



Comprehension and The Bilingual Reader: Thinking Within a Decodable Text

Emily Cecile Zoeller, Madison Metropolitan School District

Reading comprehension is paramount for the success of a child in any setting, this is undisputed. For a child in a bilingual setting, its importance cannot be overstated. While the significance of reading comprehension is widely accepted, the field of biliteracy is yet to fully explore its complexities. Through the lens of a sociopsycholinguistic view of reading, this article discusses how a reader constructs meaning through strategic activity. I address a few of the nuances of literacy development in Spanish, and why such nuances call for a deliberate, purposeful approach to teaching comprehension to bilingual readers.

Constructing Meaning by Solving Text

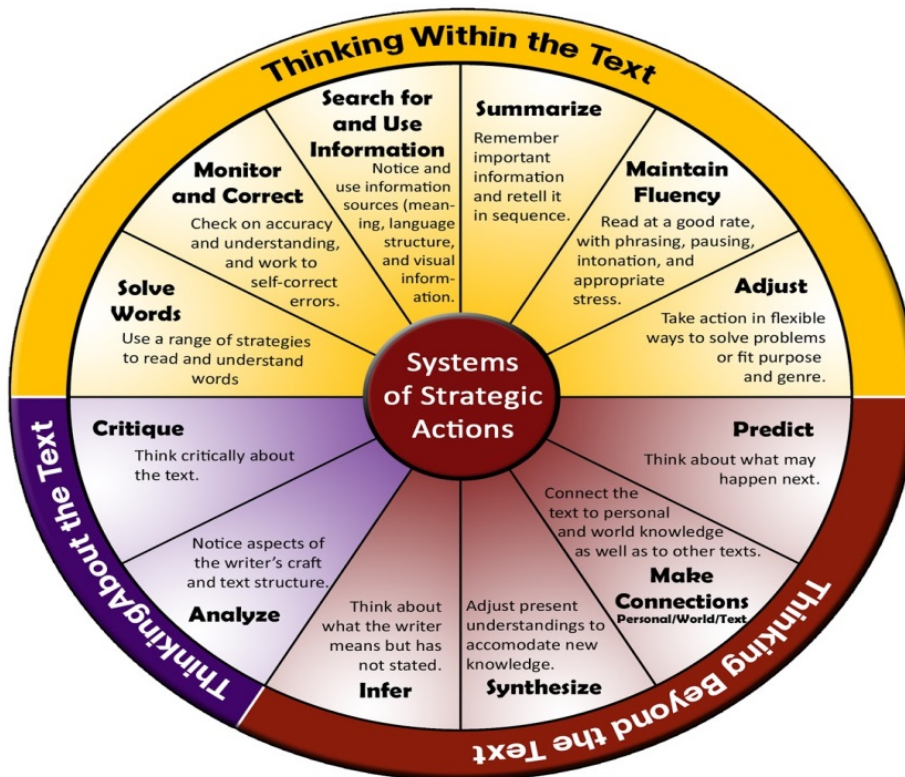
In a sociopsycholinguistic view, the reader constructs meaning as he transacts with texts. Marie Clay defines reading as a message-getting, problem-solving activity (Clay, 2001). Instead of merely “decoding text” by combining syllables or letters, the reader “solves text” through strategic activity. The reader anticipates what the word might be, makes an attempt, and confirms or disconfirms if his attempt was correct. He draws upon both his prior knowledge and semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic cues in the process. Building on the work of Marie Clay, Fountas and Pinnell point out how a reader’s comprehension might directly link to their processing of text along the way. A reader’s ability to think *beyond* the text (for example, to make inferences or predictions) will relate to how he thinks *within* the text, such as using strategies to solve words or self-correct errors (2009) Thus, in a sociopsycholinguistic view, meaning construction is both the end result and the means to the reading process.

Research shows that the reading process described above applies to readers in any language. Freeman and Freeman write “[s]tudies of both children and adults reading in a variety of languages - including non-alphabetic languages, like Japanese and Chinese, as well as languages that don’t use a Roman script, like Arabic and Hebrew - have revealed that the reading process is universal” (2006). Readers in any language sample the text, use prior knowledge and linguistic cues, make predictions and inferences, confirm or disconfirm and correct their predictions, and integrate the new knowledge into the meaning they are building. A reader’s approach to processing text in one language will transfer to his approach to processing text in another language.

The Impact of the Spanish Language's Transparent Orthography on Comprehension

When comparing Spanish and English literacy, a sociopsycholinguistic view holds that most aspects of teaching and learning literacy are the same, but not all. It is critical to examine closely the nuances of the Spanish language, and how these differences might impact a reader's ability to construct meaning within the text. If a reader's approach to solving words affects their global comprehension, these variations might call for modifications to our approach to Spanish literacy instruction.

A Network of Processing Systems for Reading



*The goal of guided reading is to help students build their reading power - to build a network of strategic actions for processing texts...
...all operating simultaneously in the reader's head.*
-Fountas and Pinnell

Although reading is a universal process, there are differences in the written forms of language that readers encounter. A primary difference between the English and Spanish languages is the transparent orthography apparent in the Spanish language. In her work, Dr. Jill Kerper Mora explains how the Spanish language is primarily rule-governed, and how the alphabetic principle is applied more regularly than in English. According to Mora:

The spelling of words can be derived by listening for its component phonemes and writing the corresponding letter. There is only one correct spelling for every word. We know how to pronounce every word we read based on its spelling. A word in Spanish can be spelled correctly by listening for its component phonemes and recording the corresponding letter, and we know how to pronounce every word we read based on its spelling (Mora, 2009)

This is distinct from the orthography of the English language, whose written form depends more on the position of the sound in the word and the word's morphological structure rather than on a direct, predictable relationship between phoneme and letter.¹

The *typically* transparent orthography of the Spanish language will change the way in which the reader approaches text and likely impacts comprehension in the developing reader. Beeman and Urow discuss this phenomenon in their book, Teaching for Biliteracy. "Because Spanish is a phonetic language and students can learn quickly to decode, it is easy to focus on the success students are having in decoding without really looking at whether they are comprehending" (2013). If words are solved more easily, the reader may be presented with fewer opportunities to problem solve, and to engage in the processing behaviors described above. The reader in Spanish may develop an approach that draws primarily from graphophonic cues, that is, the visual information within the word, such as the letters or syllables. Over time, these readers may become "word callers" or "syllabifiers", knowing how to pronounce the word but not understanding what they are saying. If the reader is not set up to be thinking about his reading *within* the text, his comprehension *about* the text will undoubtedly be affected.

There are further implications for the bilingual reader learning to read in two languages.

Strategic activity is transferrable across languages, and so are bad habits. The reader who has developed a "word-calling" approach in Spanish will not be able to apply this approach so easily in English, where text is not-so-decodable. Reading comprehension in both languages can be negatively impacted by poor processing behaviors on Spanish text.

¹ In order to honor the complexity of the topic and not oversimplify, it is important to challenge the notion of Spanish being a highly decodable language. There are a bounty of words used with high frequency that follow irregular orthographic patterns (aqui, hay, que, ...) When compared to their English counterparts, early texts in Spanish contain more multi-syllabic words and more two letter words (la, el, tu, es, si, de) that are difficult for readers who are still securing left-to-right directionality. Concept of word in Spanish is complicated by readers confusing syllable breaks with word breaks and by seeing two "words" (the article and the noun) that represent one concept. Finally, unlike most early texts in English, few texts in Spanish offer predictable language structures that reflect the oral language actually spoken by speakers of Spanish in the United States. In many ways, the early reader in Spanish is confronted with challenges that do not exist in reading in English.

Implications for Teaching Comprehension in Biliteracy Instruction

Reading entails thinking about what makes sense. All readers, particularly readers in Spanish, need to be instructed in how to do so. Below are some ways teachers can be deliberate about their approach to fostering comprehension in bilingual readers.

1) PLAN with alignment of theory and practice

Students are most apt to develop comprehension when the systems that surround them reflect the message that reading is about constructing meaning. Assessments should set out to observe processing behaviors, instead of discrete skills in isolation. Such processing behaviors might not be reflected in common assessments. For example, fluency tests in Spanish might overlook issues in the reader's understanding of what was read. Rather, a miscue analysis of a child's running record attempts to show how readers are comprehending as they are reading. (Does the student stop at a difficulty to work things out or does he continue reading, without noticing the mismatch?). Less proficient readers are students whose success most depends upon comprehension development. Effective intervention fosters problem-solving and processing instead of acquisition of discrete skills in isolation. Frequent collaboration and reflection about our systems help assure alignment of theory and practice.

2) TEACH lessons about strategic behaviors

To teach students to make meaning of text, teachers can design lesson objectives of *thinking within the text* behaviors. This can be a challenge in bilingual settings, where thematic teaching calls for teachers to implement multiple standards simultaneously. Lesson objectives should be transferrable behaviors that ultimately increase students' ability to process a new text. A theme can serve as a manageable terrain on which the reader can apply a new strategic behavior.

In creating a target for the lesson, teachers might ask themselves, "How will this learning objective make the students stronger readers in their own independent texts?" One way to do this is by creating actionable "I can" statements to guide the focus of a reading mini-lesson: I can read for a purpose / *Puedo leer con un propósito*; I can stop and ask myself if the reading is making sense/ *Puedo parar y preguntar si tiene sentido lo que leo*, I can revise my prediction as I gain new information in the text / *Puedo revisar mi predicción cuando me enfrento con nueva información en el texto*. Such behaviors are generative. They support the reader in developing comprehension skills that transcend beyond the theme that is guiding that particular unit of study.

3) PROMPT students to engage in problem-solving text

Early readers will be more apt to become thinkers and not just decoders if they are supported in how they process text. When a teacher listens to a child read aloud a portion of a text, she has an opportunity to provide prompting language that can foster strategic activity in the reader. While the student reads aloud, the teacher might say “You made a mistake. Can you find it?” (“*Cometiste un error... ¿Lo puedes encontrar?*”) If a student stops at a difficult part of the text, the teacher can provide prompts that encourage certain linguistic cues the reader might not be accessing. Since readers in Spanish might have a tendency to over-rely on graphophonic cues, teachers should be judicious about prompts like “sound it out” (“*di las sílabas*”). Instead, teachers can consider prompts that draw the reader’s attention to meaning or syntax, such as; “What word would make sense there?” (“*¿Qué palabra tendría sentido allí?*”) Over time, the prompts the reader receives become part of his own inner monologue, conscious and later subconscious, automatic behaviors. These prompts support the reader in developing a balanced processing system, which he will apply in any language he is reading.

Prompts to support strategic activity

Prompts to foster self-monitoring	“Where is the tricky part?” “Find the part that is not quite right” “Good, you stopped!” “What did you notice?”	“Enseña la parte difícil.” “¿Que bien! ¡Te paraste!” “¿Qué notaste?”
Prompt to use Meaning Cues	“Does that make sense?” “Look at the picture to help yourself.” “Think about the story.”	“¿Tiene sentido?” “El dibujo te puede ayudar.” “Piensa en el cuento.”
Prompts to use Structural Cues	“How would that sound in a book?” “Read that part again and think about what would sound right.”	“Léelo como si estuviera en un libro.” “Vuelve a intentarlo y piensa en qué suena bien.”
Prompts to problem solve independently	“What can you try?” “Look for something you know.” “How might you help yourself?”	“¿Qué puedes intentar?” “Busca lo que sabes.” “¿Cómo puedes ayudarte?”

“Comprehension is the reason for reading. If readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not really reading.” The National Reading Panel (2001). Despite features of the Spanish language that set students up to solve text phonetically, teachers can teach students how to solve text strategically. Through close observation, intentional planning, and carefully responding to student behaviors, teachers can impact the reader’s approach to processing text. Attention to how a reader thinks *within* the text creates a clear pathway for the reader to think *about* and *beyond* the text. Reading, after all, is about the message.

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