

**Complimentary Strategies in Reading and Listening Curricula:
E.S.L. Classroom Delivery and Assessment**

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Introduction

Referred to primarily as “passive forms” of language acquisition, Reading and Listening strategies remain a formidable challenge to E.S.L. / E.F.L. educators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Issues related to student motivation, practice, and competency are at the core of each instructor’s agenda, as she/ he engages students in meaningful and relevant classroom activities. Such concerns might include:

- 1.) Engagement in the development of models designed to clearly bring to bear elements of teacher facilitation in an educational setting involving Reading / Listening skill-building.
- 2.) Consideration of the linguistic benefits of including Narrative-based Theory in classroom activities in order to reinforce one’s Reading / Listening format.
- 3.) Comprehension of the theoretical foundations of Constructivist-based classroom delivery.

Narrative Methodology as a Re-Enforcer of Reading / Listening Skills

Many research-based educators seek to give agency to the narratives of classroom participants. Current data strongly indicates that Narrative Inquiry, with its emphasis on vignettes of lived experience, provides the means through which students can make dramatic advances in the so-called “passive forms” of second language acquisition. Of prime interest is exploring how each student responds to “seeing and hearing” through Narrative writing strategies and what internal / external sources they draw from in their Reading / Listening skill-building exercises. These responses, in turn, can often clearly indicate how well each student will eventually express themselves in English.

Narrative writing gives us all the opportunity to describe what we see, to make associations between the concepts in question and our own experiences, and to interpret their association in an effort to resolve gaps in our collective funds of knowledge. The driving question is: **“How do my students develop reading and listening skills through Narrative Inquiry?”** From this point of initial inquiry, one might hope to better know how students respond to what they read and hear, based on phenomenological circumstances and varying forms of verbal and nonverbal communication. If all conditions prove satisfactory, one might hope to accurately access how they encode and decode linguistic information and convert it into the English language.

Students’ educational, religious, ethnic, and philosophical similarities / differences will make a lively study of human perception and cognition. Secondly, that my students’ advances in linguistic perception and cognition serve as an emotive springboard toward growth in reading, writing, speaking, and internalizing English as a valuable supplement to their personal education.

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MacDonald and Walker (1977, p. 181), as well as Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 371) indicate that the objectives for case study methodology and narrative analysis using qualitative methods aid in the “comprehensive understanding” of the groups under study. One might hope to assess classroom strategies to accomplish this through a form of individualized student case-study characterized by Merriam as “particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (2001, p. 29).

Educators involved in the Reading / Listening process find ways to tap into the students’ various forms of intelligence and communicative styles. They often use methodological procedures that explore the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants, and then design procedures that will allow them to gain an understanding of the educational experiences of each student. This triangulation (Narrative writing, Reading, Listening) can indicate how participants address specific issues related to their lives on an intellectual, emotive, and visceral level as each student progresses in his acquisition of English.

Reading / Listening Assessment

By approaching Reading and Listening from different angles, one might gain insight into her / his students’ varying learning styles. Instructors might refer to this methodology as the “mixed form” strategy of classroom delivery, in preparation for assessment. The collective energies of the co-participants in this scenario may produce shifting levels of points of importance and relevancy as the student and teacher work collectively to evaluate overall scholastic success.

Therefore, rather than predict the exact course that classroom delivery and assessment would take, Reading and Listening teachers implement what Patton called “sensitizing concepts” (1990, p. 391). Patton referred to sensitizing concepts as those that “provide a basic framework highlighting the importance of certain kinds of events, activities, and behaviors” (p. 216). These sensitizing concepts can often induce and reflect certain culturally engrained attitudes and alert teachers to ways of facilitating classroom activities. Blumer (1969, p. 148) noted that these sensitizing concepts could help orient Reading / Writing curricula through a “general sense of reference” and provide “directions along which to look.”

One approach is to directly analyze students’ original three-part (descriptive, associative, and interpretive) responses to Narrative-based language acquisition in assignment form. A second procedure is to be looking for key elements that appear from the respondents’ writings. In actuality, I believe that it seems likely that the merging of the two approaches and the resulting triangulation would lend itself well to establishing credibility, transferability, and other concerns of academic “trustworthiness” related to student achievement and subsequent assessment.

The key issue is whether Saudi students will benefit from combining active skills (writing and speaking) with the more passive elements associated with Reading and

Listening. Educators might seek to closely observe the response of their students, and examine the results of their collective linguistic efforts. On some level, their progress will be in relationship to their enthusiasm toward the task at hand. I suspect that my students' gains, or lack thereof, will be tied to both teachers' buy-in to S.I.L.C. theory and praxis, and students to their teacher as their facilitator and mentor.

Student-Centered Language Acquisition

Narrative specialists insist that using this specific writing technique in conjunction with Reading / Listening activities advances student achievement. Geertz worked within the conception of a culture as an "integrated, semiotic system." Geertz's work is often highly praised for its timeliness in a domain which had, up to that point, largely resisted students' own *micro-historia* as a viable investigative tool with which to spike students' interest in learning a new language. Socio-cultural language theory is based on the idea that students would rather center on their own interests than obediently recite dictums issued by forces standing outside their particular realm of lived experience.

Research clearly indicates that rote memorization, endless work-sheets of terms and vocabulary words, and other such previously accepted approaches are simply not very effective. In time, student morale will slump. Constructivist teachers who employ elements of interpretive ethnography, multi-modal semiotics, Narrative-based theory and research, and a general application of relativistic inquiry often serve to inspire and invigorate students working to learn another language. The co-construction of bridges transcending and traversing two languages can then become a noteworthy experience for both facilitator and student.

Vygotskian-based Language Acquisition

Skills in reading and listening require a specific cognitive function that first takes place within the consciousness of the student, but which is then braided with lived-experience to form the co-constructed environment within which new knowledge is formed (Vygotsky, 1925). Reminiscent of Wittgenstein, Wertsch (1991) refers to this semiotic transference as a "socially provided tool kit" indispensable to the process by which tools and aids help develop "streams of internalized language and conceptualized thought that sometimes run parallel and sometimes merge" with those intended by the producer of the learning activity (Bruner, 1996, p.7).

Through this paradigm, knowledge is not simply a matter of comprehending a fixed understanding of some alleged educational "truth," but rather the keen observation of the complicated interplay of human perceptions, emotions, imagination, and fantasy (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 199). These inner-workings of the "social mind" involve an integrated approach toward *how* meaning is made. As Vygotsky noted: "Since the

intellect is nothing but inhibited will, we might possibly think of imagination as inhibited feeling” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 48).

Vygotsky sought to locate phenomena within the parameters of his emerging socio-cultural and psychological theories. His leanings indicated a “shift away from formalist, analytical positions-- functionalism, structuralism, and so forth-- toward more phenomenological perspectives” (Banks, in Prosser, 1988, p. 9). Vygotsky’s approach “conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1995). In passive forms of language acquisition, the internalized speech is all-important to students building their L2 lexicon.

Derry (1996) has indicated that cognitive constructivist research and practice has intended to place the student being observed within the context of her / his natural learning environment. Many tradition-based educational researchers, however, maintain a view of cognition that “lacks the lived-in qualities of intimacy, engagement, conflict, and negotiation. Disassociative forms of pedagogy resemble “other analytical dichotomies separating interrelated human experiences, such as the separation of thinking from feeling, or the individual from culture” (John-Steiner, 2000, p.195). In this manner, current research strategies valued by sociolinguistic theorists stand “in opposition to the more traditional reliance on universal cognitive algorithms” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 194).

Students’ Narratives as a Reading / Listening Tool

Socio-cultural Theory holds that “human activities take place in cultural contexts, that they are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can best be understood when investigated in their historical development” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Further, communicative networks are formed when “acts of representation are embedded in social practice and rely on socially developed semiotic means.... in patterning experience and events” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Although some traditional educators may seek to align themselves with a quick-fix pedagogical dogma, “there can be no universal schema that adequately represents the dynamic relation between external and internal aspects of development” (John-Steiner & Souberman, 1978). Students are afforded an opportunity to lessen academic anxiety by incorporating personal experiences into projects, presentations, or as a supplement to interpersonal communication.

Analysis of this process recognizes the need for “an integrative mode of thinking aimed at overcoming the temptation to rely too heavily on the more obvious, active skills like writing and speaking. Working, in part, from the principles outlined by pragmatist George Herbert Mead, Vygotsky “believed that thought develops first through interdependence with others and later is internalized” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 188). Creating new knowledge does not occur in a void. “Joint, mediated activity is the proper

unit of psychological analysis and hence, is inherently socially shared” (Cole, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 192). As far as the learning process is concerned, “the smallest indivisible unit is two people, not one” (Kushner, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 64). For students engaged in classroom activities, interactive group work is essential.

Such collaborative ventures have been thoroughly analyzed by Vygotsky, whose conceptualization of the *zone of proximal development* has led to an increased understanding of the positive advancement of reading and listening in a social context. The relationship between peers, between ‘master’ and mentor, or between groups, offers E.S. L. readers opportunity for interactive meaning-making to occur. In many cases, Narrative Inquiry acts as the catalyst for a very different form of jointly mediated knowledge building. The direct spillover positively effects listening and reading skills.

Building skills in reading and listening do not and indeed *should not* have to take place in strict isolation. Kozulin emphasizes that “the internalization of social interaction in the construction of knowledge (leads to a) dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes” (Kozulin, 1990, p. 87). This process of internalization of stimuli is not an instantaneous phenomenon. Feldman states that “the purpose of cultural organisms.... (is) to organize existing knowledge and to provide the challenge and the context for individual and joint creativity” (Feldman, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 88).

This “collective sense-making,” as defined by Weick, “is a need to act in order to think... where shared experience leads to engagement with culture” (Weick, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 193). John-Steiner adds, “through collaboration, we can transcend the constraints of biology, of time, of habit, and achieve a fuller self, beyond the limitations and the talents of the isolated individual” (2000, p. 188). Student “engagement” is at the forefront of Reading and Listening competencies. It is within these varying locations of the ontogenic, phylogenic and psycho-social self that truly meaningful change can “contribute to the realization of human possibility” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 187).

Comprehension Hypothesis

Krashen’s work in language acquisition notes that canned curriculum, rigid recitation, and constant correction do little to promote learning. Rather, acquiring a second language can best take place in the same manner as the original acquisition of the Mother Tongue. A child learns his/her original language in a natural progression, rather than through an artificially constructed environment. The result is an expansion of one’s lexicon through trial and error, whereupon “gains” far outweigh grammatical or pronunciation errors. As a result, each language learner develops without the debilitating effects of criticism or deficit-based modeling on the part of any given instructor, whether the teacher is a parent or professional instructor. This process is more in keeping with various forms of ‘whole language’ practice, rather than the dissection of language

acquisition into artificially conceived segments. On a related note, comprehension is accelerated through input, not merely output, just as students' success hinges more on learning than teaching.

Student-Centered Pedagogy

The Interlink philosophy, in keeping with current research, places students at the epicenter of the learning process. By relinquishing the most overt forms of control, an instructor paves the way for increased levels of self-esteem, as the students relate more closely to their own lived-experience. By eliminating outdated approaches (endless recitation, reams of vocabulary words, or tiresome grammar exercises) each instructor is afforded the opportunity to become a facilitator rather than the Kingpin of a top-down hierarchy. If the desired goal is to produce an "independent learner," the instructor must recognize that the student is more than an "empty vessel" to be filled with information. Rather, each student is recognized as a Being fully capable of high-functioning skill building, born of one's own innate intelligence(s).

Krashen and Terrell have found that reading and listening should be comprehensible and interesting if we are to achieve student "buy-in." If I, as teacher, apply my own cultural and educational ideology and suppress or minimize my students' personal, cultural experience can I expect to sustain the interest of my second language learners? They may, out of respect for my title, work with me for a while. In the end, I can expect them, one by one, to lose interest in exercises that have no relationship with their own personal identity.

If we, on the other hand, seek to broaden our own cultural understandings, we can engage each student in his personal quest for self-discovery. In this scenario, the instructor can participate in the learning process as well: acting as both an agent for educational advancement for one's students and as a learner himself. In so doing, the instructor can transfer the power that comes with his status without sacrificing the level of respect that he inherits through his "job description" as group "leader." In time, if performed properly, this transfer of power can reap great rewards for both student and instructor. This system of delivery places the student at the center of classroom activity, while "forming the bridge to reading, listening, writing independently."

To create an atmosphere whereby students become "independent learners" is, after all, the main goal of Socio-cultural educational theory and practice.

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