

# Teachers as Mediators in Undergraduate Students' Literacy Practices: Two Pedagogical Experiences

*Teachers, as active agents in the mediation of knowledge (the rich experience of learning), are closer to understanding the formal and informal curriculum experience of students and how to access it. They know the students in a concrete, personal, individualized way, better than external evaluators. (Quintero, A. 2004)*

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In this article, we describe the pedagogical experiences of two in-service teachers developing literacy practices with their undergraduate students in EFL classes. Here the reader will learn about the connections we make between theory and practice regarding the role of the teacher in the development of undergraduate students' literacy dimensions. We also analyze the importance of teachers as mediators in the implementation of literacy activities at the university level.

*Key words:* Reading, Writing, Teaching, Literacy Dimensions, Teachers as Mediators

En este artículo describimos las experiencias pedagógicas de dos profesoras en ejercicio quienes implementan prácticas de lectura y escritura con estudiantes de pregrado en clases de inglés como lengua extranjera. El lector encontrará las conexiones que hacemos entre teoría y práctica en relación con el rol del maestro en el desarrollo de las dimensiones de lectura y escritura de estudiantes de pregrado. Analizamos además la importancia de los maestros como mediadores en la implementación de actividades de lectura y escritura a nivel universitario.

*Palabras claves:* Lectura, Escritura, Enseñanza, Dimensiones de Lectura y Escritura, Maestros como Mediadores

## **Introduction**

Reading and writing as literacy processes determine the students' social dimension and their performance inside and outside the classroom. As members of a literate society, we are in permanent contact with printed materials and are required to write for different purposes. This need relates to a real use of the language to interact, negotiate, and transact in order to participate actively in the academic community we belong to.

This article focuses on the implications of the teacher as mediator when implementing literacy activities in the classroom. In this case, the classroom consists of two university settings, one of a teacher educator program and another one of an engineering program.

The organization of this article is as follows: first, a theoretical view about reading and writing and the connections between the two. Second, there is a description of two pedagogical experiences carried out by in-service teachers that illustrate the discussion of the literacy practices at university level. Third, there are some pedagogical implications and finally the conclusions.

## **Theoretical framework**

The discussion of the constructs in this article are enlightened by theory related to reading and writing from a holistic perspective which sheds light on the linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions of literacy.

### **The reading process**

In traditional schools, reading has been regarded as a physical activity. This means that reading is the activity of recognizing print in a passive and mechanical way in which the brain is not challenged intellectually. This activity of recognizing print is carried out either in silence or orally. In either reading mode, it seems that the emphasis has been on the superficial aspects such as, speed, pronunciation, number of words per minute, etc.. Conversely, reading should involve a profound mental activity in which the brain takes an active role in the construction or transaction of meaning with the printed text (Smith, 1997).

Consequently, reading is much more than recognizing print. Reading is making sense (Goodman, 1987), reading is taking the physical realization of the words (print) and bringing it to the brain to be analyzed there (Smith, 1997). When we read it is our brain the one that makes connections and gives meaning to the written words. According to Goodman, to make sense of what is read, it is necessary to have the whole text. It is very difficult to make sense

of a syllable or a single word. The shorter the entity the harder the prediction about meaning.

For us, as whole language teachers, reading is understood as the process in which readers construct meaning by using prior knowledge and experiences as resources to make sense of texts. Readers predict, select, confirm, and self-correct as they seek to make sense of print. In other words, they guess or make hypotheses about what might occur in the text. Then, they monitor their own reading to see whether they guessed right or need to correct themselves in order to make sense of the text.

In relation to making sense in literacy practices, Rosenblat (in Clavijo, 2000: 33 -34) proposes the transactional theory. Her theory, which contributes to the understanding of the construction of meaning between readers and writers, states that the act of reading is a transaction between the reader and the writer through the text. Both bring meaning into making sense of it. Thus both reader and writer become active participants in the literacy event.

In the same line of thought, different types of knowledge and meaning systems are involved in the reading process which is *cognitive, interactive, dynamic, transactional and progressive* (Kucer, 2001). Reading is *cognitive* because it involves the individual's brain work; *interactive* because it entails interaction both with knowledge and with other participants, *dynamic* because all elements engaged in it are active. It is also a *transactional* activity because meaning is a matter of dealing with multiple choices of meaning construction that readers have to convey and *progressive* because it entails different stages in its development.

As researchers and as teachers, we see reading as a purposeful activity which must provide readers with meaning. We clearly know that reading in our initial language development stage is neither based only on printed material nor on isolated letters or graphemes. Before going to school we read the facial expressions of our parents, advertisements, and all kinds of non-verbal language around us that does not contain arbitrary linguistic symbols. For this reason, we believe that learners' reading follows a quite natural route which should continue in school.

Contrary to what we say above, the route of reading we see at the university level is not necessarily natural. It seems to be basically an instrumental practice, or what Freire and Macedo (1987) call, a utilitarian approach to reading whose main objective is to "produce readers who meet the basic reading requirements of contemporary society...Such an approach emphasizes the mechanical learning of reading skills while sacrificing the critical analysis of the social and political order" (146-147) and where little meaningful interaction takes place.

In order to avoid this instrumental or utilitarian approach to reading, one of the literacy practices we shall discuss is *reading aloud*. Reading aloud for Campell (2001) is the practice of an adult reading a book to a child or a group of children. The same practice is known by different names, for example, Scott and Ytreberg (1996: 31) view reading aloud as one of the ways to listen to a story. They classify listening to stories into three categories: telling stories, where the teacher takes the story and actually tells it to the children; creating stories, where the teacher invents the story with the help of children, and reading stories, that is to read aloud from a book. Reading aloud provides many opportunities for children to develop their literacy since it invites children to take part in the reading in multiple ways, such as discussions, drawings, repetitions, etc. In this sense, reading aloud becomes an enriching opportunity to promote children's literacy growth.

For the purpose of the first experience described here, reading aloud did not take place with children but with student-teachers in an undergraduate teaching program where one of the purposes of the activity was to present them with an experience as to how to read stories to children out loud. In all manners, student-teachers benefited from the activity and the reading aloud enhanced their literacy development in the foreign language and showed them a literacy activity that they could possibly use with their pupils.

In this sense, reading is a complex and active process and it is in our hands as teachers, to make it difficult or easy, meaningful or meaningless. A way to make the meaning resulting from reading explicit is through writing. For this reason, we shall discuss this literacy activity in the following section.

## Writing

We think it is appropriate to state a personal position about this complex literacy activity. Writing to us involves both the abstraction and the generation of meaning. This takes place and is constructed in the writer's mind. Along with this meaning is the structural representation of it, the marks the writer puts on the page. In the best of all possible worlds, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the unobservable text and the observable text; that is, what the writer wants to articulate is represented in the written language on the page. However, it is this very attempt to align the intention and structures that writers often find challenging. What the writer intends to say may not be captured by what is actually said. There is a disruption or discontinuity between intention and reality. This is when instruction plays an important role. Furthermore, this alignment is a process that evolves and never finishes, the writer can decide only to stop it but not finish it (Pearson, 1989 in Kucer, 2001: 159).

Writing teachers may decide to cover the following dimensions of literacy as proposed and supported by Kucer (2001) in his work "Dimensions of Literacy." The linguistic (text focus), cognitive (mind focus), sociocultural (group focus), and developmental (growth focus). Proficient writers use these dimensions in a simultaneous, transactive, symbolic manner. The understanding of these dimensions illuminates the instruction practice.

An understanding of the dimensions of literacy has direct implications for classroom writing instruction. Looking for the "best" methods for teaching writing is no longer a valid debate. The priority now is the debate on the sociocultural dimension of writing. For instance, teachers are aware of the fact that writing skills are best taught through meaningful communication and best learned in meaningful contexts. The understanding of this situation leads teachers to promote what Kucer, (2001) calls literacy and critical concept development – learning about literacy, learning literacy, and learning through literacy (p. 260).

In educational environments, the writing activity is a complex and time consuming process to be commented on by teachers. For this reason the role of the teacher is a crucial one in providing amateur writers with feedback on their written productions in order to help them construct coherent and meaningful texts for other readers.

### **Reading and writing connections**

Reading and writing are two processes that connect in many ways. Manson (1989:16) considers that one of the starting points in promoting reading and writing in foreign language learners is by paying more attention to meaning rather than to form.

This author also suggests that teachers should not force the students to read for words, but for meaning; therefore they should not ask them to slow down when they can speed up. For him, reading for meaning is easier than reading for words. Additionally, Manson's conceptualization about reading focuses on making students confident in their process; she says that the lack of confidence and tolerance towards errors contribute to making reading impossible.

The process of constructing meaning under the parameters of whole language is more than the interaction of grammar, syntax and semantics components of a language. In fact, three language systems interact: the grapho phonic (sound and letter patterns), the syntactic (sentence patterns), and the semantic (meanings) but in accordance with the situational or contextual component that provides additional and particular meanings to each situation and to each language user. That is to say

that the first three sub-systems operate in a pragmatic context –the particular situation in which the reading and writing is taking place. That context also contributes to the success or failure of the reading or writing.

When people read or write, they have specific goals. Comprehension of meaning is always the goal of readers and expression of meaning is always what writers are trying to achieve. Both writers and readers are strongly limited by what they already know: writers in composing, readers in comprehending.

## **Pedagogical interventions**

Our understanding of the theory presented above, leads us to look at the two pedagogical interventions we discuss below from a holistic perspective not from an instrumental one as is the case of many university literacy courses. The first scenario took place in a public university in Colombia with a teacher educator and her group of pre-school education student-teachers who were in third semester and had to teach English to children as part of their teaching practicum. The purpose of this pedagogical intervention was to implement reading activities that student-teachers could use with their pupils.

The second case took place at a private university in Colombia with an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher and her group of undergraduate students. The purpose of this pedagogical intervention was to provide her pupils with experience in academic writing.

### **Case 1: Reading aloud**

The teacher decided to carry out reading-aloud activities in which a group of third semester pre-school student teachers participated. In the development of the activities the teacher and students would choose a short story to be read according to the topic for every class. This constituted a reading routine. The purpose of this reading routine was to help the student-teachers to develop an awareness of the benefits of reading to develop language. The approach to reading was intended to bring about reading for meaning and enjoyment and not for utilitarian purposes.

The process for the implementation of these reading activities held in class was as follows:

#### *1. Collecting student-teachers' reflections about reading in their mother tongue*

The teacher collected information about the student-teachers' reading experiences in their mother tongue with the purpose of inquiring about their

perceptions of those experiences. The collected information showed that the student teachers liked reading when they were in elementary school, because there they read stories. However, when they started high school, they had to read textbooks with readings that did not make much sense to them. The literature books they had to read did not necessarily match their interests. They never had the opportunity to choose what to read. The teacher or the program dictated what was to be read. Furthermore, after the reading there was a reading test, or a composition to be submitted with a detailed analysis of plot, characters, setting and time. All in all, reading in school tended to become meaningless to students as they passed on to higher grades.

### *2. Collecting student teachers' reflections about reading in English*

The teacher collected information about student-teachers' reflections on reading in English. The teacher found that some student-teachers lacked reading experiences in English. Besides, other student-teachers associated reading in English with translation. Consequently, reading in English was not perceived as a transactional process but as a surface structural process. Literacy practices did not constitute motivation for them towards becoming readers and writers.

### *3. Reading short stories aloud to students*

After having collected information about student-teachers' prior experiences with reading, the teacher educator started the reading activity in the classroom. She took into account two key aspects. First, when teaching children, it is important to have routines. They make students feel confident, so she included reading time into the schedule everyday. The routine included asking for the date, asking personal questions, exercising a little bit or singing along and then the reading. The second aspect was the kind of books. The teacher wanted stories that were related to the topics of the lessons in order to make connections easier.

The stories read were *The Greedy Camel*, *The Potluck Party*, *The Pond Party*, *What's a Wedding?*, *The Rabbit and the Turnip*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *The Little Red Hen*, and *How the Moon got in the Sky*.

While reading aloud, the teacher educator observed the student-teachers' reactions to the stories, asked them questions related to the story and helped them make connections to the topics of the lessons and their own experiences. Sometimes, when there were repeated passages in the story, the student-teachers joined the teacher educator and repeated them out loud.

#### *4. Collect students' reflections on the reading activity*

After some weeks of reading, the students wrote their impressions about the activity carried out. Students had a positive attitude towards reading as a result of the activity because they felt they were learning English.

#### **Case 2: Feedback on writing**

The second case is related to an experience in which nine undergraduate students and an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher participated. The EFL teacher was working with teacher feedback on undergraduate students' academic writing. Her main concerns were related to the effect of written feedback (on compositions) given to a group of EFL students. By describing the task of giving and receiving feedback on written compositions, the teacher gained a deeper understanding of how influential the type of teacher feedback may have been when helping the students write in English. For instance, a focus on form in the EFL teacher's feedback resulted in students' deviation from the real intentions they had prior to writing their compositions. This indicated that the teacher's purpose in her mind was merely structural. The type of feedback was marks and symbols on the margin of the students' papers about mostly spelling and punctuation. The students seemed to overlook these marks and only worry about the grade. When asked to rewrite their compositions, the students continued showing the same type of problems in punctuation and spelling. This shows that there was no transaction between the teacher and her students since the symbols and marks she used were meaningless to them.

Later, after becoming aware of this situation, the teacher saw it fit to propose the implementation of a dialogical type of feedback in which she and her students could reach a consensus about the improvement of their writing and implement a process approach to writing development. This dialogue took the form of an instructional strategy to develop conferencing through dialogue journals. Furthermore, another interesting aspect was that it occurred to the teacher that some criteria could be jointly developed by students and teachers as opposed to evaluating work as "good" or "excellent." This could be the result of a shift in the pedagogy from teacher imposition to student-teacher transaction.

#### **Implications for further pedagogical practice**

We believe that the goal teachers need to look at is to empower their students to inquire independently about everything that interests them, choose to read and write for their own purposes, find and use resources to seek the knowledge and



information they desire, write to learn, reflect, think, modify their thinking, take new action, self-evaluate, seek feedback, and go on learning. This can be best achieved when teachers and other experts (such as parents and fellow students) serve as models and mentors (Routman, 1996: 147).

The mediation that the teacher performs needs to bridge the reader and the reading and the writer and the writing in order to facilitate the interaction and transaction between the students and the text to be either read or written.

The teachers need to understand literacy practices as dynamic processes from a deeper perspective where the reader and writer can be seen as contributors to the construction and reconstruction of texts. Besides, teachers need to see the teaching of reading and writing as processes that develop along time and rich practices.

It is important to consider the inclusion and promotion of literacy practices in educational programs at all levels. That is, universities need to also consider literacy development programs that might be thought only relevant for primary or secondary school as shown in the two cases reported here. These efforts represent an impact on university students' literacy development where teachers acted as mediators.

Literacy practices need to be meaningful to the students. The students can choose what to read or write with the crucial mediation of the teacher.

It is important to let the students make their voices heard so they become an active part of the transaction that occurs between the students and text and the students and the teacher.

One of the aspects related to literacy practices at university level that could be explored is the university students' self-perceptions as readers or writers. This is due to the fact they are usually judged on their lack of interest in reading or lousy writing. The teachers' judgmental attitudes to students' efforts to learn do not contribute much to the students' approximation to the reading or writing for enjoyment.

## **Conclusions**

As we have discussed in this article, the literacy practices are dynamic processes that demand from the readers and writers an active participation. The readers and writers are constantly in contact with reading or writing materials as part of their social interaction and need to develop literacy skills for personal enjoyment as well as academic or professional applications.

The teacher educators have a great responsibility concerning the development of literacy in university students since they are young adults or adults who are supposed to have advanced literacy skills but actually might not. When students enter the

university, they bring their elementary and secondary school literacy background with them. This responsibility embeds a positive attitude and an open mind to literacy process as cognitive, transactional, and dynamic.

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