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DEVELOPING A CREATIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE READER: IN SEARCH OF A THEORETICAL APPROACH AND DIDACTIC TECHNIQUES

Abstract

The paper discusses different conceptions of creativity in relation to reading in a FL. It looks at psycholinguistic approaches that view creativity as a mentalistic individual creative thought. Further, it discusses sociocultural theories that take in account social, cultural and environmental factors. Special attention is given to a critical aspect of creativity. In the next section, the author looks at how psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic approaches view literacy and what they can offer for both FL/L2 research and pedagogy. The presentation argues for viewing the FL/L2 reading situation as an interaction of cognitive and social factors and emphases the importance of developing skills to critique texts. It suggests a set of tasks to be applied in a FL classroom aiming at improving creative reading skills.

1. Introduction

This paper is the outcome of my work as a teacher of English as a foreign language. Most of my professional life and research have been devoted to the teaching of undergraduate students of a foreign language teacher training college at the Jagiellonian University. They are a homogenous group of Polish students who enter the college with the language competence at the advanced level. My teaching experience fed the rationale of the issues that are at the centre of this paper. During my work as a teacher, I realized that reading is not only a language skill; it involves readers' general reasoning potential, especially the one needed to evaluate ideas in a critical way. It also became clear that reading is not passive, as it is sometimes named in methodology literature; instead, it engages the reader in an interaction of a very intricate and active kind. Reading seems a complex and active ability that involves readers' general language competence, reading ability, background knowledge and critical reasoning skills. While drawing on these factors, readers attempt to construct, in other words,

create meaning out of text. This reflection encouraged me to link creativity with critical reading and investigate this interesting issue in this paper.

2. Psychological, socio-cultural and critical approaches to creativity

Creativity is a complex phenomenon, studied widely by psychological and socio-cultural approaches. Psychological approaches view creativity as a mentalistic operation, an individual thought. It is an ability to think innovatively which involves both problem-posing and problem-solving. Systems approaches, e.g. the one by Csikszentmihalyi (1999), see creativity as "a confluence of different systems involving both mentalistic predisposition and socio-cultural domains such as community reception and acceptance within a particular domain" (Carter, 2004: 41). The author stresses a dynamic rather than static view of creativity. It seems that in order to respect a complex nature of creativity, creativity should be best studied as a psychological as well as a social and cultural phenomenon. Carter (2004) recommends that in studying creativity researchers take account of its monologic as well as dialogic sides. Creativity is monologic, i.e. it functions within an individual, but it is also dialogic and involves interaction with other individuals. Carter (2004: 48) claims that: "The dominant paradigm of research into creativity is based on the discipline of psychology, and views creativity as a mentalistic phenomenon. Yet the phenomenon cannot be decontextualised or studied in a disciplinary vacuum or seen as an exclusively mental process. Creativity is a social, cultural and environmental phenomenon as well as a psychological process."

There is one more aspect of creativity worth elucidating. Linguists discussing the presence of creativity in language emphasise still another aspect of creativity – an ability to be critical. For example, Carter (2004) claims that creative output is usually more than mere imitating or reproduction. It often involves constructing an alternative point of view and a critique of both what existed before the creation and of the product of the creation. All the three aspects of creativity, i.e. psychological, socio-cultural and critical, are essential in understanding a complexity of reading. They are discussed in the next sections below.

3. Creativity in reading

For psycholinguists reading is a mental process during which the reader creates his/her own representation of a text. The process of reading can be compared to the act of acquiring knowledge. An explanation offered by Diane F. Halpern (2003) seems relevant here. She explains that when we acquire new information, we draw on our existing knowledge and thus we make sense of the new information. The acquisition of knowledge is an active process. The outcome of this process is "always personal and somehow idiosyncratic" (Halpern, 2003: 6). Following an assumption that reading is also a process of acquiring knowledge, we can accept that the representation of text that every reader constructs is also personal and idiosyncratic, in other words, unique. It is important to note that in this conception of reading a psychological aspect of creativity is emphasised.

Creativity in reading is also emphasised by Monin (2004). The author says that reading and interpreting a text are creative. He puts forward a very interesting concept of scriptive reading, which views reading the text as writing it. This means that the task of the reader is similar to that of the author/writer of the text. Just as the author produces the text out of his/her ideas, emotions and life experiences, and later transcribes them using the literary conventions, so the reader, while constructing his/her representation of the text, synthesises his/her knowledge of the world and life experiences with the ideas, values and emotions evoked by the text. Monin (2004) emphasises a creative role of the reader; the reader is active in his construction of understanding of the text, just like the writer is active while producing the text. This conception of reading contributes to our discussion concerning creativity in reading. In reference to the three conceptions of creativity discussed above, i.e. psychological, socio-cultural and critical presented above, it seems that Monin (2004) extends a psychological conception of reading, particularly – the role of the reader, who while creating a representation of text is sensitive not only to his/her own knowledge and emotions, but also to those that the writer "drew on" while writing the text.

To understand better the socio-cultural view of creativity, let us first analyse the concept of literacy. Johns (1997) defines literacy as a very complex concept, more inclusive than reading and writing. The concept refers to strategies used to understand, discuss, organize and produce texts. It relates to the social context in which a discourse is produced as well as the roles and purposes of communities of text readers and writers. The concept of literacy integrates "the many and varied social, historical and cognitive influences on readers and writers as they attempt to process and produce texts" (Johns, 1997: 2). This conceptualization of literacy contributes to our view of creativity in reading. The reader has more factors at his/her disposal that he/she may use to construct a representation of

text. In his/her creation of comprehension of text, he/she may take into account not only information expressed in the text and his/her own background knowledge but also historical and social factors that could have influenced the process of writing this text. In this way his/her reading becomes even more creative.

Let us now explore the critical aspect of creativity in relation to reading. Being critical is an important aspect of creative reading. Dechant (1991: 453) claims that "critical reading demands that the reader evaluates, passes personal judgment on the quality, logic, appropriateness, reasonableness, authenticity, adequacy, value, relevancy, timeliness, accuracy, completeness, and truthfulness of what is read." Thus, a critical reader is the one who is aware of the intentions and inferences present in the text. Such a reader is aware of his/her own worldviews and ideas while constructing his/her comprehension of the text and consequently – sensitive to how the interaction with the text may influence his/her position as the reader. Many contemporary literacy researchers (e.g. Giroux, 1983) and reading experts (Alderson, 2000) approve of the necessity to develop critical literacy. Alderson (2000) considers developing critical reading a crucial part of advanced students' reading education. Advanced readers should learn how to read intelligently, how to be aware of factors that influence the process of writing a text and factors that influence how the text can be read. Critical readers take control over and are responsible for their own readings. They are also aware of consequences of decisions that they can make in relation to their interpretation (McCormick, 1997; Johns, 1997).

In the further section a variety of approaches to teaching literacy are explored. This discussion is illustrated with examples taken from different teaching contexts: both first language and foreign language ones. The main aim is to see whether and to what extent these contexts allow the reader to develop his/her abilities of being creative and critical.

4. Various approaches to teaching reading

First traditional views to teaching literacy are presented. Cope and Kalantzis (1993, cited in Johns, 1997) call traditional views, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, scientific, positivistic and factual. In literacy pedagogy it meant the insistence on a single interpretation of a reading. Traditional approaches view language as form; literacy is acquired through practice directed by the teacher, who is an expert and authority. Unfortunately, these approaches are criticized (e.g. by Johns, 1997) because of insufficient emphasis on psychological and social aspects of language and language learning, and because of insufficient

consideration for writer and reader roles, context and the functions of language in the process of creating and understanding of texts. It seems that by expecting the reader to reproduce only one "possible" interpretation, we would not appreciate his/her creative and critical potential.

It is worth pointing out that a number of contemporary EFL coursebooks seem to view writing and reading in the traditional way, i.e. they emphasize the formal organization of texts and encourage one interpretation of texts, without sensitizing learners to their role as writers and readers. While the traditional approach to teaching writing seems useful for foreign language learners at the beginning stage of instruction, using this approach in teaching reading, especially to advanced learners, is more controversial. As an example of this approach, I suggest discussing the usefulness of omnipresent multiple-choice question tests, which seem to "force" learners to look for or guess the only one correct way of interpretation of the text.

If we use multiple-choice questions, test distractors should be devised in such a way that they prompt "illegitimate" interpretations or evaluations, as is shown in Munby (1968, cited in Alderson, 2000). However, as Alderson (2000) warns, such tests do not really test critical reading. The researcher suggests that students' understanding of texts should be evaluated more according to their ability to justify their criticisms than according to the correctness of their interpretations. He advocates evaluating the "reasonableness" of learners' opinions and the way readers are able to defend their interpretation. Alderson's claim has been confirmed both by my experimental study (Kusiak, 2000) and my teaching experience. Open-ended questions prove more appropriate to practice and test foreign language learners' critical reading, i.e. readers' awareness of factors that influence how they read texts as well as of consequences of decisions that they make in relation to their interpretation.

Since the early 1970s criticism against traditional approaches became strong. Learner-centred theories argued that classes should give voice to students. The teacher role is to facilitate students' search for individual meaning when they produce texts and when they read texts. It was Personal-Expressivist theories that focus on the reader, encouraging students to develop their own "personal" subjective meanings from texts they read. McCormick (1997) includes within the category of expressivist theories psycholinguistic theories, e.g. those by Frank Smith (1988) and Kenneth Goodman (1986), and work in reader-response theory, e.g. Louise Rosenblatt (1983) and Stanley Fish (1980). In elementary reading education psycholinguists, such as Smith and Goodman, inspired teachers in the USA and Great Britain to develop 'whole language' programs, which did not break reading into a hierarchy of skills and allowed children to

develop their own versions of the texts they read by, e.g. involving them in collaborative reading projects.

Although Personal-Expressivist theories can undoubtedly help learners to investigate their personal literacies and develop fluency and confidence in a free and creative manner, they are criticized. Johns (1997) claims that they fail to take into account the context in which students learn, e.g. constant influence of teachers, coursebooks and exams. A good example of a difficulty to test interpretation skills in a formal exam is the final secondary school Polish exam. The test is constructed in accordance with the exam specifications (e.g. *Informator maturalny,* 2003: 25), which discuss in detail interpretation skills that students are expected to develop during their secondary school education and consequently demonstrate at the exam. This set of skills has been approved by Polish experts, e.g. Bortnowski (2000) and Chrząstowska (2000). However, the test itself has caused stormy discussions. Learners are given a text and asked to analyze and interpret it. Although Bortnowski (2000) regards this testing technique as appropriate, he criticizes the way learners' interpretations are marked. Exam markers are given a list of answers that they should spot in students' interpretations and classify as "correct". Unfortunately very often it happens that original and well discussed interpretations are not appreciated and may even pass unnoticed. Bortnowski (2000) calls this exam "a tyranny of one interpretation."

Let us now discuss the Psycholinguistic-cognitive approaches, which since the 1970s have been the most influential in reading research and pedagogy (McCormick, 1997). In these approaches considerable focus, particularly in reading literacy studies, has been put on the role of schemata. Schema theories claim that we comprehend new information only when we can match it with something we already know, i.e. with existing schemata. In relation to reading, schemata enable the reader to make inferences on the basis of the information from the text and the ready schemata (Anderson, 1978). To facilitate an interaction between FL readers and texts written by native-speaker writers, coursebooks provided student readers with pre-reading exercises, which aimed to develop or activate students' background knowledge about texts. Additionally, the Psycholinguistic-Cognitive views stressed the role of the reader in the reading process. Readers were trained to observe and regulate their reading strategies. Raising readers' metacognitive awareness about themselves as readers and their text processing strategies was found a crucial element of FL reading instruction (e.g. Kusiak, 2000).

The Psycholinguistic-Cognitive approaches have radically changed literacy pedagogy. Teachers became facilitators in students' interaction with texts; there was a shift from linguistic and textual form to readers' mental processes and

individual search for meaning. However, it is claimed, e.g. by Johns (1997), that this approach may not be sufficient to develop undergraduate FL students' literacy. She argues that "texts are primarily socially constructed" (1997: 14) and failing to take into account social and cultural factors influencing text production and reception may not provide adequate support especially to those "who are culturally, socially, or linguistically distant from English academic language and discourses" (Johns, 1997: 3). It seems that this argumentation is true about the Polish tertiary education, i.e. college and university English departments. E.g., Zalewski (2004) advocates viewing writing as a social-cognitive process of knowledge construction, particularly in teaching writing in English for general academic purposes. The social-cognitive perspective is elaborated on in the further part of the paper.

Socio-cognitive approaches offer new insights into understanding of interpretation; they extend a concept of schema knowledge and redefine the role of the reader. A good example of this type of approach is the Bernhardt constructivist model of reading in L2. It incorporates "both 'seen' text elements (those that appear in black and white) and 'unseen' texts (those that are intended by the author and that carry implicit socio-cultural elements)" (Bernhardt, 1991: 2). The author views reading as a cognitive and social process. As for the cognitive aspect of reading, she believes that reading involves processing information from text into meaning, which takes place in the reader's mind. She agrees that during the processing the reader creates an internal representation of the text, which is not the duplicate of the text itself. Bernhardt concludes that this processing is generalisable, i.e. to a large extent the same for all readers, but the result of this process, the internal representation of the text is individual and unique to every reader.

In regard to a view on reading as a social process, Bernhardt explains that texts are "manifestations of cultures" (1991: 10) and in contrast to the cognitive view, the processing of text cannot be generalised since readers from different cultural contexts will read the same text in a different way. This view of reading as a social phenomenon seems very adequate for reading in L2. Drawing implications about a L2 reader, Bernhardt concludes that although a L2 reader may possess well developed linguistic skills, very frequently he/she is not able to respond to the text in a culturally specific way. In this situation his/her final comprehension may depend only on the linguistic data and skills. In other words, to be successful the reader has to understand not only words and sentences, but also implied message shared by the members of the social group to whom the text is addressed.

Another model worth investigating is the McCormick social-cultural model of reading. Similarly to Bernhardt, McCormick (1997) views reading as a

cognitive activity that occurs in social contexts; it is an interaction of the reader and text, with both readers and texts ideologically situated. McCormick sees the reading situation as an interaction of reader's repertoire and text's repertoire. Repertoire is defined as "the particular subset of discourses, the combination of ideas, experiences, habits, norms, conventions and assumptions, which the text draws on that allows it to be written and take the shape it does" (McCormick, 1997: 70). McCormick explains that the term "ideology", although often associated with propaganda, is used in cultural studies to indicate common values, ideas and assumptions of a particular society. "Ideology helps to tie us together by giving us seemingly coherent representations and explanations of our social practices, and in particular by giving us the language by which we describe and thus try to perpetuate them. Thus general ideology acts as a kind of social glue, binding us all together" (McCormick, 1997: 74).

The ways readers read texts depend on how their repertoire interacts with those of the text. Texts do not exist in themselves but rather should be thought of as "texts in use". For example, a reader's understanding of a text will be constructed by his/her place in a particular historical situation. It may happen that the interaction between the reader's repertoire and the text's repertoire are in conflict. Readers and writers are never purely "individual" acts of readers and writers. Both processes balance between autonomy and determination; both readers and writers consciously and unconsciously draw on aspects of the general and literary repertoire of their particular social situation.

The analysis of the most influential approaches to reading seems to suggest that socio-cognitive and socio-cultural views can serve as the most promising in developing critical literacy of advanced foreign language learners. These approaches seem valuable both because of their theoretical assumptions outlined in this section and teaching implications, which are discussed below.

5. Teaching implications

This section summarizes teaching implications suggested by the sociolinguistic theories. Focus is put on the activities that seem most useful in teaching advanced learners. Bernhardt (1991) recommends a set of instructional implications that she presents in terms of principles, not in terms of classroom activities. The principles suggested by Bernhardt stress an individual character of the process of understanding a text. She draws the teacher's attention to the fact that in the development of text understanding students "may be forced into a dual-process" (Bernhardt 1991:186), in which one part of understanding will rely on the development of the learner's meaning, and the other part on the

meaning expected by the teacher. This advice seems a useful warning for teachers who, because of their teaching style, tend to control their students, also their students' interpretation. It is important that teachers should respect students' rights to create their own understanding. However, their role is also to teach learners an ability of being critical about their reading, e.g. by taking responsibility for their interpretation.

Another principle suggested by Bernhardt concerns the importance of the skill of strategic teaching. Strategic teaching, in contrast to prepared teaching, enables the teacher to be sensitive to "on-line" student behaviours in the classroom. Instead of anticipating students potential problems, preparing all activities and teaching them through, the teacher should analyse students' reactions and problems during the lesson and tailor his/her teaching accordingly. In this way he/she may avoid the traps of "procedural display", (the classroom phenomenon isolated and researched by educational ethnographers, e.g. Bloome 1985), which allows the students to fake the understanding of reading materials. In fact, as a teacher trainer I would like to emphasise how difficult it is to teach this skill to teacher trainees. On-line reacting to learners' problems requires a considerable amount of reflection and experience on the part of the teacher. Only by staying alert to how students construct their readings in class, can teachers sharpen learners' sensitivity to factors that influence their interpretation, thereby enhancing students' critical literacy.

Bernhardt also recommends applying the recall protocol procedure as an instructional device. Written summaries of texts produced by learners provide the teacher with an excellent source of students' reading difficulties. This technique may be also used during the lesson as a group activity; one of the students' protocols may be read aloud and analysed by the whole class. This method can help the teacher to understand how students comprehend texts - the process which is often masked by a teacher-centred view on reading instruction. I personally find this technique very useful. Not only does it make reading lessons more attractive, but it also provides both teachers and students with a unique opportunity to gain new insight into different repertoires that students bring to texts. Undoubtedly this awareness enhances learners' development as critical readers.

McCormick's model (1997) changes the way literature is taught. Students may be asked to examine elements of a text's repertoire that do not match their own repertoire, i.e. to observe what repertoires produced the text and what repertoires produce modern readers. This observation may help students to identify aspects of their own repertoire and understand how these elements influence the way they respond to texts. Students should also have an opportunity to develop their repertoire, e.g. by comparing their repertoire with

those of other students. Techniques ideally suited to develop the aforementioned skills are portfolio assignments and class discussions. For example, advanced learners may be asked to write a journal while reading an assigned book – a technique applied with success by my Polish colleague in teaching literature to advanced learners (Bandura, 2004).

Johns (1997) suggests a number of techniques to be used in developing academic literacy. Undergraduate students can develop genre literacy by examining, e.g. any two textbooks on the same subjects and answering the following questions: *For whom are these books written? Who wrote them? In what way do the textbooks appear alike? In what way do they differ? If you were to write a similar textbook, how would you write it?* Another task may be to compare how the same concept is defined in various parts of the same textbook or by different textbooks. Such class discussions offer a valuable opportunity to teach students how to talk about their literacies. Learners are sensitized to factors influencing the way they read and write; at the same time they practice metalanguage necessary in such discussions.

A task that is often recommended by academic pedagogy is writing a critical summary, very useful in developing a "reading to write" skill. While writing a critical summary students learn to develop critical interpretive abilities, indispensable in reading and writing research papers. Researchers (e.g. Johns, 1997; McCormick, 1997; and Niżegorodcew, 2000) admit that even advanced learners find this popular academic task difficult.

6. Conclusions

The investigation presented in this paper indicates that teaching critical reading skills plays a crucial role in enhancing students' academic literacy. Classroom tasks should aim to invite students to critically approach, i.e. to examine, revise and extend their own theories of texts and the way they read. Learners should be trained to research and critique texts and their roles in reading and writing texts. The teacher's task is to facilitate students' reflection not only on their text processing strategies but also factors related to social formation of text.
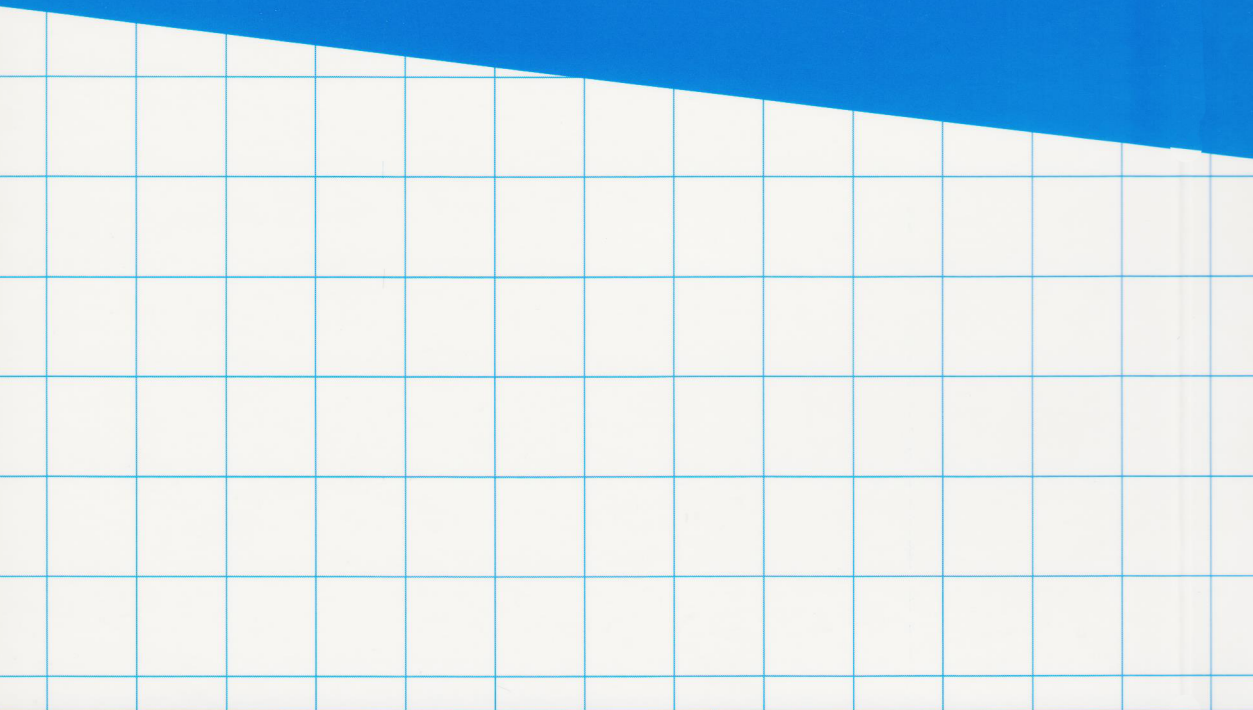
The techniques described above elucidate the reading process as a creative act. Readers construct meaning out of text, their background knowledge and their ideologies. They are autonomous in their creation or we can rather say re-creation. They take from the texts as much as they wish or as much as they are able to see. They learn that they can create many different readings of the same text and that different readers may construct very different creations of the same text. They learn how to be aware of factors that can influence their act of

creation. Consequently, they also learn that their reading of the same text may change when, e.g. they shift to a different point of view concerning issues discussed in this text. Last but not least, it is worth realizing that by helping learners to read in an autonomous way, we educate autonomous members of the society, who, in the globalization era, will consume information in a slower and more critical manner.

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