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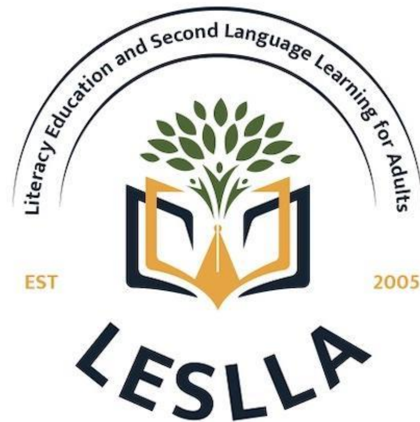

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WHO IS 'YOU'?: ESL LITERACY, WRITTEN TEXT AND TROUBLES WITH DEIXIS IN IMAGINED SPACES.

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1 *Introduction*

For experienced readers/expert navigators in the imaginary space of books, second language reading can be a rich source of "real world" language (Cates & Swaffar 1979; Krashen 1989; Cho & Krashen 1994; Mason & Krashen 1997). But in the case of fledgling adult readers, is written language an unequivocally good source of L2 vocabulary and structures for them? The assumption that L2 reading supports L2 learning with adult beginning readers has yet to receive sufficient scrutiny. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of an adult ESL literacy classroom which examined the various functions teachers and students assigned to written language (textbooks, written handouts, dialogue journals, workbooks and language written on the blackboard) (Whiteside 1997). The study's findings shed light on the kinds of difficulties adult students may experience with written expressions in L2, and how these difficulties can impede progress in SLA. The study compared students' and teachers' normative assumptions about the uses of written material, and documented communication breakdowns in discussions about written text. In particular, these data show the trouble low- intermediate readers may have orienting themselves *vis à vis* the imaginary spaces represented in L2 textbooks, and then reorienting themselves in the real time/space of the classroom. This paper will describe such troubles with "deixis"; that is, the time/space/person relationships represented by the language of a given text. We then consider what these findings suggest about early-stage adult L2 readers, and discuss some implications for pedagogy.

2 *Background*

Research on early-stage L2 reading and the extent to which it supports SLA or *vice versa,* is meager to say the least. With the exception of recent work done by members of the LESLLA forum, second language studies have generally neglected adult early second language readers (Adams & Burt, 2002; van de Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten, 2005). Researchers in L2 reading have historically focused on school-age children, and have tended to replicate studies in L1 reading rather than to chart new territory in L2 reading (Bernhardt 2002, p.796). Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) framed the discussions on L2 reading with these two questions: "(H)ow first language literate does a second language reader have to be in order to make the second language work?" and "How much second language knowledge does a second language reader have to have to make the first language reading work?" (p. 32). Findings from their own study suggest that L2 reading draws on both L1 reading ability and L2 syntactic knowledge. Their study looked at college undergraduates, whose skills are very different that those of adult new readers with few years of formal schooling, or none at all, who lack many of the skills normally acquired before or during the first few years of schooling. These skills include a general orientation to books, text genres, graphic conventions, and the relationships between pictures and texts.

Much of the "expertise" in adult L2 literacy that has emerged over the last 30 years in the U.S. has come not from academics but from practitioners. Beginning in the late 1970s, adult ESL programs began developing *ad hoc* solutions to problems posed by non-reading students, who were arriving in increasing numbers (Burt, Kreeft Peyton and Adams, 2003). These programs were generally poorly funded, with little or no professional development, and in the absence of research on how adult immigrants

learn second language or on the effects of particular interventions (van de Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten, 2005). ESL literacy textbooks written by these "experts" often focus on communicative competencies, along with sight word and letter recognition. But questions remain about the efficacy of these texts, or the functions of text in L2 development with low educated adults.

3 Description of the study

This qualitative study, part of an M.A. thesis "*All the words are in the story": uses of text in an ESL Literacy classroom* (U.C. Berkeley, 1997), looked at how intermediate literacy students and the teacher used a popular introductory L2 text, *Collaborations* (Weinstein-Shr & Huizenga, 1996), not a designated literacy textbook. The subjects were members of an ESL Literacy B class, held at a predominantly Latino[1] campus (8,000 students enrolled, 82 sections of ESL) of a large urban California community college where I had taught for many years. The class had 38 students ranging in age from 18 to 80, all Spanish speakers, with the exception of three students, who spoke Vietnamese or Amharic. These students placed in the Literacy B section if they were considered "semi-literate" in their first language; that is, they could decode basic sentences in English and/or had 1-3 years of schooling. The class was itself part of a literacy program with four levels of literacy and over 400 students, within the ESL department.

The study started with five questions: What is the function of text in this classroom? How are students using it? How is the teacher using it? What do the textbook authors say about its intended use? What metalinguistic talk is used to refer to language structure and rules? The plan was to document the discourse of the teacher and students during or after literacy "events" and tensions that arose in relation to these events (Dyson, 1992; Heath 1986). The approach was interpretive, its purpose to shed light on the terms of the problems by looking for "emic" or insider perspectives of the various participants: the teacher, the students, and the authors of the text used (Erikson, 1986) about what counts as learning and knowledge (Cazden, 1988).

The project used a case study method, following the trajectories of five students, four female and one male from Mexico and Central America, all native speakers of Spanish. Four students had three years of education, the other, six years. The most fluent reader, a woman in her 30s with three years of schooling, felt she was making progress in English; the others, in their 40s and 50s, felt they were not. The teacher had had seven years of part time ESL teaching experience, but no training in literacy; she expressed frustration with how the class was going and with her choice of textbook for this level. My role in this case was as a researcher/participant-observer. Although some students knew me as a teacher, my role in the class was as an observer who helped out minimally.

3.1 Data collection procedures

Data were collected biweekly over two months. These consisted of observation notes; audio-taped classroom interactions; semi-structured audio-taped interviews with three focal students and the teacher; and written artifacts, including tests, journals, handouts, and the ESL textbook. Spanish data were translated. Transcribed data were coded and analyzed, yielding four kinds of evidence. These were grouped as: evidence of frustration, task discrepancies (teacher expectation vs. student behavior), discrepancies between communicative competence and academic incompetence, (Cummins 1984) and problems with deixis. I limit my discussion here to the last category, data that show

[1] Students are generally from South and Central America and the Caribbean. They speak Spanish, Portuguese in addition to a variety of indigenous languages. (For details about this US immigrant population, see Juffs and Rodríguez, this volume.).

these low- intermediate readers struggling with relationships represented on the written page, between pictures and words and between various texts, and between these relationships and real space, or problem with "deixis".

3.2 What is deixis?

The term "deixis"[2] refers to those linguistic phenomena that index something or somebody. These phenomena belong to the more general linguistic category of indexicality; that is, language which directs attention to a person, object or context, without describing it (Hanks, 1996; p.58). Indexical-referential terms, terms like "now/later", "us/them", represent relationships between objects and their contexts (Hanks 1999). Deictic terms are "shifters", or words whose meaning shifts according to their context of use. They include pronouns and demonstratives and other words whose interpretation depends on knowing the time, position and identity of the speaker. That identity is considered a deictic center: "I" has to be identified before "you" can have meaning. Deictic terms also include time expressions, such as verb tense, aspect markers and adverbials. A written note pinned to a door reading "back in 10 minutes" is useless unless you know what time it was posted. Many verbs like "come" and "go" encode deictic relationships. Contextual cues like eye gaze or a pointed finger make these relationships explicit in face-to-face interaction (Gumperz, 1982); they are not so obvious in written text.

" Want me to pick you up?" I'd ask my two-year-old daughter. "Yes, pick you up" she would answer. Children take time to develop deictic reference in L1 acquisition, as they gradually learn to recognize points of view other than their own (Tanz, 1980). Parents often compensate by avoiding shifted reference ("Mommy wants you to sleep") (Ibid, p.50). In L2 development, deictic terms can be a source of confusion, since pronoun systems can differ greatly from the L1 (marked vs. unmarked plural of English 'you' singular /'you' plural vs. Spanish *Usted/Ustedes*), phonological cues can be misleading (*Yo* in Spanish is not the equivalent of 'you'), and their cultural dimension (e.g. rules for using the familiar *tu* vs. the formal *Usted* in Spanish) may be unknown.

Charles Fillmore (1997) identified five types of deixis, for which interpretation depends on knowing the following: 1. Person deixis, on the identity of the interlocutors; examples include pronouns, and shifted pronouns of reported speech; 2. Place deixis, on the location of these individuals; examples include demonstratives (this/that), adverbs (here/there), and prepositions (in front of/behind); 3. Time deixis, on the encoded time of the message, and the time it's received (back in 10); 4. Social deixis, on social relationships; examples include teacher/student, social status (*tu/Usted*); 5. Discourse deixis, on the discourse context of the utterance; examples in written text include, "as mentioned above" or "Ibid". In addition to the five types described by Fillmore, Musloff (1997) distinguishes "visual sensory" deixis which depends for meaning on perceptual cues like eye gaze or spatial arrangements, from imaginary deixis:

> (W)hen discussing any not directly and sensorial 'given' referent, speaker and hearer must either project it into their present situation (e.g. putting a problem 'before' someone) or vice versa, by projecting the concrete situation coordinates onto an imagined context (e.g. describing and imagined route by way of positioning the interlocutors' deictic roles in it) or both. (Musloff, 1997; p.7).

While reading is restricted to the imaginary deixic relations in the text, discussion about reading involves both imagined deixis and sensory deixis, with the reader switching back and forth between an imagined space and the real time/space/person relations.

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[2] from the Greek word "to point"

Relatively little research has been done on deixis in second language reading, although Cates and Swaffar (1979) argue for the key role of negotiating deictic reference L2 reading comprehension (p.13 ,14). A recent study of Iranian undergraduate students of English found that deictic terms are significant variables affecting EFL readers' comprehension and that deictic terms can interfere with comprehension (Varzegar, Afkami & Khabiri, 2004). But no previous studies have looked at early adult L2 readers and deixis.

4 Findings

The present study found a marked contrast between students' claims about their ability to speak English, and their perceptions about their performance in class. "Speak, yes, I can, although not correctly, but, yes, I can some, and read, yes, a little, but I don't know how to write, and it's really hard for me, since I don't understand very well what it means, so I can't write." All but one expressed concern that they weren't learning in class: "We can't do it"; "The little I learn I forget; Listen, I'm very worried because I'm not learning and they contrast themselves to other students who have more schooling (*Ellos si aprenden-* 'They do understand'). The teacher expressed frustration about how the class was going: "I don't know how to teach reading at the level that they're at…feel bad for them, whenever I ask them to write in their journals it's just AGHHHH"…"The class has been such a struggle…since the book has been such a struggle, every once in a while there will be a page where everything seems to, they understand and they answer all the questions…"

The data revealed student confusion with four types of deixis in the textbook: person, temporal, social and discourse.

4.1 Trouble with Person deixis

Students had trouble establishing who was speaking in a given text, or were unable to make inferences about a protagonist or those to whom he or she referred. For example, the teacher described one class discussion about a story by a man named Jose Tamoyo. The textbook shows a photo of a group of students facing the camera, below which the text begins: "We have a small class. I like it because I get lots of personal attention from our teacher…." Below the text, and to the right in smaller type, it says: "Jose Tamoyo is from Mexico. He studies at the Chicago Commons. He is sitting in the middle of his class in the photo." There is no visual cue about which of the two men in the photo Jose Tamoyo; students were unable identity the author of the first text.

> "…there was NO connection that it's his story, you see it's supposed to be Jose's story, it's signed Jose Tamoyo. Unless it starts with "My name is Jose' they don't make the connection that it's his story."

Another story involves a woman, who is identified below a photo of people talking in a classroom as Ruth Chang. In the photo, an Anglo American woman on the right is talking with an Asian looking woman on the left while other students listen in. The text reads (in part) "I was a teacher in Taiwan…". The attribution text below this, which is distinguished by different typeface, reads: "Ruth Chang is from Taiwan….She is on the far left in the photo. Adena is on the right." The reader must infer that the "I" in the story is the "she" in the attribution text, but the "she" in the first person narrative is Adena, another teacher. Students had trouble answering questions about Ruth Chang, and distinguishing her from Adena, according to their teacher, who described her interaction with them:

> "When I asked them, you know, 'yes or no, raise your hand, Ruth Chang was a teacher in Taiwan', nobody knew that; 'Yes or no, Ruth Chang is the teacher

> in this picture', I mean they didn't know all those things about who was telling the story."

But these students had no problems with sensory deixic reference with the same pictures. Deictic reference in imaginary space generally caused more trouble than references to photos of people in the third person, as the teacher noted:

> "If it just started saying "We live in Miami and we like it" they're like "Who?"…but they don't seem to have a problem then discussing that person in the picture in the third person…"

4.2 Trouble with temporal deixis

In written text, temporal deixis depends on inferences about sequencing that involves turning pages, anaphora or looking above or below. This is compounded by story deixis in which "the reader must be able to sort through the flashbacks, montage techniques, and project into the future" (Cates & Swaffar, 1979; p.14). Student difficulties with temporal deixis, demonstrated by the following event, concerned a section of the Jose Tamoyo story. In this text, Jose is writing about how teachers dress and the impact it has on the students, remembering a former teacher who dressed badly:

> "If they wear old jeans, small blouses and punk hairstyles, the students will not take them seriously. Once I had a teacher like that."

The teacher described a discussion in which students were unable to make inferences about Jose and his teachers:

> "They had terrible trouble with the idea that Jose had two different teachers. They thought he had two teachers now. They couldn't imagine that he had a teacher you couldn't see. They thought the old guy with a bald head (the older man in the photo) was a teacher, even though they had seen him in other pictures of the students."

The source of confusion may have been the past tense of the verb (had), the deictic center of the story, or the meaning of "once". Regardless of the source, an inability to ground the events in a sequence interfered with their reasoning about the story. These same students later told me stories with flashbacks and futures in interviews with me, suggesting that their trouble had to do with orientation to textually represented space/time.

4.3 Trouble with social deixis

According to Musloff, the interpretation of deictic terms depends on the relationship of speaker to listener, their common background knowledge and action goals (1997; p.9). This is particularly evident in social deixis. In my data, students were confused by social relationships implied by photos and their accompanying text. These confusions were exacerbated by confusions about English social relationship terms and unknown cultural factors. The Latino students were confused by a photo in of a Lao family, who are identified as the Kaxoyos. In the following transcription of a class discussion about the text, after establishing that Mr. Kaxoyo is speaking in the text below the photo, the teacher asked:

T: …who is he speaking about?
S1: He saying the story.
T: Yeah.. about who?
S1: about, about…

S2: about his…(pause)
T: About the family?
SS: No..no…
T: about his son?
SS: (mumbling)
S1: His daughter.
T: The daughter! About the daughter! It says right here, daughter (surprised tone)…About the daughter. So he's talking about his daughter…

Gender and its cultural baggage add confusion. In one assignment, a focal student had written about Mrs. Kaxoyo, referring to her as a father. She reported to me that she thought the man in the photo, Mr. Kaxoyo, was a woman.

Other ambiguities stemmed from the implicit assumption of the textbook authors about whom to include in the third person plural. One task involves "Thinking of jobs that suit us". The vocabulary provided includes: "cashier, carpenter, computer technician, doctor, homemaker, musician, sales clerk". A student who was having trouble filling in the blanks told me: "I understand what it says, but I can't answer, I can't say it and I can't write or do what they…" The students, themselves service workers, were unable to relate to the "us" in the text, or to the idea of jobs "suited" to that "us". Another page instructs students to:

> Work in pairs to describe yourselves:
> "I am ____and my partner is too. Vocabulary provided: (active, cheerful, friendly, intelligent, rich, romantic, sad, talkative)"

After much hesitation, one student wrote: "I am poor and my partner is too." Another later complained, "…the work in this book is very difficult, and it's very hard for me because I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Just now for example, they asked us what we plan to do in the future, according to what we want to be, or why we are studying. I understand what it says but I can't answer, I can't say it and I can't write or do what they…". These "action goals" which include "career plans", may contrast with survival strategies of immigrant service workers, who don't have the luxury of choosing an occupation.

4.4 Trouble with discourse deixis

References within or across a text, which make use of pronouns and antecedents or temporal anaphora, build textual cohesion (Halliday, 1976). Fillmore describes discourse deixis as "the "matrix of linguistic material within which the utterance has a role". Students had trouble figuring out implied connections between pronouns and their antecedents as in the examples above. There was less data specifically on discourse deixis, although I would include the following problem with logic. A page in the textbook lists several class rules, the first of which reads: "Students should not smoke in class". On the following page, students are instructed to check boxes "Agree/disagree" about each rule. One focal student had checked "disagree" about the smoking rule. Her stated reason was, "Because smoking is bad." Her disagreement was with the last three words of the sentence, not the whole idea, and the problem is one of reference, not necessarily one of faulty logic.

4.5 Evidence of interactional competence

In contrast to the seemingly basic difficulties students had answering questions about the textbook, these same students demonstrated an impressive ability to negotiate meaning in real time space, despite limited vocabulary and use of pidgin-like structures (on the syntax of such learner varieties, see Klein & Perdue 1993). For example, one

student who showed up late to class explained to the teacher that she wasn't coming to class but had tried to go to the bookstore:

S: I sick but I coming for the buy the book y *es* closed.

T: Oh, I think it opens… what day is the bookstore open?

S: I come in the bookstore?

T: Tuesday or Wednesday? Do you know?

S: Tuesday and Wednesday, tell me (intonation= "they tell me")

T: Un huh.

S: But now, nobody, *y* I'm waiting. Maybe late.

T: Maybe late.

In another instance, a student had this question about the verb to be:

> "Sometime no *am,* sometime *am.* When yes *am,* when no *am*? I need information for when writing *am* and *I* and when writing no *I* and no *am."*

And in a conversation about food they like, two focal students were able to understand each other using their limited vocabularies:

S1: I like burrito but hot dog no like.
S2: I like steak, for chile,
S1: Salsa?
S2: Yes.
S1: I can't take too much for the oil, very…I like everything I can, I eating rice, I cook, no put the oil, can eat to much, I too fat. Oil.
S2: Oil is fat for you?
S1: Yes.
S2: Do you like beer?
S1: I everytime I medicine.
S2. Oh, no good.

In these exchanges, students' ability to communicate far exceeded their capacity to function within the imagined space of text. This conflicts with the stated goals of the textbook authors who suggest that reading is the best way to improve vocabulary, and that of the teacher, who said her "whole crusade" was to make the text a resource for the students. Yet the focal students felt that the book was not an autonomous resource:

> "The book is useful only with the teacher, if the teacher guides us and shows us what it's for and how, because if I buy a book just to study and to look in it's as if I had no book."

They rarely used the book outside of class. As one student put it,

> "Very little, only one time. I try to look at what they gave us, but anyway I don't understand very much…Yes, I can read the book and yes, it helps, but since some words I understand and others I don't, so, no."

Others seemed to use the textbook as a kind of word suitcase, which you can carry home to show people who can explain it.

5 Discussion of Findings

Asked how she liked her textbook, a student once told me, "We see the little drawings, but we don't know what they are or what we're supposed to do with them". These findings demonstrate that students like these focal students, who were all fairly fluent oral readers, nevertheless may have difficulty orienting themselves in the imaginary time/space relations of written texts, and as a result, be unable to make inferences about text. In such cases, language learning is stymied by a general confusion about the basic who/what/when/
where and why of an activity. A number of deictic variables may be involved in each of these confusions; future research might be isolate and examined some of these such as L2 pronouns, prepositions, cultural assumptions, spatial relations, relationships between two texts, etc. However these findings suggest that deictic reference must be addressed before students can benefit from texts, and that students would benefit from practice with basic orientations to texts, pictures and to implied relationships between the two. McDonald's (2007) experience with giving students explicit instruction about visual conventions such as speech bubbles suggests that general orientations to such conventions are needed before these devices can be used to teach L2. As Cates & Swaffar argued almost 30 years ago (1979), students need practice in "inferential thinking about internal redundancy, orientational framework, genre based expectations, and background knowledge" (p.23).

The findings also suggest that texts designed for this level should make deictic reference as simple as possible, and favor sensory deixis. Texts such as picture dictionaries and picture stories are particularly suited to this kind of use. As one student told me, "If you use a word to show me the word, then I'll understand and I'll learn, but if you just write it, in Spanish and in English, how am I going to learn it? I'll be left without knowing the name, I'll just understand in Spanish. But pictures with words help. Then I know, I look at the picture and I remember". Classroom practices can involve more transactions in the "here and now", refer to concrete objects and make referential practice clear using gestures, and eye gaze.

6 Summing up

Second language literacy students may be good language learners, albeit weak readers and writers. Some of my Mexican and Guatemalan students learned Spanish after the age of 18, and in few years, without being able to read or write. Literacy students are not "interactional dopes" (Garfinkel, 1967); they can make sense of language which is grounded in the familiar. For teachers to rely on written input is to start from student weaknesses. This study shows some of the pitfalls of using written text as a source of new language. Its findings suggest that early stage reading may pose a number of obstacles to L2 comprehension, deictic reference being one of them.

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