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CAROLYN BAKER
San Jose State University

Review

Interactive Reading

Suzanne Salimbene. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1986. Pp. v + 184.

EFL teacher trainers, reading specialists, materials writers, and applied linguists everywhere can learn much from Suzanne Salimbene's *Interactive Reading* for two reasons: It presents a unified set of high-level strategies that could dramatically improve anyone's reading and is an absorbing case study in the production of a student textbook explicitly based on psycholinguistic insights. Growing out of doctoral research Salimbene performed at the University of London Institute of Education under the supervision of Henry G. Widdowson, who contributed its foreword, *Interactive Reading* presents 10 authentic, advanced-level texts from sources such as news magazines and academic coursebooks, together with abundant instructions and practice in the reading strategies. Writing activities exploring the usefulness of the same strategies to composition complete each unit. Salimbene pilot tested portions of the materials at the American College of Greece and at UCLA. For reasons that will become clear, I have not used the book in my own classes but did try the interactive reading strategy in personal reading with gratifying results.

The basic theory, as stated by Widdowson in the foreword, is that:

> Written text is essentially a set of directions which indicate to readers where they are to look for significance in their own knowledge of the world as derived from individual experience and the social conventions of their culture . . . The text, the actual appearance of signs on the page, does not therefore itself contain meaning but provides the occasion for meaning to be achieved in the act of reading. (p. v)
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> (Sources and discussion of these ideas may be traced in e.g. Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Devine, Carrell, & Eskey, 1987; Rumelhart, 1984; Widdowson, 1984; and Williams, 1986. An excellent introduction to the theory and practice of interactive reading for L1 primary teachers, with some attention to ESL, is May, 1986.)

Skeptics might agree that good readers "construct meaning," but isn't the problem for poor and second language readers just that they don't know all the words? Salimbene's answer to the dilemma is to

treat the learner as a good reader on the way to becoming better; without neglecting vocabulary building, she makes it an end point rather than a beginning of reading improvement. Her sequences of instructional activity invariably begin with mobilizing the learner's background knowledge; then through various kinds of comprehension-developing dialogs—teacher with learner, reader with author, learner with peer, and learner with self—she gradually focuses attention on essential details. The information gained this way from a given paragraph becomes part of the broad general knowledge with which the learner begins the next paragraph. Under Salimbene's direction, learners work through successive paragraphs of text trying out new ways to read and sharing the procedures and results.

Salimbene fully explains to learners that (1) it is helpful to experience reading as a dialog and (2) it isn't necessary to read, or even to know, all the words. Prereading work consists of predicting, on the basis of the title alone, what the contents, organization, and even writer's opinion will be. If the title is a metaphor like that of Unit 1, "Your Verbal Maps," the implications of this are exhaustively mined. Readers then survey the first and last paragraphs, section headings and graphic material, checking their guesses and adjusting expectations. With the reader's background knowledge, however scanty, affirmed, and the author's intentions clarified, the reader can enter assertively into dialog with the author, actually writing his or her side in spaces provided after every sentence of text. Initially these reader comments may be as simple as *Ok. So what?* and *What's your point?* Salimbene shows readers how to deepen communication with an author by insisting on getting answers to one's questions—utilizing logical, organizational, syntactic, and context clues—and by summarizing ideas even before the whole text is finished.

A typical activity introducing the sampling strategy helps persuade readers that comprehension is not a matter of attending mechanistically to every word. Groups identify a paragraph's topic, message, and supporting evidence, then cross out all unnecessary words. They rewrite the paragraph, now telegraphic, leaving blanks for omitted words. Groups exchange papers, discovering that the choice of unnecessary words differs. This exercise builds learners' expertise in identifying key ideas, shows that construction of meaning is an individual responsibility, yet does not neglect the word level.

The emphasis on reader questioning recalls the 3QPR method sometimes used in American schools in which subheadings are turned into questions to be answered by purposeful reading. Salimbene's method is special in her principled aversion to letting the learner answer other people's comprehension-testing questions, even putative ones. Whereas a respected EAP text might ask, following a reading titled, for example, "Marine Life":

True or false: A sea anemone is a plant.

Salimbene teaches the learner to ask, before reading begins:

What lives in the sea besides fish?

The first, more conventional question (even if inferencing is involved) assumes reading comprehension is best advanced when learners stuff themselves with all the information, then analyze questions to find out what they should have noticed the first time, becoming adept in reading questions, and in effect depending on them. In the interactive process, learners finish the first reading with a set of answers that can be applied to any questions that may come up, with new knowledge consciously connected to old, ready for recycling in fresh reading or reconstitution in an essay or discussion. Clearly the second type is the more desirable skill for content reading, with wide applicability at all levels of education.

Interactive reading can lead to significant change in one's conception of the writing task and to improvement in cogency and clarity. Salimbene's writing activities begin with question, dialog, and paragraph writing done in pairs in which learners paraphrase the unit, playing the roles of writer and reader, checking what one another needs to understand. Later, learners summarize a whole text from notes taken as answers to their own questions, construct and answer essay questions, and develop whole compositions as an author/reader dialog.

Teachers interested in testing the theory will unfortunately find some problems with the book. A fundamental weakness is failure to provide a clear role for the classroom teacher or in some way engage him or her as an enthusiastic partner in putting the strategies across. Perhaps inevitably, lessons read like transcripts of Salimbene's own classes; they are all of a piece and cumulative, a full-scale reading course in which later units refer to content, not only strategies, from earlier lessons, and the presentation of strategies is intricately interwoven with text content, the sharing of exercises, and the rationale for the method. Salimbene's voice is omnipresent. It is not evident what the classroom teacher can or should be doing besides acting as an aide. Later, when Salimbene's instruction drops off and texts to be read are as long as 5,000 words (12 pages), the classroom teacher wanting to maintain the quality of the instruction must now be a discourse analyst as astute as Salimbene herself, as there is no teacher's guide. First eclipsed and then abandoned, the classroom teacher is further undermined by Salimbene's choice of 7 of her 10 texts from the 50s, 60s, and early 70s which in the bland, long-winded style of the period discuss such topics as the pollution of drinking water by sewage, the nature of statistical methods, astronomy up to Galileo, and human perception. Salimbene wants learners to test their interactive skills on solid subject matter; most teachers, however, are looking for more intrinsically motivating fare.

Graphic design is another weak spot. Book users will be confused trying to separate the bit of text under discussion from what Salimbene

is saying about it. Visual organizing devices such as facing pages for text and commentary or two colors of print are badly needed so that readers can follow the instruction without needless floundering. These problems are serious enough to discourage even a patient and interested native English reader like myself; advanced language learners will very likely get a first impression of dullness and impenetrability. In my opinion, the problems are not the fault of the theory, but they will prevent the materials and thus the theory from receiving broad trial.

Salimbene deserves great credit for painstaking preparation of the lessons and seeing them through to publication without trivialization or imposed marketing gimmicks. Next time, though, it would be well worth finding a consultant or coauthor with the necessary objectivity to put the manuscript in more classroom-ready final form. ■

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DENISE E. MURRAY
San Jose State University

Review

Strategies for Readers: A Reading/Communication Text for Students of ESL. Books 1 and 2.

Christine Pearson Casanave. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986. Pp. 138 and 204.

Reading theory has run the full gambit of possibilities—from simply decoding to accessing both structural and content schemata (see, for example, Carrell, 1983, 1984, 1987). What most theories hold in common is the cognitive nature of reading. Similarly, the process approach to writing has focused almost exclusively on the cognitive processes involved in writing (see, for example, Flower & Hayes, 1981). More recently, composition researchers and theorists have called for a better understanding of the social nature of writing by drawing attention to the fact that writing is a communicative act, arising out of a discourse community (see, for example, LeFevre, 1987). Such writers all make the same claim: Writing is not the solitary act of the Platonic tradition; it arises from the interaction among people, contexts, and texts. The closest reading theory has come to such a socially constructed view, is the claim that reading is a dialog between writer and reader. This view, however, still focuses on the solitary reader making sense of the writer's text, albeit against a background of shared knowledge. Interestingly, Casanave, in *Strategies for Readers* grounds her prereading activities in "the psycholinguistic and schema-theoretic conceptualization of reading" (p. viii), yet, with a classroom teacher's understanding of effective methodology, encourages small group work, thus setting up discourse communities in which to situate reading. The strength and value of these two textbooks lie in this combination of theory and pedagogy, of reading and communicating.

The audience for these two texts is low-intermediate young adult and adult students of ESL in college preparation programs. The first volume uses concrete and familiar subjects as reading topics (e.g., "Names," "Substances") but deals with them as one would more academic topics. The topics in the second volume increase in abstractness, length, and difficulty (e.g., "The Common Cold," "World Population") and are more like the readings we have come to expect in a college text. Casanave's choice of more familiar topics for *Book 1* is an advantage since students work with familiar content in an unfamiliar way. In other words, the books move from readings in which the

content is not cognitively demanding but the tasks are academic to ones in which both content and task are demanding (a progression advocated by Cummins, 1981). Teachers will use the books most effectively if they pay attention to the "Information for Teachers" provided at the beginning of each book. In this section, Casanave sets out the organization of the book, her rationale for the activities, and classroom activities, such as the use of small group work previously mentioned. She makes many points that help us rethink our traditional ways of teaching reading, such as the following:

> All activities in both volumes of *Strategies for Readers* begin with directions. *The directions should be considered reading matter* [emphasis in the original]. The ability to read and understand directions is perhaps the most basic of the reading abilities our students must acquire. (p. x)

The prereading activities involve communication to activate students' background knowledge and interaction with the reading by asking students to scan, predict, question, and so forth. These activities encourage active involvement that facilitates reading comprehension.

The early reading selections are short, gently guiding students towards articles of more academic length with footnotes and tables. Students, therefore, are not overwhelmed by the reading task but gain confidence in their own ability to read English. Vocabulary is dealt with through prereading activities and glosses as footnotes to the readings.

An important aspect of these books is that extensive and varied exercises follow the readings. These include comprehension checks that range from true/false questions to summaries. Exercises focus on reading strategies such as inferencing, categorizing, and predicting and on study skills such as summarizing and organizing. Other exercises focus on language use, in particular, logical word goups and cohesive devices. In the author's words, "Logical Word Groups help students understand the importance of perceiving grammatically related groups of words while reading" (p. xi). Still others depend solely on students' own knowledge and interests, such as agreeing or disagreeing with various statements or doing word analogy exercises. Such exercises, since they have no right or wrong answers, stimulate student interest and reduce anxiety in the classroom. However, we must introduce such exercises very carefully to students since many come from educational systems in which personal opinion is not necessarily valued and there are always "right" answers. Each chapter ends with a communicative activity and extra reading. The communicative activities require students to tap their own knowledge and interests, thus concluding each chapter on a positive note.

Both volumes are professionally illustrated and laid out. Headings and directions help students know what they are to do next and what it is about.

Strategies for Readers successfully achieves its goal as a reading and communication text for low-intermediate ESL readers. The careful blend of sound pedagogy and theoretical principles has produced a text that encourages students to be readers of English. Most students will find they will need more advanced reading selections before they can adequately handle their college studies in Englsh; but, given the groundwork of reading strategies they have learned using these texts, they should be able to apply those strategies to more academic texts and tasks. ■

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