

Employing Cueing Systems to Decode Text and Negotiate Text-Meaning in a Second Language

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Abstract

Many educators state that teaching English-Language Learners (ELLs) is just a matter of good teaching. While effective teaching is something that all children deserve, there are some differences between the approach a teacher may have to take with ELLs and with other students. One aspect of this difference is the fact that, while children go through the same stages of language development, ELLs may be at stages typically not found in other students. Based on a case study of an EL and his teacher, this article explains cueing systems and their role in literacy for ELs.

Key words: Reading, second-language acquisition, second-language reading, emergent reading, phonics.

Introduction

Frank Smith (1971) stated that “information is the reduction of uncertainty.” This is a worthwhile proposition for learning in general, and it certainly extends to learning to read a second language. One challenge that teachers of English-language learners (ELL) face is how to teach reading to this population. Students must not only learn vocabulary and grammar, but they must learn a large number of sight words and sound/letter associations that will allow them to identify words accurately and efficiently (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston, 2007). They must learn a new phonetic system (or a graphophonic system that differs from the one they already know).

Theoretical Framework

In order for teachers to understand the process of teaching reading to ELLs, we must first examine views of reading, and then determine which view would more likely reduce student’s uncertainty in learning to read in English.

Freeman and Freeman (2004) discussed two views of reading; word recognition and socio-psycholinguistics. The goal of the first view, word recognition, is to have students identify words in order to make sense of the text. The primary method used with word recognition is synthetic phonics, where the student uses phonics rules to sound out unfamiliar words and learn sight words to identify phonetically irregular words. The word recognition view advocates

that the main task of reading is the identification of words (Gouch, 1972). This paradigm implies that the reader begins with identifying the smallest units of written language (letters and words) and then applying them to larger units of language (sentences and paragraphs) and eventually, decoding meaning from text.

The second view, socio-psycholinguistics, as outlined by May (1990) and May and Rizzardi (2002), argues that readers may employ a combination of complimentary cues to help identify words and make meaning from the text. The five types of socio-psycholinguistic cues that will be presented and discussed here include grapho-phonics, syntactic, semantic, schematic, and picture cues.

The first of these cues from the socio-psycholinguistic view is grapho-phonetic cues. Grapho-phonetic cues are single letters or sets of letters, particularly their positions in words, and the speech sounds they represent. For example, the “gh” in ghost, laugh, and bought are all pronounced differently. Vowels and vowel sounds are particularly problematic. Vowel or vowel combinations may have many different sounds, such as “ea” in bread, great, and bead. In addition, a vowel sound may be represented by different vowels and vowel combinations, such as long “E” being represented in the words be, bee, eat, Pete, machine, thief, and pretty. Wylie and Durrell (1970) demonstrated that 37 rimes, or word families such as -at, -in, and -op, can be used to spell and decode 500 different words. Bear, et. al. (2007) argued that the use of rimes may be effective in decoding and spelling because vowels are more consistent within word families than across them. Since English is phonetically more irregular than other languages such as Spanish, an approach that advocates simply sounding out words does not account for the complexity of the sound-letter relationships found in English. Using grapho-phonetic cues, particularly in relation with the other cues, may be helpful for students learning to read in English.

Graphophonic Cues

Gibbons (2002) argued that second-language readers, especially beginning learners, rely more on graphophonic cues than do their monolingual English-speaking peers. This is due to a lack of English semantics and background knowledge that may not be reflected in text. This affects reading fluency, which in turn affects comprehension and vocabulary development. Graphophonic cues are more consistent with short-vowel words such as “cat,” “bed,” “dim,” “dot,” and “rug.” This consonant-vowel-consonant pattern is very predictable and lends itself well to decoding (reading) and encoding (spelling) words. Long-vowel words have more variants, but even those have some rules associated with them. For example, a closed-syllable (where a consonant sound is heard at the end of the syllable) long “A” word contains “ai,” and an open-syllable (where a vowel sound is heard at the end of the syllable) long “A” word contains “ay.” An example of each would be “rain” and “ray.” The location of a letter also indicates the sound it makes. For example, the “y” in “yellow,” in “silly,” and in “cry” makes a different

sound. Therefore, telling students to just “sound out” a word is insufficient, especially for students learning English as a new language.

Syntactic Cues

The second type of cue is syntactic cues. The order of words may provide cues about the word to be decoded, as well as its meaning. In the sentence “The b_____ dog went home” the reader can determine that the word in question is an adjective. Returning to Smith’s statement about information, the reader’s choices of words is reduced by his knowledge of word order. When combining this knowledge with grapho-phonetic knowledge, the reader may look at the letters and see that the word begins with a “b” and is an adjective. The reader may predict the word based on this combination of cues and confirm it with another cue. Of course, this cue is contingent on knowing the syntax of the target language, which may be problematic for English Language Learners, especially at first.

Semantic Cues

The third type of cue, semantic cues, may help in decoding words as well as confirming predictions, as mentioned above. The reader determined that the unknown word begins with “b” and is an adjective. In examining our sentence “The b_____ dog went home.” we can say that “big” is a good prediction. The word “bag” would be a reasonable prediction based on grapho-phonetic and syntactic cues, but would not make much sense. If we change the word “dog” to “lady” we would have to re-examine the grapho-phonetic cues, since both “big” and “bag” could fit with “lady.”

Schematic Cues

The fourth type of cue, schematic cues, assumes that the reader interacts with the text to make predictions and verify predictions. This type of cue can work with the other cues to make sense and change predictions of text. The text below illustrates how schema may be employed with the first three cues:

Joan: I don’t think this p_____ will take off.

John: What are you talking about? It’s a well-designed p_____.

Jan: Who thought of this p_____?

Juan: I did, just this morning.

The reader may have predicted that the word in question was “plane” after reading the first sentence. The second sentence may have reinforced this notion, but by the third line the reader may start second-guessing their initial prediction. By the fourth line the reader realizes that “plane” is not a good choice because their schema of how planes are built would tell them that planes are not

conceived of and built the same day. The word “plan” is the best choice. The grapho-phonetic similarities between these two words are very high and may be difficult for some readers to distinguish without some degree of difficulty.

Picture Cues

The fifth type of cue is picture cues. The incorporation of appropriate pictures with the text may help students identify unknown words, in addition to aiding in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. An example of using a picture cue is when a student is unable to decode the word “blue” when reading about the flag. The teacher can ask the student to identify the colors of the flag by using a picture in the text. The teacher should then ask the student if the sentence makes sense and if the word in question looks like the word “blue.” These cues may be used in any combination. It should be noted, however, that the use of these cues are just one aspect of reading, albeit one that may play an important role in learning to read.

It is important to understand how these cues facilitate learning to read in English for an English learner and how the student’s knowledge of printed language may conflict with the use of these same cues in reading English.

Hornberger (1989, 2004) proposed that learning to read in a second language is dependent upon a number of variables. Hornberger stated that there are continua of biliteracy that affect how well and how quickly a student learns to read in another language. The continuum that is of particular importance to this piece is the similar/dissimilar linguistic constructions continua. The important issue relevant to this particular continuum is the issue of whether or not the native language and the second language have a high degree of similarity and how this similarity, or lack thereof, affects the student’s ability to learn the new language and become literate in a new language. When students learn a second language in the U.S. they often learn to read in that language as well. When students learn to read a second language, they do not need to relearn literacy skills if they are already literate in their first language, nor do they have to relearn all the content they learned in their first language. Cummins (1979) argued that second-language literates transfer declarative knowledge (knowing content) and procedural knowledge (knowing how to read and write) from the first language to the second language. They often bring the assumptions they have about reading they acquired when learning to read in the first language. If the student subscribes to a word recognition view of reading or over-emphasizes grapho-phonetic cues from the socio-psycholinguistic view then it is likely that negotiating meaning from text will be hindered. On the other hand, if the student has a socio-psycholinguistic view of reading, where the student is capable of apply all the cueing systems at the student’s disposal in the attempt to gain meaning from text, even when all of the words are not completely decoded or understood, the student can more easily transfer declarative and procedural knowledge from his/her first to second language.

Stanovich (1986) identified phonemic awareness as the key factor that differentiated good readers from less-abled readers. Stanovich argued that there is a reciprocal relationship between phonemic awareness and reading; good readers have strong phonemic awareness and phonemic awareness helps readers become good readers. The question is what approach would be most effective for ELLs, an approach that relies almost exclusively at first on sound-letter relationships with which the reader may be unfamiliar or slightly familiar, or approach that can take advantage of other things he knows about language in order to learn those sound-letter relationships?

McClellan, Rumelhart and Hilton (1986) examined the phonetically regularity of Spanish versus the relative phonetic irregularity of English. Clymer (1963) found that many phonics rules in English have so many exceptions that they should not be taught as rules to young children. Clymer proposed that for a generalization to be useful, it had to apply at least 75% of the time. Bailey (1967) completed a study of 45 phonics generalizations taught in reading programs, and found that only 27 were applicable at least 75% of the time.

Since phonemic awareness is important for all language learners, the question remains what approach is more effective; the synthetic approach or the analytical approach. The synthetic approach is aligned with the word recognition view. In this approach, students blend individual sounds together to decode words. The synthetic approach has been criticized because there are many sounds in English that are phonetically irregular and confuse second-language learners when students are asked to use this approach (Newman, 2006). Newman stated that children can be good word-callers but not understand text. Another cause of concern is that meaning is not apparent from the start.

The analytical approach is congruent with the socio-psycholinguistic view. With the analytical approach, students are introduced to whole words and then analyze their phonetic elements. This approach, however, should be used only with words that have already been seen in context (Bear, et. al., 2007).

Gibbons (2002) asserted that while educators should teach language in a holistic, meaningful way, phonics still needed to be taught. Gibbons mentioned three principles to keep in mind when teaching phonics to second-language learners; move from the whole to the part, move from meaning to form, and from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Finally, Gibbons stated that teachers need to help students “become aware that letter-sound relationships lead to possibilities, rather than certainties!” (p.135). This last principle in particular resonates deeply with Smith’s definition of knowledge being the reduction of uncertainty; literacy in the second language should be based on the reduction of uncertainties rather than a reliance on learning a set of rigid rules which do not apply in many situations.

The idea of reducing uncertainties and giving students viable choices in decoding and word meaning is in keeping with Bruner’s notion of scaffolding (Bruner, 1985; Clay and Cazden, 1990). Bruner referred to scaffolding as the

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amount of support a teacher provides a student during the act of learning. In addition, Bruner proposed that teachers relinquish the amount of scaffolding needed as a student becomes more capable and independent while learning a particular skill or task.

Gibbons (2002) argued that beginning second-language readers rely more on grapho-phonetic cues than do their monolingual English-speaking peers. May (1990) and May and Rizzardi (2002) termed “cueing systems.” Her approach was more holistic in nature. Her attempt to have Mario employ all of the cueing systems was due to the interactive nature of reading; an interaction between reader and text to negotiate meaning. While a graphophonics approach is suited to reading in Spanish, English is more phonetically irregular.

The teacher’s ability to scaffold the cueing systems may be greatly influenced by the student’s fluency in the target language. The knowledge of the target language that the student may know includes phonemic awareness and grapho-phonetic knowledge, knowledge of syntax, vocabulary meaning and the nuances of word meanings in different contexts, knowledge of grammar, and knowledge of the culture presented by the texts the student is reading.

The graphophonetic cueing system does have some potential for use by Spanish-speakers learning English, if the word is in the student’s listening vocabulary. Another way that this cueing system may be helpful is when the Spanish-speaking student encounters cognates (Rodriguez, 2001). Cognates are words that are identical or similar in spelling and have the same meaning. Spanish and English share many such cognates. When a student encounters a cognate, recognition may be instantaneous and pronunciation of the word may not even be a factor, although the teacher should model pronunciation of the word so the student may recognize the word when listening to someone speak, or while using it during a conversation. There are lists of cognates that the teacher can employ. These could be used on a word wall or in the students’ folders.

When teaching students the cueing systems in English, a teacher may ask a student to confirm a word based on the system the student is using. For example, when a student has determined what an unknown word is, the teacher may ask “Does that word look like _____?” She should ask this if the word in question is correct so the student knows what the word looks like. On the other hand, if the word is not correct and does not look like the unknown word, the teacher can have the student focus on the elements of the word to see if the graphic cues match the sounds of the word given by the student. This would be difficult to do with a beginning English language learner, since his knowledge of graphophonics would be very limited. Only as the student becomes more fluent in English can the teacher employ this cueing system.

The next cueing system, syntactic cues, may also be used to determine words and word meaning in English. As the English learners knowledge of English, including syntactical knowledge, grows he may be able to predict the part of speech of unknown words. This knowledge of word order, along with the other cueing systems, may be more efficient in learning to decode new words and

their meanings. This is especially true for decoding phonetically irregular words, which are more common in English than in Spanish.

Semantic cues may be employed to teach decoding and vocabulary. For example, teachers may scaffold students' understanding of the relationship between words in order to make sense of unknown or partially-known words. In the sentence, "The man is not innocent, he is culpable," the teacher should aid in students' awareness of the key words "not" and "innocent." The student should expect an antonym in this case. The word "culpable" is a cognate for Spanish-speaking students. If the word "guilty" replaced "culpable," the teacher should ask students if the target word means the same or the opposite of "guilty." The teacher should model pronunciation of the target word and model the correct pronunciation if students mispronounce the word, or any target words. The meaning of the word should take precedence, especially at first.

Schema may be a powerful cue for students. Instead of asking students to "sound out" words, teachers may take advantage of students' funds of knowledge. Also, teachers should add to students' schema before reading text by identifying words that may be unknown to the students. Teaching new words in relation to known words is recommended. Using graphic organizers such as a Venn Diagram, a Semantic Feature Analysis, and a Concept Circle fosters understanding among words.

Finally, picture cues should be employed whenever they are available. If a student is struggling to decode a word that is represented in a picture, teachers should have students examine the picture as an aid. For example, in the sentence, "Our flag is red, white, and blue," a student may struggle to identify the word "white" because it is phonetically irregular. The teacher may ask the student to identify the colors of the flag found in the picture. If the student says the colors found in the picture, the teacher should ask if the student's utterance makes sense.

Conclusions

Picture cues are an important cueing system available to readers in determining words. Pictures may serve a two-fold purpose; they may help a student figure out a word in his oral vocabulary, or it may help the student add to his vocabulary. Picture cues may be very crucial for ELL readers because the teacher may be able to scaffold meaning more readily through pictures. With beginning second-language learners, pictures may be a good way for students to learn the target language and to understand a specific story. Nonetheless, the teacher's goal of having the student become an independent reader who is able to decode text, eventually with less pictures available, is an arduous task. Knowing which cueing systems to use initially and which to use as the student becomes more fluent in speaking English and reading English is a key to effective instruction.

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