identified eight discussion moves that may enhance student thinking and help them to connect ideas produced by their peers where the same moves can be used when conducting second language text-based discussion in second language reading classrooms.

Discussion Moves²

- Marking
 - Acknowledging student contributions by repeating or paraphrasing student comments and responding to student comments by saying things like: "Good point" or "That's important to remember.")
- Turning back to students
 - There are three ways to turn the discussion back to students:
 - Turning back responsibility to students for thinking things through and figuring things out by asking questions such as "But does that make sense?" or "What makes you think so?" or "How do you know?"
 - Requesting more information or elaboration by asking questions such as "Tell us more about that?" or "Can you explain that idea more?"

² A Reproduction with modifications from Linda Kucan (2004/2006) "An Overview of Questioning the Author with Examples from a Science Text."

- Engaging other students by asking questions such as “Do you agree with what....just said? Why or why not?”
- Turning back to the text
 - Referring students back to the text when discussion begins to divert from the intended path, or when the answer to student question can be found in the text.
- Revoicing
 - Interpreting what students are struggling to express and rephrasing their ideas so they can become part of the discussion such as “So, what you seem to be saying is that..... Is that what you meant?”
- Modeling
 - Rereading parts of the text and commenting on their importance.
 - Pointing out text features or aspects of the author’s craft
 - The author got my attention with the title of this chapter: e.g., phenomena and secrets. Those words get my attention
 - And she starts us off with an interesting question. She gets us thinking about what we should find out by reading.
 - After telling us about and, the author is taking us away from the topic to tell us more about.....
 - Now we’re back to.....from the beginning of this chapter.
 - Revealing confusion about a section of text and explaining how you made sense of it.
 - When I read this section I was confused. Then, I thought about looking at the illustration to see
- Annotating
 - Providing information to fill in gaps or providing information that is not available in the text such as saying, “Here’s what I found out when I looked up on the Internet. It is..... It’s the same/different from”
- Recapping
 - Periodically ask students to sum up what they have understood up to a certain point by saying thing such as “Who would like to tell us about one of the big ideas that we have learned about so far?”

The teachers need to be trained on how to implement the abovementioned text-based discussion procedures as well as how to use the instructional tools such as modeling protocol, queries, and discussion moves prior to actual classroom implementation.

Conclusion

Current interest in the roles of social context within reading research field has resulted in the development of research framework that integrates cognitive, sociocognitive, and sociocultural perspectives. Hence, reading becomes more holistically and comprehensively defined. Within the context of reading comprehension instruction research, the need to construct conceptual framework that includes those perspectives becomes necessary for future research. However, it is prudent to utilize existing resources of instructional approaches that suit the intended theoretical framework, have potential to succeed, and could be practically implemented in the target setting. Since QtA framework closely fits the proposed text-based discussion reading comprehension instruction model, modifying the implementation of QtA would expand its usefulness beyond its original setting such as in learning AFL.

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