

PROCESSING SKILL IS ENHANCED IN READING LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Processing skill is a kind of thinking, reflective, interpretative and inferential skill in the use of the language. Traditional way that English is taught in the Chinese context encouraging teachers' fragmented approach to teaching is obviously impedimental to developing students' processing skill. This article intends to discuss how to enhance students' processing skill by reading literary works.

KEY WORDS

Processing skill, referentiality, representationality, cognitive strategies, metacognition, imaginativity, creativity, appreciation, pre- / while- / post-reading tasks.

RESUMEN

La destreza procesual es un tipo de destreza de pensamiento, reflexiva, interpretativa e inferencial en el uso de la lengua. El modo tradicional en que se enseña inglés en el contexto chino, propiciando en los profesores un enfoque fragmentado de la enseñanza, es obviamente un impedimento para el desarrollo de la destreza procesual en los estudiantes. Este artículo discute cómo mejorar la destreza procesual de los estudiantes por medio de la lectura de obras literarias.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Destreza procesual, referencialidad, representacionalidad, estrategias cognitivas, metacognición, imaginatividad, creatividad, apreciación, actividades antes de / durante / después de la lectura.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'adresse processuelle est une sorte d'adresse de pensée, réfléchie, interprétative et inférencielle dans l'emploi de la langue. La façon traditionnelle dont on apprend l'anglais dans le contexte chinois, favorisant chez les professeurs une optique fragmentée de l'enseignement, est évidemment un empêchement pour le développement de l'adresse processuelle chez les élèves. Cet article discute comment améliorer l'adresse processuelle des étudiants moyennant la lecture d'oeuvres littéraires.

MOTS-CLÉ

Adresse processuelle, référencialité, représentivité, stratégies cognitives, métacognition, imaginanimité, créativité, appréciation, activités avant / pendant / après la lecture.

This essay intends to discuss:

What is processing skill?

Why should we lay emphasis on processing skill in the Chinese context?

How to cultivate students' processing skill by reading literary works?

Traditional way that English is taught in the Chinese context is focused only on students' ability in reading and writing. This, to some extent, hinders students in achieving communicative competence, because students are exposed to English in artificial situations with minimal exposure to authentic use. They are trained to develop language skills in isolation, without using them for real communication or for making meaning. Accordingly it encourages teachers' fragmented approach to teaching, and grammar and structures that weigh heavily in teaching are obviously impedimental to developing students' processing skill.

Processing skill is a kind of *thinking* (McRae, 1996; 1999), reflective, *interpretative* and *inferential* (Carter, 1995, p. 13; 1996) skill in the use of the language. Professor McRae (1999) describes processing as the fifth skill in his article *Five Skills English*. He advocates that "...language learning is moving beyond the traditional four skills...to the development of the indispensable but often ignored or taken-for-granted fifth skill, thinking / [processing]" (1996, p. 23). Processing can be divided into data-based, literal, referential, shallow processing, and conceptually-based, metaphorical, representative, deep processing.

If shallow processing is seen as a preliminary stage, then deep processing is an advanced stage. Obviously only deep processing can result in construction leading to critical analysis and judgement, and trigger-

ing rich imaginative responses and potential creativity in students. Therefore processing which permeates through reading to the other skills should be regarded as an indispensable skill apart from the cliché that only listening, speaking, reading and writing are the skills in language learning.

Stress on developing processing skill is particularly of far-reaching significance for students who are traditionally (or may be trained to be) dependent, authority-oriented and unconditionally submissive. Chinese students display their distinct patience in unquestioning recipience of the knowledge from their teachers. Apart from traditional cultural factors in that students are used to unconditional subordination, they have rarely been trained to critically process knowledge or relate it to their own received knowledge. Even in mother tongue teaching, students' thinking, imagination and creativity are condensed within the scope of the former scholars' perspectives and comments which are written in the teacher's book and imparted by the teacher in the classroom. Their thinking is far from critical, creative or imaginative but a sheer duplicate of the teacher's or the former scholars'. This kind of thinking or processing is uni-directional, convergent rather than multi-directional, divergent, which will certainly bridle students' thinking ability, potential imagination and creativity.

I understand that the importance attached to developing students' processing skill goes far beyond the limitation of language learning and teaching itself. It helps students become active, reflective, meditative, imaginative, creative, independent and responsible so as to promote social progress. It can make students into a new generation with their own mind and with the capability of reading the world as a text, observing objectively, analyzing and thinking critically, seeing through the appearance to get at essence. And this new generation will surely facilitate the steps in China's current reforms.

Reading in real sense entails students getting actively involved in giving out or producing what is needed to contribute to deeper processing, imaginative interpretation, multi-dimensional appreciation, and creative thinking of a text. I believe this kind of reading will bring students from surface to deep, from passive to active, from serialist to holist, from static to dynamic, from plane to stereo, which is the core of language learning, the orientation of language teaching.

It is important not to be satisfied with a surface approach to a text, because reading is not only for passive reception but also for active production; it is not only for the understanding of explicit, referential

but also for implicit, representational meaning of a text; it is not only for *seeing into* the working of a text but also for *seeing through* and *around* a text (Carter and Nash, 1990; McRae, 1991; Carter, 1996, 1997; McRae, 1996). In Bernardt's words reading is not only a *meaning-extracting* but also a *meaning-constructing* process (1991, p. 5).

McRae mentions the key concept of *referential* and *representational* materials in reading. He further explains that referentiality "remains close to what they mean in a dictionary sense. [It is] purely informational, or at the level of basic interpersonal communication. [And it] requires very little in the way of thinking. It requires a memory for vocabulary and an ability to manipulate grammatical forms" (McRae, 1991, p. 5). Representationality does not differ from referentiality in that respect, but "[it] opens up, calls upon, stimulates and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion, from pleasure to pain, which referential language does not reach" (McRae, 1991, p. 13). Talking about discourse analysis, Carter (1997, p. 75) states "...it means the analysis and interpretation of language use not just as *reference* but also as *representation*". Representationality appeals to students' interaction, negotiation, thinking, and creativity in processing the text according to language, content, effect and impact. It also contains elements of intentionality and elements of uncertainty that gives the reins to the students' imagination and creativity (Carter 1996).

Brumfit and Carter (1986), Carter and Long (1991), Duff and Maley (1991), McRae (1991) and Widdowson (1992) respectively put forward some theoretical underpinnings in advocating the application of literature in language teaching. Language and literature cannot be separated from each other. They are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. "The study of literature involves an approach to texts as aesthetically patterned artifacts; and it also involves critical concepts, knowledge of conventions and the like. Using literature as a linguistic resource involves starting from the fact that literature is language in use and can therefore be exploited for language learning purposes." (Carter and McRae, 1996, p. xx).

Carter and McRae (1996, p. xxi) state "Texts are not completely fixed or stable entities". Mao (1996, p. 180) says "[Texts] multiply in meanings". They actually imply that even the same text may be interpreted differently by different people in different contexts at different times. A text itself is static, waiting to be explored. It is the reader, the interaction between the reader and the text through tasks that make it dynamic, bring it to life. Tasks are normally designed according to the

order of before, during and after reading. Barnett (1989) and Bernhardt (1991) describe various tasks in reading, among which pre-reading tasks, while-reading tasks and post-reading tasks are often utilized in classroom language teaching.

Pre-reading tasks aim to relate a text to students' prior experiences and relevant knowledge, activate and expand their content and formal schemata, build vocabulary and help identify cultural influences that may affect reading comprehension or interpretation (Byrd, 1995) through brainstorming questions, group discussion, skimming, scanning or writing, etc. Some pre-reading questions which are within students' capacity are "designed to stimulate response, and a willingness to response" (Brumfit and Carter, 1986, p. 47). The purpose of designing pre-reading tasks is obviously to arouse students' interest and help them approach the text more meaningfully and purposefully. But we need to balance the degree of operating pre-reading tasks. The "warm-up activity that goes on [either] too long [or too far] can be distracting, taxing, and counter-productive" (McRae, 1996, p. 25).

Based upon pre-reading tasks, while-reading tasks are designed to help students to become efficient in dealing with complex or unfamiliar structures and words so as to work through the text. Reading strategy practice, linguistic development and activation of thinking or processing form the core of while-reading tasks. Different kinds of questions designed for discussion can range from lower-order, referential, closed questions to higher-order, inferential, open questions (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 38; McRae, 1991, 1996) so as to encourage students at different levels to read, analyze and appreciate the text not only literally but also between the lines. They also challenge students to reflect analytically, critically and creatively, trigger their questioning, and stir up their imagination.

In post-reading tasks, students are provided with opportunities for summarizing, deducting and evaluating the text. Students' language, text and cultural awareness is raised through discussion, and they are helped to go beyond the text they have read and understood to recast or transform the text feature into a new setting or form. Professor Carter said that "Reading is probably not the passive process we take it to be. It involves us in relating the experiences of the [narrator] to the experiences we ourselves have undergone or can imagine ourselves undergoing" (1991, p. 16). I strongly believe that students will be better motivated to read a literary text if they can relate it to their own experience.

However, it should be pointed out that tasks may not be necessarily confined to be designed according to the phases as was mentioned above. There is no clear-cut demarcation between them. The tasks designed in each phase may be overlapped or interwoven. They should be, based on what the text is, flexibly operated in the processing of the text with developing students' processing or thinking skill as a core.

Both the teacher and students bring different affective and cognitive conditions to the construction of a text presentation so that different interpretations for a text will be expected (Ruddell and Unrau, 1994, p. 123). "The reading we are directing is an appeal to the individual mind" (McRae, 1991, p. 123). I strongly advocate that students are encouraged or challenged to relate the text they are learning to the reality they are facing. "Reality itself is a plural text with as many interpretations as there are individuals experiencing it. The text, therefore, is to be considered as an expression of experience" (McRae, 1991, p. 124).

We should not only improve students' linguistic, pragmatic competence but also develop their cognitive and metacognitive strategies through processing literary works. According to O'Malley, Chamot (1989) and Oxford (1990), cognitive strategies refer to processes and behavior which learners use to help them improve their ability to learn or remember something, particularly those which learners use with specific classroom tasks and activities in reading comprehension. Any mental process which learners make use of in language learning such as inferencing, generalization, deductive learning, monitoring, memorizing, problem-solving, etc. belongs to a cognitive process which deals with learning systems of knowledge, particularly those processes involved in thought, perception, comprehension, reflection, etc.

Metacognitive strategies "refer to the extent to which the reader is thinking about or reflecting on what is being read. This feature demonstrates that the reader is monitoring his / her own comprehension process. Metacognition is characterized in written recalls by question marks, parenthetical comments, vague vocabulary, or blanks that illustrate the reader's uncertainty about particular aspects of the text or demonstrate additional [interpretation] that the text has not made explicit" (Berhardt, 1991, p. 122). Metacognition is an important component of the comprehension process for students, because it demands that they reevaluate and reflect on their interpretations of the text.

Based on all the above-mentioned, it is axiomatic that literature should be introduced to students in the classroom as a means or

resource for the enhancement of their language proficiency and more important, their processing skill. And language should, in turn, be applied as a “point of entry” for the improvement of their understanding and appreciation of literature. Language teachers should teach language for literature purposes and vice versa. I would like to introduce short stories such as “*Windows*” and “*A Job on the Side*” to senior grade students in my school, and guide them to process the texts properly with the questions following the texts. These short stories are literally simple but metaphorically deep in meaning. They are “rich enough for study at a variety of levels and within a variety of contexts” (Dunning 1968, p. 8). They are good enough to train students’ processing skill.

Short story

Windows

Freeman J. Wong

Yes, she was a helpful neighbor. She kept our mutual lane spotless all year round. She raked the maple leaves for me in fall, cleared my ice in winter, and mowed my lawn in summer. And she asked for nothing in return, but God knows what she was up to!

Then on Canada Day last year, while my wife and I were entertaining friends in our backyard, I heard a loud crack. My basement window had been smashed to pieces. We rushed to the scene, and there was that busy woman again! But why did she break our basement window? Was she clearing the way for her husband or someone else to break into our home?

“What have you done to my fucking window?” I reproached her sternly.

“Nothing. I was just sweeping the leaves when it suddenly broke. I didn’t even touch it.”

“Shut up! No more fucking stories! Do you want to fix it for me, or should I call the police?”

“Kindness is never paid in kindness,” she mumbled to herself. “Serves me right.”

“Fuck you! Speak out. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll get a contractor to replace the window for you.”

“When?”

“Right now,” she said firmly as she walked away.

A man came and took the measurements. Thirty minutes later, he returned with a new aluminum window wrapped in plastic and foam. In less than an hour, my forty-year-old wooden window was replaced by a modern one. To tell you the truth, I had wanted to change it for a long

time, but just didn't have a chance. Thank God, I got it free of charge at last. Why not? She was a helpful woman who enjoyed doing good deeds for others anyway.

Just between you and me, the true story is that while she was sweeping the tree leaves for me, my boy—who was playing in the basement—kicked his ball right through the old window. It was the perfect moment for me to threaten to press charge against her. What a helpful child! That evening I rewarded him with two pounds of white chocolate.

After saving three hundred dollars on the new window, I began to seek opportunities to have the other window replaced. To improve my chances, I placed a five-foot long stick through an old hole to trip her up. I intuitively listened for the stick whenever I heard footsteps around my house—I woke up even in the small hours of the night, lest she would hit and run. But she never came again.

The synopsis of this short story: The narrator took a chance to corner and threaten his helpful neighbor to replace his old window with a new one. The neighbor couldn't find a witness to prove that she was innocent, so she got a contractor to replace the window. What was even worse is that he took it for granted and tried to seek another chance to trap her, but failed at last, because she never came back to his help.

To activate students' schemata, I give them some pre-reading questions to discuss about so as to provide a connection with this short story.

- Do you know your neighbors or their names? If not, why not?
- What comes to your mind the moment the word "neighbor" is mentioned?

Cognitive psychology identifies three phases in language development: *perceiving*, in which students attend to certain aspects of experience by means of listening and reading; *ideating*, through students reflect on the experience; and *presenting*, in which students express their ideas by means of speaking and writing (Goodman, 1986).

- Why didn't the narrator use his neighbor's name, instead, he used "she" all through the text?
- Do you believe that a woman was ready to help her neighbor all year round only for the purpose of seeking an opportunity to break into her neighbor's house with an out-of-date wooden window that had been used for 40 years?

- What do you think of the narrator and his neighbor based upon the dialogue between them? Do you think the narrator rude, domineering, unjustifiable, or overbearing? Do you agree that the neighbor was passive, helpless, self-controlled, forbearing, or submitting to humiliation? If yes, why? If no, why not?

- Do you think the woman is strong or weak in character? Why and why not?

- Use your imagination and tell why she decided to replace his old wooden window with a new, modern one since it was not her fault at all?

The students had a heated discussion on this question: maybe the window was too old to fix; maybe she just didn't want to get involved in this unpleasant, meaningless disagreement or conflict; maybe she wanted to prove that she was God's daughter, loving not only her friends but also her enemies; maybe she wanted to continue to help her neighbor, leaving him an unforgettable impression; or maybe she wanted to give him a good lesson by forming a sharp contrast of the two windows, which would definitely make him feel guilty, or humiliated, while making her feel good whenever she saw it.; maybe...

- What does the word "you" in the first sentence of the second paragraph from the bottom refer to? Why?

Obviously most students will say "you" refers to the readers, because readers have nothing to do with her or this dispute. It may refer to God, because he kept the secret to himself and nobody knows it except omnipresent God. And it may also refer to nobody but the other half of the narrator himself. If "me" is physically the narrator, then "you" psychologically the narrator. Maybe he didn't want to tell, but deep in his heart the other half of the narrator just couldn't help telling the truth.

- What does "the perfect moment" mean?

- What does the word "reward" mean? What influence would what the narrator did have on his child? Do you think his child will follow suit when he grows up? Do you think what the narrator lost was far more than what he got, or vice versa? In what way?

- Why didn't the woman come to his help after that?

- Do you believe that the narrator got a free-of-charge new window actually at a cost of his moral quality? How?

- What do you think the title is (if the title is held back)? Why?

“Windows” is the best word as the title for this short story. One window was broken and replaced with a new one, while the other one is still what it was. Literally, a window is something through which we can see things outside or inside. Metaphorically, it is compared to the window of mind. The two characters displayed their different inner worlds and qualities through the “windows” of their actions, their words and the activities of their minds.

- What is the purpose of writing this short story in your own opinion?

This short story reflects the relationship between people in a certain society has become isolated and indifferent, some people have even become hypocritical and fraudulent. It discloses the seamy side of the society in ironic way and draws the attention of the general public to the social problem concerning ethics and morals. Meanwhile it probably intends to tell us that immoral action is not conforming to the accepted morality.

Short story

A Job on the Side

Freeman J. Wong

The security woman restated her accusation in the presence of the police officer. She claimed that she had found an expensive watch belonging to the store in Robert's pocket. The guard accused him of stealing the watch and wanted him arrested. Robert denied her allegations and accused her of trying to frame him.

I was called in. The police officer took down my name, address and phone number as he had done with Robert.

“Do you know him?” He pointed at Robert.

“No. But we were looking at the same watches at the jewelry counter about half an hour ago.”

“The store is accusing him of stealing a watch.” He looked into my eyes. “Did you see him steal anything?”

“Sir, may I suggest that you first take a look at the jewelry counter itself.”

“Why?”

“Once you see it, maybe you'll have a better idea.”

Reluctantly, the police officer led us to the jewelry counter. “Now what do you have to tell us?”

“Sir, you can see for yourself. It’s impossible for anybody to steal a watch here without getting caught. This counter is always locked. Whatever merchandise you see is always shown by the salesgirl. Plus, the security camera would have the incident on tape.”

“What else do you want to tell us?”

“Right after the salesgirl showed us the three watches, she put them all back. I didn’t even see him touching them. How could he have stolen anything?”

“Did you ever see the watches all by yourself, then?” He asked Robert.

“No. You can ask her,” he pointed to the salesgirl.

“Did he?”

“No, he didn’t,” the girl assured him.

“Then how could the watch have ended up in his pocket?” The officer asked the security guard suspiciously.

She shrugged her shoulders, “It just did.”

“Well, let’s check the videotape.”

The police officer released Robert right after viewing the tape. I congratulated Robert and he gave me a warm hug. After we left the store, he invited me to dinner in a French restaurant. He was still upset by the whole incident. He told me that he would hire the best lawyer and sue the store for slandering him in public. I offered to be his witness.

You never lose by helping a rich man win a lawsuit. They buy you good meals and pay you excellent wages for the days you go to court for them.

That’s the reason I started this job on the side after my wife lost her job. Sometimes it takes a whole Saturday to find the right person at the right spot where you can sneak something into their pocket or handbag. The worst that can happen is that you plant something on somebody you have been following for a whole day, then lose track of him or her when the police are called in. Without my help, some such people get heavy fines, while others go to court only to lose the lawsuit. A few even have to go to jail. Fortunately, Robert got off.

As for the short story “A Job on the Side”, I list the following questions for students to discuss about.

- Do you know any people who take an extra job apart from their regular one? If yes, do you know why they do so? What do you think of these people?
- Why did the security woman accuse Robert of stealing a watch from a store? Is there any evidence that can be used to support her accusation?
- What is Robert’s reaction to the accusation? Did he accept or deny it? What did he do in return?

- Why was the narrator called in?
- “No” seems enough to the question “Do you know him?” But why did the narrator add more with “But we were looking at...”? What did he intend to impress people?
- Why did the police officer look into the narrator’s eyes while speaking?
- Why didn’t the narrator answer the police officer’s question directly, instead, he said, “Sir, you can see...”? What is the narrator’s real purpose? (to show his endeavor and to leave Robert a good impression that he is capable to...)
- What do you think of the store? Was it well or poorly organized? How do you know it?
- Why did the writer spend a lot of space in describing the well-organized store? (to prove that it’s impossible for Robert to steal...)
- But the fact is “the watch is in Robert’s pocket.” What does the writer really want to tell us? What is beyond the language? (just show the special job the narrator did.)
- Why did the police officer release Robert immediately after they viewed the tape? What might be recorded on the tape?
- What does the word “offered” mean? Why did the narrator offer to be a witness?
- How do you understand “You never lose by helping a rich man win a lawsuit.”?
- What does the title mean? Does it carry some other meaning besides “sideline, side job or side occupation”? (it’s not a right channel at all for people to make a living on the job that is not accepted by the society.)
- Why did Robert start this job on the side? (maybe because his wife lost her job; maybe because he wanted to have good meals and excellent wage; or maybe because of the loophole in management or morality, etc.)
- Suppose you were in Robert’s position, would you like to do the same thing as he did? Why? Why not?
- Did Robert always get along with this job smoothly or without any difficulty? Why?
- Is there anything between the lines in this story that the writer intends to tell us? If yes, what is it?

This short story reflects an existing social phenomenon. A few people take the advantage of the loophole of the law and management to

act immorally in society. The writer unfolds the evil side of the society in an ironic way and draws the attention of the general public to the social problem. Meanwhile the writer wishes to enhance the public moral awareness.

McRae and Vethamani (1999, p. xii) state "The author depends on the reader to make the text come to life". To a certain extent, it is the reader who unfolds the literary works far beyond what the author intends to reach, which is usually found in full display in literary works. It is in the literary works that exist the implicit knowledge structures and the unstated cultural heritage which are absolutely necessary for students to develop their processing skill. Carter (1997, p. 155) states "...literature is made from language, and the sensitivity to language use is a strong basis for the development of an understanding of literary texts.

The purpose lies in not only improving students' language proficiency, developing their literary taste and ability of appreciation but also enriching their knowledge of the world, improving their cognitive ability and building up their moral characters. As for the questions listed above for discussion, some of them invite students to retrieve factual and propositional content ("low-order questions"); some allow them to predict or guess by means of inference; and some others entail their judgement and evaluation based on their own experience and knowledge ("high-order questions") (Carter and Long, 1991; McRae, 1991).

It should be admitted that some questions are a little bit difficult, but there is no harm in letting students give it a try. One of the aspects that are often ignored by language teachers is that from time to time they underestimate their students' competence, which makes the literature teaching less of a challenge.

It was of course undeniable that very often the best lessons are those where the class take the teacher somewhere unexpected. So long as it is within control, it should be regarded as a positively creative learning and interpretative autonomy (Carter and McRae, 1996, p. 26).

Based on my knowledge of students, they have very alert mind, they are full of imagination without exclusion of what is naive and ridiculously childish. Their prediction and imagination, as a result, render an unexpected but reasonable contribution to literature teaching.

We should be clear that a prerequisite of a successful literature class lies in that the teacher must have a strong interest in literature and he/she must be able to transfer their enthusiasm for literature to students so as to enable them to respond with the same enjoyment and

pleasure (Carter and Long, 1991). We should make students aware that more is meant than meets the eye (Barnett, 1989) and place emphasis on raising students' language awareness with literature as a medium to develop their processing skill.

And of course it is of great importance for teachers to communicate their personal experience of reading literature to their students so as to help develop the capacity to read for themselves in this way (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). Meanwhile, it should be realized that the understanding and the appreciation of literature depend largely on the part of students' literary taste and rich knowledge of life as well. It is natural that different teachers may conduct literature class in different ways mainly based upon their own interpretation of the literary works. And it is usually inevitable that diversified, controversial opinions will arise among students. However, teachers should never impose their own interpretations and opinions of the story on their students as being "correct". What they need to do is to ensure that their interpretations are reasonably valid.

It is time to develop students' processing ability with creativity and imaginativity as a resource in learning English. The engagement of processing, creativity and imagination in a text together with the concomitant development of language awareness is much more important, more effective and efficient in language learning and teaching than any form of exercise in learning and applying rules (McRae, 1996). I put emphasis on exposure to and the use of the target language in my classroom teaching. I try to drive home the point that language is for negotiating and making meaning (McRae, 1991). Students' active participation in classroom discussion greatly develops their confidence and fluency in speaking, and it also helps them develop strategies for improving all their language skills simultaneously, and above all their processing skill is enhanced.

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