

“What are we doing when we read?” – adult literacy learners’ perceptions of reading

ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a qualitative study into how adult literacy learners perceive reading. Individual interviews and focus groups were used to ask thirty-seven adult literacy learners at a London further education college what reading *is*. It follows a grounded theory approach to build a model, or narrative, of reading in the form of six interrelating aspects and seven findings for discussion. These findings include insights on metalanguage and phonic decoding, the distinction between how we read and how we learn to read, motivation and learning to read, the place of reading aloud, the manifold relationship between reading and time, reading as a social practice and reading as a distinctly asocial practice. Implications for the learning and teaching of adult emergent reading are presented for each finding.

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Background and rationale

As an adult literacy teacher and teacher educator, I have become increasingly aware that adult literacy learners and teachers want more guidance on how to teach and develop adult reading, and yet are not sure where to look. The study of reading is claimed by several disciplines, each marking its territory in distinct ways. Cognitive psychology defines and investigates reading in certain ways, literary theory in others, and New Literacy Studies in yet others. Which of these can help adult literacy learners and teachers?

Cognitive psychology researches how text is processed into speech sounds and/or meaning. The development of phonemic awareness (Stuart, 2005a, 2005b) and orthographic processing skill (Burt, 2006), and how these relate to the lexical or phonological routes to verbalising and/or understanding a word are represented in the models cognitive psychology has produced over the past twenty years (Coltheart, 2006; Coltheart & Jackson, 2001; Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989; Stuart, 2002, 2005b). Yet, cognitive psychology’s engagement with reading does not end with verbalisation or lexical comprehension. Just & Carpenter (1977) used eye movement research to investigate sentence and paragraph comprehension and Garnham (1987) and Garnham & Oakhill’s (1992) “mental models theory” details how the reader processes each new word in the context of a mental model of the text read so far, in an “integrative,” “constructive” way (Garnham & Oakhill, 1992, p. 194). Noordman & Vonk (1992) argue that this constructive understanding is the product of the interplay between information from the text and the

reader's existing world knowledge.

Literary theory, over the past hundred years, has shifted its focus from the author to the text and finally to the reader (Eagleton, 1996; Rimmon-Kenan, 1989), investigating the reader's experience and offering models of the reading process. Iser, developing literary phenomenological hermeneutics into reception theory (Cuddon, 1991; Eagleton, 1996; Iser, 1978), theorised the reader's active participation in creating the *work* of literature – “a convergence...virtual... dynamic” (Iser, 1972, p. 212) – as opposed to the written *text*. Iser argues that the work is born (and reborn with each reading) in the connections the reader makes between sentences. Perry (1979), Fish (1980), Rimmon-Kenan (1989) and Todorov (1996) continued this work in both reader-response theory and structuralist poetics, identifying the reader as “build[ing] up” “the literary text,” “cumulatively [...] through adjustments and readjustments” (Perry, 1979, p. 35) in a process of “continually [...] reconstituting” (Fish, 1980, p. 159) meaning.

In contrast to the individual cognition based approach of the cognitive psychologists or the author-text-reader interchange of the literary theorists, the social practice approach of New Literacy Studies addresses the role that reading plays in the social organisation of our lives. Building on Heath's (1983) work on the literacy practices of communities in the United States, New Literacy Studies (Barton, 1994; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 1996; Papen, 2005; Street, 1984) presents a move towards an emphasis on literacy as a social practice, serving a particular function for the reader at a particular time and in a particular situation.

These three approaches to reading research are rarely placed together to attempt a more comprehensive look at what reading could be *for the reader*. A belief in the importance of

perspective of the learner reader is motivating factor behind this project. Over the past five years there has been an increase in research directly addressing adult literacy development, locating the research, at least partly, in the adult literacy classroom. Besser et al (2004) and McShane (2005) used classroom observation, diagnostic materials, interviews and teacher focus groups to identify a range of common reading difficulties (including phonological awareness, decoding and comprehension), advocating more classroom attention to these areas. Brooks, Burton, Cole & Szczerbinski (2007) investigated adult literacy teaching strategies, concluding that more work needs to be done on “oral fluency, explicit comprehension strategies, reciprocal teaching, phonics and language experience approaches” (p. 10).

Yet, despite this learning and teaching focus, the above projects did not address learners’ ideas of reading, though other research has. Devine (1984) interviewed adult English as a Second Language students to establish their “internalised reading models,” which she classified as “sound-centered,” “word centered” or “meaning centered” and compared to student reading aptitudes as measured through standardised tests, finding a correlation between students’ models and their reading strengths. Similarly, Schraw & Bruning (1996) used a combination of interview and quantitative methods to research how adult readers’ implicit models of reading – “transmission, translation or transaction” (p. 290) – affect reading performance, finding that those using the transactional model remembered more of the text, were better able to relate the text to their prior knowledge and reported more emotional response than those using other models. Ivanic et al (2006) interviewed adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL learners on their “everyday numeracy and language practices” to “understand links between learning provision and everyday lives more fully, as a basis for developing practice” (p. 3). Appleby & Barton developed this project into a guide to “Responding to People’s Lives” (2008), recommending that the best classroom

practice comes from seven key “threads”, including “listening to learners” (p. 4).

It is this approach, that of “listening to the learners,” which lies at the core of the present study. Adult literacy learners have chosen to improve their reading and writing, and bring the knowledge, skills and experience of adult life to this self-aware process. They are therefore an important, but rarely used, resource for research into adult reading development. This study aims to add to existing knowledge of the learning and teaching of adult emergent reading by using a grounded theory approach to turn the perceptions of adult literacy learners into a model (or narrative) of what reading is for the reader – cognitively, socially and affectively.

The main research question was:

- “What are we doing when we read” (Hogan, 2004) as perceived by adult literacy learners?

Sample & Methodology

The methodology of this study is grounded theory: my aim was to use the participants’ conceptualisations to build a new model of reading, rather than to test an existing model or theory. At the same time, the theoretical basis of my decision to work from learner perceptions lies in phenomenology: reading, in this study, is – and can only be – what these learners perceive it to be.

I carried out twenty-one individual interviews and four focus groups (of four learners each) over a three-month period with a sample of adult literacy learners at a London further education college. Participants were chosen to represent the spectrum of English Adult Literacy Core Curriculum levels from Entry 1 (beginners) to Level 2 (GCSE level). Of the

individual interviewees, 4 were at Entry 1, 4 at Entry 2, 5 at Entry 3, 4 at Level 1 and 4 at Level 2. Two focus groups were at Entry level and two at Level 1.

All 37 participants joined adult literacy classes voluntarily, in order to improve their reading and writing. Some are native speakers with experiences of failure at school for a range of personal, social and/or cognitive reasons. Others had come to England as children or adults and are confident speaking and listening in English, but lack confidence in reading and writing. All the participants had disrupted school educations, whether in this country or abroad. Just under three-quarters of participants are female. This represents the usual proportion of women to men in adult literacy classes at this college. Participant initials have been changed for this article.

Each interview lasted for 25-35 minutes and each focus group for 45-55 minutes. I used semi-structured interviews to capture a maximum of interviewee ideas, with minimal leading from fixed questions (Kvale, 1996). A list of question prompts was devised, and refined through piloting, following Tomlinson's (1989) approach of 'hierarchical focussing:' starting with open questions to allow the interviewees to set the perimeters of what reading is/involved and only later, if necessary, asking questions about aspects reading interviewees did not raise themselves. The use of these prompts was kept to a minimum; the interview structure was predominantly improvised from participant responses. Likewise, focus groups, rather than group discussions, were used to maximize group interaction (and therefore the generation and exploration of ideas).

All the individual interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim the same day. The resulting transcripts were analyzed using the grounded theory approach of open (assigning codes to issues or themes appearing in the data), axial

(grouping codes into categories) and selective coding (arranging the categories and component codes into a “story-line” or model) (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this way a model, or narrative, was created, in answer to the question ‘what are we doing when we read?’

Findings

‘In vivo’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) open coding produced 80 codes representing the diversity of participants’ perceptions of reading, from “concentrating” (the idea that reading takes a great deal of concentration) to “reading help for writing” (the idea that reading helps your writing), and from “spiritual things” (the code for reading religious/spiritual texts) to “you forget everything” (the idea that when you read you forget your immediate physical environment).

These codes form six categories: *decoding*, *ways to get better at reading*, *what we read*, *external factors related to reading*, *internal factors related to reading* and *why we read*.

The category *decoding* includes ideas about the physical and cognitive acts we perform to decode, such as looking at words, concentrating and remembering, as well as descriptions of the specific processes involved in reading words, such as phonic decoding, whole word recognition and guessing from context. *Ways to get better at reading* contains four dominant ideas (appearing in over half the transcripts): reading as much as possible, reading aloud, reading easy books and reading books you have a strong motivation to read. The category *what we read* represents a range of texts the participants read, from holy or spiritual books to “the paper” and from fiction to the words we see “everywhere.”

External factors related to reading includes motivating factors such as keeping up with current affairs, getting a good job and helping your children, as well as situational factors such as having “nothing to do” or having too little or too much “time.” The dominant codes in *internal factors related to reading* explore ideas such as enjoyment, experiencing emotion, escaping emotion, ‘feeling inside’ a text, forgetting everything and experiencing something new. Finally, *Why we read* is the largest category, dominated by ideas such as reading to understand, to learn, to access information, to keep our brains ‘active’, to communicate with others, to enjoy ourselves, for religious worship, to relax, for our children, to escape to a new world and simply because there are “words everywhere.”

Discussion

Metalanguage and phonic decoding

The majority of participants lacked the metalanguage to express the phonic decoding process they described. When asked how they read unfamiliar words, every participant described a process of phonic decoding. CS and PL described how they managed to read the name Asako, a word they had never seen before:

CS: Cause I’d seen the A S it would be like ‘as’ , ‘as’, ‘as’- ko’ ‘as ako’

PL: ‘As’ ‘a’ ‘ko’ Asako- A , /æ/, and S, /s/, and then A, /æ/ and ‘ko’ and then I squeezed them together like squashing a sponge until they were so squashed together that they made Asako.

Yet, apart from one learner who called this process “decoding,” and two others who called it “sounding out,” participants did not have any specialist vocabulary with which to name this process. Instead, they searched for other ways to describe it, using terms such as “break it down,” “spell it” or “pronounce it.”

JT: Then I try to sp... how can I put it ... I try to, what's the word? I try to... break it down. I try to break it, try to get it all together, the word.

PP: I may try and spell it out, and spell it- I spell it out- to pronounce it, to bring it out, to bring out.

Participants did use other classroom metalanguage (such as 'syllable' and 'vowel'), and therefore the fact that they did not use specific metalanguage for phonic decoding suggests their teachers may not use this terminology. Teachers are either not addressing phonic approaches, or they are, but not using its specific metalanguage.

If teachers are not dealing with phonemic awareness/decoding in the classroom, a possibility supported by Brooks et al (2007, p. 9), why not? Possible reasons fall into four interrelated areas: government funding shifts over the past few years resulting in fewer Entry level classes, which may have reduced the emphasis on beginning reading in teacher education, adult literacy teachers "reject[ing]" phonics because of fears of learners' previous negative experiences (Burton, 2007, p. 12), the "strong feelings" (p. 12) – verging on political allegiance – which phonics raises amongst many teachers, and a lack of teacher skill or confidence in this area (Besser et al., 2004).

It is also possible that teachers are indeed addressing phonemic awareness/decoding without using its specific metalanguage. Yet the relationship between being able to name an act and perform that act, the sense of empowerment which many feel metalanguage provides, the way these learners used other metalanguage to describe their learning, the struggle these participants had to articulate their phonic decoding processes without specific vocabulary, and the fact that these participants perceived phonic decoding to be their primary strategy for reading new words would all seem to indicate that the

advantages of using this metalanguage overpower feared disadvantages.

How you read vs. how you learn to read

The categories *Decoding* (or how we read) and *Ways to Get Better At Reading* (how we learn to read and improve our reading) overlap very little, sharing only “alphabet” (the code for a knowledge of the sound-symbol relationships of our writing system).

Participants discussed decoding words as predominantly a process of phonic decoding (see above), with some use of whole word recognition for familiar words like ‘October’:

AN: Because it’s a word that I always use [...] so I know it.

Participants also explained that they sometimes guessed a word from its context:

ST: Sometimes you can understand a word from the sentence, from the rest of the paragraph, when you realise what they’re trying to say.

However, when speaking of how they learnt to read or how they are improving their reading, participants explained the importance of reading as much as possible, reading easy books, reading books you enjoy and are interested in, reading aloud, or listening to others read aloud. All twenty-five transcripts stressed that the best way to get better at reading was to read as much as possible:

EP: Read, read, read! [...] the more you practice the better you get at it, and that’s the way it is.

Fifteen explained that to learn to read or get better at reading you need to read “easy” books:

EM: You know, when I want to read and improve my reading, I choose a book that I can read easily, understand easily.

Sixteen stressed that the key was to read books which you simply *like* and therefore are particularly motivated to read:

MO: If there’s a book and I like the book and find it exciting, that’s what gets me to read.

Finally, thirteen spoke of the role that reading aloud, and listening to others read, plays in reading development (discussed below).

For these participants, therefore, how you read (primarily by phonic decoding, with some whole word recognition and prediction) and how you learn to read or get better at reading (read as much as possible, read easy books, read what interests or motivates you and read aloud) are distinct. This distinction suggests that models of fluent reading are not necessarily the best place to start in developing ideas for the learning and teaching of reading. We need to find other ways to research how best to develop reading.

Ramifications for classroom practice are twofold. Firstly, to generate ideas on how to teach or develop reading, do not work only from models of fluent reading; ask the learners, many of whom have thought about this area a great deal. Secondly, to develop reading: read as much as possible, read ‘easy’ texts, choose texts which interest the reader and read aloud.

Motivation

Linking *Why We Read, Ways to Get Better at Reading and Internal Factors Related to Reading* is the concept of motivation. The breadth of the term 'motivation' conceals where it is vital as opposed to merely desirable. That it is good practice to read texts which interest our learners is common sense. Yet, this data indicates a different, more fundamental concept, that motivation can provide not only the impetus to pick up a particular text on a particular day, but can make the difference between someone being able to read or not: motivation to struggle against the odds to learn to read.

Three main categories of motivation emerge from this data. The first is feeling that you need to be able to read for the sake of your children:

CS: Because I think it [being able to read] would be, not just better for me, but better for my son [...] when he goes into nursery and he brings home a book or he's got homework- I want to be able to sit there and read to him.

The second category of motivation which emerged was reading as access to a job or lifestyle which would otherwise be closed off:

TE: I started going to performing arts school, about 15, 16 [...] because I really loved to do drama, and to do drama I had to read scripts, so I was really interested and focussed on it so I think that was a big big part of helping me learn how to read.

Finally, motivation emerged in the realisation that reading could be an escape from 'real life' problems. SF describes how she suddenly began to make progress with her reading

after many years of unsuccessful struggle:

SF: Um, I think it's because I found out it was a way of escaping and I just wanted to read and be inside the book all the time- and that drew me into reading.

Motivation was not just what drove these participants to join literacy classes, but what has allowed them to learn to read and to keep on improving their reading. The nature of these motivations, the first two social and the third distinctly *asocial*, are discussed later. This presents ramifications for outreach work; colleges need to develop their community outreach work to reach those who may have the motivation and need for literacy learning, but may not be aware that this support is available.

Reading aloud

Participants defined reading aloud as both a *type* of reading for specific purposes and as a *method* to improve their reading.

Reading aloud as a type of reading is performed, according to these participants, for three main purposes: reading stories, poems and religious texts. PL spoke of how stories read aloud are more exciting, for adults as well as for children:

PL: I like to hear stories [...] it's the tone of the voice.

Another participant explained that she doesn't understand poems when she reads them herself but does when others, such as her husband, read them aloud to her:

AI: I like someone reading to me poems; I understand when someone is reading but

I don't understand when I am reading.

DW stressed that the Qur'an must be read aloud:

DW: it's better to read it loud because you feel the words, every word you read you feel the word [...] maybe because this is the Holy Book, maybe that's why I am putting all of my mind and my heart in it.

These participants have described reading aloud as a social practice performed for particular purposes in particular situations.

Reading aloud was also presented as something you do to improve your reading, both alone and in groups. Participants spoke of how they frequently read aloud when they are alone, in order to better decode words:

MO: [when] I'm on my own at home, I'd read out loud [...] So I can understand the words and the sounds as well.

PL: It [reading aloud alone] helps you because you see the word and then you try to position your mouth to how the letters are written.

Many explained how reading aloud in groups provides an opportunity for their own reading to be corrected by others:

AN: I like [reading] loudly because I am learning something [...] it's good that other people hear - if there is a mistake they can help.

Additionally, listening to others read aloud clarifies the connection between symbols/written words and sounds/spoken words:

EP: You know before, when we used to read in class yeah, I used to pretend I was following, but I wasn't - but now I do follow it! I notice that it helps me a lot [...] when someone's reading it and you're following it, it helps – if you can't say that word, don't know what that word is and someone's reading it, and then it's 'oh yeah yeah.' That helps a lot.

The message for the learning and teaching of reading is that experimentation with different uses and formations of reading aloud – in and out of the classroom – can play an important role in the development of reading, both as a vehicle for improving decoding skills and as a way of acquiring the ability to read confidently in different ways for different social and personal purposes.

Reading and time, and time and space

The code “time,” a subsidiary of both *External* and *Internal Factors Affecting Reading*, features in all twenty-five transcripts. Participants spoke of time as a valuable commodity, required on a daily or weekly basis in order to be able to read, but often in short supply:

JJ: I like to read but I haven't time to.

Others spoke of time as a mass they have to “pass through” (CM). Reading can help “pass your time” (OR). For some this was a deliberate strategy:

JC: I read because... time flies, you don't think about travelling. while for others it

was more a matter of chance:

AN: Last week, I was reading this book and then I forgot I'm on the bus and the bus reached the final stop and I said 'Oh my God, why I am here?' I was reading a love story and it was interesting...

Time, for these participants, is also a way to mark the paths the years of their lives have taken, speaking of the "times of [their] lives" (PS) when they have read more or less. Participants emphasised that they chose to join an adult literacy class at this particular "time" for specific reasons:

AE: For three years now, I sort of stopped trying to read because I was busy looking after my son. Now is the time for me to read again...

Yet even more often, participants spoke of reading, particularly the reading of literature, as an escape from the difficulties or loneliness of these particular "times", where "time" signifies the place or situation we are in now:

AN: When it's a bad time, I just get a book and I read it.

DS: When I read, I forget about all, I forget about this time, my environment – yes, I forget about it all when I'm reading.

ST: It's an escape – when I'm stressed out or just want to take time out, I'll start to read.

Time, in this data, is something to be measured out and used or endured in units of minutes or hours, is a marker for the years of our lives and is a way of talking about the place we are each located right now, a place which may allow us to develop our reading or a place from which we want to escape by reading.

The relationship between reading, time and space is further developed in participants' ideas of differences in permanence and personal control between spoken and written language. Written language has permanence:

DS: this language is written down [...] because we have to keep it [...] Oral language maybe it will change by time but written language wouldn't change.

Written language also allows the reader to read it whenever she chooses:

RC: A story is there the whole time, you can read before you go to bed, you can read it whenever you like.

Written language offers a degree of control that is still, even in this digital age, not associated with the spoken; the reader can often decide what and when to read, providing the possibility of communication across time and space:

BH: [reading's] like speaking, but because I can't be with that person, then it is like them speaking but now it is in writing.

This sense of reading (and writing) as a form of controlled communication across space and time calls up ideas both from literary theory – for instance Chambers' idea of narrative

as “seductive” in that it involves a “deferral” of communication (1984, p. 10) – and from linguistics, expanding the notion that human language is characterised by displacement (being able to communicate *about* distant times or spaces) into written language’s ability to communicate *across* time and space. In this way, written language allows both writer and reader control over where, when and how they perform their communicative acts, to accommodate personal need:

ST: [when reading a novel] I’m just listening to him [“Coelho, the writer”], to what he’s telling me, he’s advising me, guiding me, because I don’t have anyone like that.

The reader can control this communication, getting what she needs from those she has never met, across continents and years.

Pennac celebrates this control over time and space in the form of ten “rights of the reader” (2006): “the right not to read,” “the right to skip,” “the right not to finish the book,” “the right to read it again,” “the right to read anything,” “the right to mistake a book for real life,” “the right to read anywhere,” “the right to dip in,” “the right to read out loud,” and “the right to be quiet” (pp. 149-174). These rights seem to encapsulate our implications for learning and teaching, and another: the right to travel across time and space when we choose.

Reading as a social practice

The concept of reading as social practice has been a touchstone of the New Literacy Studies theorists over the past fifteen years (Barton, 1994, 2007; Barton et al., 2000; Barton & Tusting, 2005; Hamilton, 2005; Papen, 2005), who “argue that literacy can only be understood in the context of the social practice in which it is acquired and used” (Barton, 2007, p. 25). Yet I would like to take this notion of literacy as social practice further

and argue that my data shows that social practice contains two distinct aspects. The first evokes freedom and cultural richness, the varied reading practices we do to take part in the diverse domains we belong to: reading letters or texts from friends, college coursework, stories to children, menus in cafes or religious texts. Yet reading as a social practice has another aspect, which evokes social inequality, powerlessness, control from above and punishment for those who do not – or rather cannot – read easily. As much as these participants articulated a range of reasons why they *want* to read, they also expressed their awareness that they actually have no choice, they *have to* read:

CS: Everywhere you go you've got to read [...] when you're at work you've got boards where you've got a rota, and you've got to, you need to read what times you've got to come in, whereabouts you've got to go [...] everywhere you go basically, you have to read everywhere.

BD. If you don't know how to read, or if you don't that word, you look like a humpty dumpty and you think you don't know nothing, and you try and try and [...] sometimes I get really angry...

Relating this to Pennac's "rights of the reader," these readers have recognised that they do *not* have Pennac's first and integral right, "the right not to read" (2006, p. 149); instead they are faced with "the obligation to read" (p. 151). This is a social practice as unwelcome obligation.

Reading as an asocial practice

As much as it is a social practice, this data indicates that reading can also be a deliberate step outside of the social, which I am calling an **asocial practice**.

Participants spoke of reading to take part in the social domains around them, but they spoke even more about reading, particularly the reading of literature, to escape these domains and access other realities. The data shows two (interrelated) aspects of this asocial practice: entering a text, often as a character within that text, and experiencing, releasing or escaping emotions in doing so.

As discussed above in relation to time, participants spoke of reading as a conscious act of escape. Thirteen participants described reading as “being inside” the text (predominantly stories and novels):

AN: I'm reading the book, if I like the story [...] I feel to be inside [...] like it's happening to me.

AE: Normally when I'm reading I sort of put myself in there, I become a character in that book.

They describe a process of intersubjectivity, entering the story/novel as a character and then returning, transformed:

JJ: you know how to do your life better at the other side [...] some of them [insights from reading] are very important, for your life, make you better.

BD: Something like *Jane Eyre*, it's an experience thing, it helps you to move forward, if there's something that you want to do, it's like 'oh this person did it, me too I will try it, if they achieved, me too I can do it.'

The idea of becoming, if only temporarily, a character within a story or novel evokes Bakhtin's "transformative identification", whereby novel readers project themselves into the world of the novel, becoming the protagonist, before returning back to their original subject position of reader to assess and "consummate" that experience (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 26) in the form of personal transformation.

These participants describe their transformations: what they have gained from their experience inside the text and what they can take back to help their usual lives. Yet they go further and discuss how "being inside" a book helps them read by not only providing the desire to read on, but by furnishing a hook upon which to hang memory of decoded words:

EF: When you read stories, and you find out a word, you don't forget because you remember the story.

Others felt that being inside a story or novel improves their confidence when reading, facilitating their decoding of new words:

AE: When I'm reading [...] I picture myself as one of the characters in the book to understand the words I'm reading [...] I'm acting as one of them, so I know where I'm going, where the reading is going.

That "knowing where you're going" in a text helps decoding fits with ideas of semantic and syntactic prediction based on the overall meaning of the text (common to adult literacy studies and a 'whole language approach' in EFL (Rigg, 1991)). Yet these participants are also describing a movement between subjectivities, the author's and the reader's. From

within the author's subjectivity the reading-eyes know where "the reading is going" (AE) and can therefore read with the increased confidence described as "flow" by four participants:

AE: I read a book some time ago, Sydney Sheldon? I was one of the characters in there. [...] - at the same time I am reading and at the same time I am acting as well, so it give me flow, you know to read it well, and I enjoy the book and I understand it well.

The learners' descriptions of how the "flow" of being inside a text helps them read also calls up Iser and Fish's work on the reader's active forming of connections within and between the sentences of a text (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978). The reader follows the words and sentences set out by the author, thus following another's cognitive footsteps (temporarily taking on another subjectivity), but also makes links between these sentences in his own "individual realisation" (Iser, 1972, p. 219) of the text. The reader is therefore both herself and the author, "the alien me and the real me" (p. 224), in a constant shifting of subject position. This is a movement between subjectivities and thus the reader gains, at least for part of the reading process, the reading confidence of the author or protagonist. The asocial act of being inside a text, therefore, is not only a chance to be someone else, but also a chance to be a more confident reader.

The second aspect of reading as an asocial practice is reading as cause and effect of emotion. "Feel", the code for emotion, featured in twenty-one of the twenty-five transcripts, sixteen of these unprompted by the interviewer. Besides the sadness or anxiety produced by difficulty reading or the joy produced by improved reading, participants spoke of reading as a way to escape from certain emotions, while experiencing or releasing others:

BH: For me, whenever I'm sad, that's when I feel I have to read [...] I prefer reading love stories or good stories, something with a happy ending.

MT: [Reading] just calms, calms out anger – if someone's been arguing and they can't take it no more, they can go and pick up a book and get away from it.

While longing to escape real-life sadness and find joy in reading is perhaps easy to understand, the riddle of why we would want to experience anger or horror through our reading, or how painful reading matter is somehow converted into pleasure in the literary experience, has fascinated critics since Aristotle half-answered it over two thousand years ago: “tragedy is an imitation [...] effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions” (1996, p. 10). ST's explanation is similar:

ST: That's probably the only time they can connect their emotions, when they read a book. Maybe because in the outside world they're really cold and can't show their emotions, but when they read a book it can come out.

Echoing Forster's ideas of how characters in novels “solace” (1927, p. 70) their readers, others felt that experiencing, through reading, the pain of others helps us understand, or contextualise, our own:

MH: If someone feels sad and reads a sad story they may feel better, like in a better condition.

Reading, here, is not only a vehicle in our social interactions, but a step outside of those

interactions into a different way of existing, feeling, and – however temporary – of being. This asocial practice of reading is more than a *reason* to read; it is an alternative way of existing, a conscious movement away from our usual social structures and subjectivity(s), to be somewhere and someone different. The learning and teaching of reading, therefore, needs to draw on the asocial practice of reading as well as the social, to explore the relationships between the intersubjective experience of reading and the processes of decoding letters and words into meanings, experiences and emotions.

Summary of implications for practice

- Learners and teachers should experiment with the use of metalanguage to describe and explore the decoding process.
- Reading as much as possible, reading more 'easier' texts and reading texts which interest the reader are three key ways to develop adult reading.
- Learners, more than models of fluent reading, may be a useful source of guidance on reading development.
- ·Motivation can make the difference between someone being able to read and not being able to read, therefore colleges need to prioritize their efforts to reach those who may have a strong motivation to improve their reading but may not be aware of available provision.
- ·Reading aloud, in groups and individually, can be an important tool for developing reading.
- ·Reading requires time. Some learners may not have enough time to read at home and therefore may need more class time allocated to reading.
- ·Reading also potentially provides a means to escape the restrictions of time and space.

- There is a need to be vigilant of increases in state generated obligation to read (this negative aspect of reading as a social practice).
- The asocial, or intersubjective, aspects of reading are related to the seemingly 'mechanical' aspects, such as decoding, and therefore this area needs more exploration, in homes and classrooms as well as through further research.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the small scale, exploratory nature of this study, the model, or "story-line", produced has highlighted and expanded upon links between the work on reading from cognitive psychology, New Literacy Studies and literary theory. Participants have articulated how escape relates to decoding and how social participation relates to emotion. More importantly, by clarifying what reading is, and could be, to different adult literacy learners, this research suggests areas for classroom experimentation, such as with reading aloud and the use of metalanguage. Yet perhaps most usefully, this study indicates the potential of "ask[ing] students what helps them learn" (Brooks et al., 2001, pp. 168-169).

Looking at contemporary literary criticism, Gregor lamented the absence of focus on "what it actually feels like to read" (1970, p. 197). This complaint could equally be levelled at cognitive psychology or New Literacy Studies, and yet this is exactly what these participants have given us.

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