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Unraveling the Affordances of *Silas Marner* in a Japanese University EFL Context

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Graded readers, simplified versions of literature and other texts at graduated levels of difficulty, are widely employed in contexts of foreign language pedagogy and are widely considered to be a form of written-language input ostensibly suitable for a wide array of developmental stages. However, the efficacy of graded readers is not unchallenged, among which criticisms is that the language in a graded work of literature is, by nature, aesthetically inert and inauthentic, in comparison to the original. Still, from an L2 literacies-development perspective, could one not justifiably accept that aesthetic impoverishment and inauthenticity are reasonable, perhaps also unavoidable, compromises? Practically, what, for example, could a typical intermediate-level learner of EFL be expected to glean from a nineteenth-century English novel? Would the language-learning needs of this learner not be better addressed through engagement with an appropriately graded version of the same novel, facilitating optimally fluent—and, therefore, assumedly more enjoyable and motivating—reading practice?

This article reports on research that addressed precisely these questions, focusing specifically on Japanese university students' involvement with and interaction around George Eliot's (1861) *Silas Marner*. Applying comparative textual analysis and qualitative case-study methods, and viewed through a social semiotic conceptual lens, the researchers investigated the relative meaning-making affordances of graded-reader and original versions of the novel and examined turn-by-turn the semiotic work performed by a group of Japanese university students as they collaboratively unpacked this challenging piece of fiction. Findings suggest that the authentic text, however difficult, afforded rich meaning-making possibilities that would have been unavailable through engagement with graded readers. Importantly, too, the results indicate that active peer collaboration, a process that entailed the individual contribution and cooperative synthesis of a diversity of textual and extra-textual semiotic resources, was vital to actualizing these learning opportunities. On the basis of this analysis, the paper concludes with a preliminary argument for the pedagogical efficacy of promoting collaborative dysfluency in L2 literacies education—over and above the individually oriented aim of reading fluency as conventionally defined.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, *graded readers*—simplified versions of literary, informational, and other texts at graduated levels of difficulty—have been widely employed in contexts of foreign language (FL) pedagogy as written-language input suitable for a broad range of developmental stages (see Bamford & Day, 2004; Iwahori, 2008; Krashen, 1993; Waring, 2003). However, the purported efficacy of graded readers is not uncontested (Cobb, 2007;

Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Waring, 2003); one criticism has been that the language in a garden-variety graded work of literature is, by nature, aesthetically inert and inauthentic, in comparison to the original work (Swaffar, 1985). Still, given the perspective and purposes of L2 literacies development, it may seem that aesthetic impoverishment and inauthenticity are reasonable, perhaps unavoidable, compromises. Practically, what, for example, might a typical intermediate-level learner of EFL be expected to glean from the unabridged text of a nineteenth-century English novel? Would the language-learning needs of this learner not be better addressed through engagement with an appropriately graded version of the *same* novel, facilitating optimally fluent—and, therefore, assumedly more enjoyable and motivating—reading practice? Actually, we contend, this sort of prejudgment is neither as simple, nor as sound as it might seem.

This article reports on research into Japanese university students' involvement with and interaction around George Eliot's (1861) classic novel *Silas Marner*. Applying comparative textual analysis and qualitative case-study methods, and viewed through a social semiotic conceptual lens (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2003, 2010; Nelson, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005), the researchers investigated the relative meaning-making affordances (Gibson, 1979; Kress, 2003) of graded-reader and original versions of the novel and examined turn-by-turn the “semiotic work” (Kress, 2010) performed by learners as they collaboratively unpacked this challenging piece of fiction. This paper is specifically focused on a fine-grained analysis of the text-oriented classroom interaction of one group of four Japanese university students, whose experience, as represented here, may suggest that the authentic literary text, however difficult, afforded unique meaning-making possibilities—opportunities seemingly unavailable through engagement with an ostensibly *appropriate* graded-reader version. Importantly, too, our results indicate that active peer collaboration, a process that entailed the individual contribution and cooperative synthesis of a diversity of textual and extra-textual semiotic resources, was vital to actualizing these learning opportunities. On the basis of this analysis, we conclude with a preliminary argument for the pedagogical efficacy of promoting *collaborative dysfluency* over and above the individually oriented aim of reading fluency, as conventionally defined in L2 literacies education.

WEIGHING GRADED READERS AGAINST AUTHENTIC LITERARY TEXTS

The graded reader has emerged over the past few decades as a core component of the pedagogic practice of ‘extensive reading,’ in which language learners engage independently with a diverse array of texts. Extensive reading (hereafter ‘ER’) itself has long been incorporated into language courses in many different contexts, recognized by proponents as a dense source of comprehensible L2 input, and so also an efficient driver of language acquisition (Krashen, 1989, 1993; see also, Bamford & Day, 2004; Iwahori, 2008; Taguchi, Takayasu-Mass, & Gorsuch, 2004; Waring, 2003;). A defining parameter is that ER should be both pleasurable and, in the main, cognitively undemanding. The rationale being that, in providing generous, sustained, and lexically dense (compared to spoken interaction) target-language input, ER facilitates progression toward successful engagement with increasingly difficult or advanced texts.

Accordingly, graded readers are specially designed to accommodate both of two fundamental requirements of ER: presenting learners with an array of texts that 1) is sufficiently broad and varied (i.e., *extensive*) to stimulate interest and enjoyment in a diversity

of learners, and 2) comprises a standardized, progressive system of language-developmental stepping stones, leading toward authentic or, in Waring's (2003) phrasing, "unsimplified" texts. Waring further explains that graded readers are simplified in two ways: by shortening an original text and by systematically adapting a text to generally conform to the assessed vocabulary 'sizes' of prospective readers at differing levels.

The most emphatically claimed benefit of graded reading is improved reading fluency (Bamford & Day, 2004; Iwahori, 2008; Taguchi, Takayasu-Mass, & Gorsuch 2004). Reading fluency is defined as reading that is not impeded by problems of word-identification, which in turn may limit comprehension (Harris & Hodges, 1995, cited in Hickey, 2007). To facilitate easy, fluent reading—which, importantly, is presumed to optimize reading pleasure—the vocabulary in a graded reader is designed to be ninety-eight percent comprehensible (*viz.* level-appropriate) to the target learners, which, irrespective of level, normally amounts to two unknown words per page (Bamford & Day, 2004; Nation, 2014). Such simplifications or 'gradings' are based upon accountings of 'high frequency vocabulary,' identified according to standard word lists. The canonical General Service List of Words (West, 1950) and more recent Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) have been commonly employed. Software-enabled corpus analysis, now routinely performed with ease, greatly facilitates the grading of authentic texts. If a text features vocabulary items identified as overly rare, or if the proportion of lower-frequency items is too high, then the inappropriate items are duly replaced, comporting with prescribed standards of 'difficulty' for the desired level or 'grade.'

Other research refutes the purported effectiveness of graded readers, however. The work of Waring and Takaki (2003), for instance, points to the lack of convincing evidence that regular graded reading positively affects incidental vocabulary acquisition. Horst (2005) shows that significant incidental vocabulary acquisition requires learners to read impractically large quantities of graded material. Moreover, Cobb (2007) contends that graded reading alone provides insufficient input to foster comprehension of complex texts. The apparent problem is that, even after an active, comprehensive course of graded reading, learners are simply not exposed to enough unknown or unfamiliar language (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Nation (2014), a leading researcher of L2 vocabulary acquisition and proponent of graded reading, claims that, to read unsimplified texts, a learner must have amassed an English vocabulary that includes the 9000 most frequently used words. Nation acknowledges, too, that only the first 3000 words are normally included in even the highest-level graded readers. If these are designed at each level to feature only two expectedly unknown words per page, then graded reading seems inapt preparation for tackling complex texts, in which many more lower frequency terms expectedly appear. Simply put, stepping stones serve little purpose if they terminate midstream. A solution, Nation (2014) proposes, is the formulation of additional levels and texts featuring a mid-frequency vocabulary range, including more items from the lower-frequency 4th to 9th sets of 1000 common words, thereby increasing exposure to the kind of vocabulary in unsimplified texts. Yet, given the persistent, fundamental priority of reading fluency aided by reduced complexity, adding more mid-level bands would imaginably not address, or might even practically exacerbate the aforementioned problems, insofar as learners' time and energy remain limited.

An alternative to using simplified or graded texts in the language classroom, then, may be original or authentic texts, for which there is notable support (Berado, 2006; Bobinka & Dominguez, 2014; Bordag, Kirchenbaum, Tschirner, & Opitz, 2015). In fact, Bordag et al. (2015), disputing Nation (2014), claim that incidental vocabulary acquisition is actually better

facilitated through engagement with more complex syntactic structures, which authentic literary texts are more apt to feature than are graded readers. Exposure to complex terminology is also necessary for learners to recognize that an unknown term in a paragraph may not significantly interfere with overall comprehension of the text (Swaffar, 1985). Actually, the style in which a graded text is typically presented may inhibit meaning-making in subtle ways; for instance, Swaffar contends that the extensive glossaries and targeted questions usually found in graded readers can forestall productive attempts at guessing vocabulary from context and making conceptual connections to existing knowledge. Graded readers encourage attention to the meanings of individual words in a text over more global semiotic patterns.

Essentially, though, the choice of employing authentic texts versus graded readers rests upon what reading and its purposes are understood to be. Nuttall (1982) states that the foundational elements of reading should be meaning itself; its transfer from author to reader; how readers construct meaning; and how the reader, writer and text all contribute to the meaning-making process. Crucial as well, we suggest, are related considerations of textual authenticity. Swaffar (1985) defines an authentic text as having the principal purpose of transferring meaning. This exchange (e.g., to persuade, thank, entertain), and the aim of authentic communication, are of primary importance. Swaffar also explains that an authentic text is characterized by lexical and rhetorical repetition, redundancy, discourse markers, and idiosyncratic authorial clues, without which learners are ill-equipped to guess, to infer, to predict, to visualize, or to conceptualize. The capacity to read, for Swaffar, centrally involves analysis of the environment and cultural context in which a text was written; the intent of the author; one's own preconceptions and positionings; the ways that information is textually structured and generically presented; and how all of these analytic processes and resulting insights contribute to integrated text-oriented meaning. We are persuaded as well that words and texts do not and cannot convey meanings that are entirely durable, immutable or in any sense universal; words and texts can only be made to mean through (inter)subjective, contextually contingent acts of analysis and interpretation.

All the same, some proponents of graded reading contend that graded readers also expose learners to many linguistic patterns that are used in authentic texts, and so provide useful, appropriate language input to learners. Allen (2016), for one, observes that graded readers actually contain significant concentrations of many of the same kinds of lexical bundles that occur in authentic texts. Moreover, Claridge (2005), on the basis of corpus analysis of graded texts, concludes that graded texts do contain certain discourse markers, instances of redundancy, and other linguistic patterns that one would find in authentic discourse. So, ultimately, the question of what constitutes an authentic reading experience remains divisive and unsettled. To our minds, however, the mediating 'voice,' choices, and purposes of the graded-reader 'author' herself or himself raise important questions that have been little explored as yet.

CONCEPTUAL ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

Having thus outlined the relative positions on using graded readers and authentic literature in EFL pedagogy, how might we proceed? Once again, arguably, the central issue here is a basic disagreement as to what reading is and why we do it, rather than a comparative appraisal of the efficacy of different instructional resources. Indeed, we admit that our stake in this debate is as much aesthetic and epistemic as it is practical. A graded reader, though

represented as a modified ‘work of literature,’ simply cannot be so, in that it is inherently, unhappily compromised. It is, in the Baudrillardian sense of “lowest common culture,” the result of a true, complete work of art having been reduced to an algorithmically reinterpreted simulacrum, a poorly reproduced counterfeit of the original (Baudrillard, 1981, 1994). Lamentably, the cultural value of aesthetic experience is stripped away, and supplanted with the artificial, utilitarian logic of lexical frequency.

Nonetheless, our objective is not to high-mindedly (nor high-handedly) defend artistic integrity and aesthetic purity. Rather, we see authentic literary texts as fertile ground in which to organically grow the capacity for meaning making itself, of which language use is only one of many parts, albeit an undoubtedly vital one. A piece of literature, as with all works of art, draws its meaning potential not only from concrete experiences of life, but also from the unseen semiotic web in which all lives and identities are intertwined; a dynamically changing network map of the innumerable metaphors and ‘chains of signification’ (Derrida, 1978) that describe the very complex qualities of meaning that make us distinctly human.

In adopting such a ‘social semiotic’ (cf. Hodge & Kress, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2005) disposition toward meaning and language, we align ourselves with an expanding body of scholarship in applied linguistics and language and literacies education (including the abovementioned work of Swaffar) in which L2 learning and use—and communication and learning writ large—are regarded fundamentally as matters of *semiotic awareness* (Nelson, 2006, 2008), of *semiotic competence* (van Lier, 2004) or *symbolic competence* (Kramersch, 2006, 2009, 2011; Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008; Warner, 2011). These are matters of developing and operationalizing capacities of adaptive attunement to and creative engagement with relationships of actual and potential meaning (Kern, 2000; cf. Halliday, 1978) both in language(s) and in the myriad other socially and culturally embedded elements and modes of representation and communication (Kress, 2003, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2006) to which linguistically conveyed meaning is always and inextricably linked. Such socially and semiotically alert frameworks recommend an approach to language and literacies pedagogy and research in which complexity and ambiguity are critical resources: catalysts for collaborative, transformative semiotic work, for creative exploration of the L2 as one meaning-making resource among many. From this vantage, an artificially constructed graded version of a literary text seems not so much a scaffolded path to literacy, but rather an unnecessarily, unhappily limited resource. Having tested this intuition ourselves, we next aim to show what the stakes may really be in striking the grader-reader bargain.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DESIGN

The present study was undertaken at a private Japanese university specializing in foreign language education. The four focal participants, sophomore English majors from the same cohort of eighteen students, had all attained intermediate to high-intermediate English language proficiency, ranging roughly between 5.5 and 6.5 as measured by IELTS, before the study commenced.

The study was conducted in the context of second-year *Academic Literacies* (AL), a core course for English majors, comprising a writing component and a reading component with two ninety-minute class periods per week devoted to each component. While there was some crossover, these components were treated as discrete courses for purposes of assessment. In the second semester, when the study was conducted, the writing component of AL centered on the development of an independent research paper on a topic of each

student's choosing. The reading component, by contrast, involved the learners in the collaborative study of a novel. The reading class was designed to focus equally on both extensive and intensive reading. Extensive reading, recall, is conventionally based on the principle of reading for pleasure and to increase reading fluency (Bamford & Day, 2004). The course instructor, who is also the lead author of this article, was a male British national and an experienced teacher of EAP, who had worked in diverse academic settings in Asia and Europe.

In his prior experience of teaching AL, the instructor quickly recognized that typical extensive reading activities, modeled on recommendations of Bamford and Day (2004), did not excite his otherwise diligent sophomore students, who often abandoned their selected ER texts once the minimum demands of related classroom tasks had been met. The students also felt that, as there were so few unknown words in their texts, the graded-reader tasks were generally uninspiring and educationally unchallenging, prompting a change of approach in the second iteration. One authentic text would be read by all students in the class concurrently, rather than basing the extensive reading component of the course on individually read graded texts. In light of his concerns over the class's engagement with graded readers and the paucity of content in the level-appropriate graded texts, the instructor sought to examine whether an authentic text might provide other, perhaps richer learning opportunities. Principal goals of the reading course included deepening each student's understandings of and personal reflection on a text both written and set in a different time period and cultural context; fostering greater appreciation of how writers achieve their desired effects through language; and facilitating exploration of the importance of literature in communicating human concerns and feelings. In view of these aims, and of the novel's fairly modest page-length, Eliot's *Silas Marner* seemed a promising choice of text.

One- to two-chapter sections of the novel were to be read in sequence, interspersed with viewings, without subtitles, of analogous segments from a TV-movie version of *Silas Marner* (A&E/BBC, 1985). Students would perform multimodal analyses of the two versions, attending especially to the kinds of meaning-making potentials language, image, and other representational modes, alone and in combination, offer an audience. While the multimodal interpretive work thus undertaken actually did bear importantly on learners' broader understandings of the novel, analysis of meaning-making work performed on and around the film is not the specific focus of the present report.

The narrative of *Silas Marner* centers on the titular individual, who is unjustly banished from a community and classed as an outsider. Having lost faith in humanity, he subsequently also loses himself in his work, generating wealth as an end in itself. Ultimately, though, his faith in humankind is restored. These themes were assumedly relatable to the Japanese students' own social context, with its rigid group orientation, facilitating the learners' construction of significant text-world connections. Yet, admittedly, the choice of *Silas Marner* was, for the instructor, initially not altogether comfortable. Even given students from relatively diverse educational backgrounds—many had undertaken High School exchange programs or had been schooled abroad—might a text of this complexity overwhelm (or underwhelm) these sophomore English majors? Could or would they effectively pool their meaning-making resources, and what form would the collective learning experience take? To concretely test his intuitions as to the prospective pedagogical value of tackling the unadulterated *Silas Marner*, the instructor, in cooperation with the second author of this article, co-designed and implemented a program of research intended to make visible the kinds of interactions that the students would have with and around this challenging text, the

qualities of “meaning making work” (Kress, 2010) performed in the course of these interactions, and the real and presumed implications for communication and learning that might obtain.

The present study, described as follows, was designed to partially address each of the following three overarching research questions:

- What observable affordances and constraints might be associated with using authentic literature, vis-à-vis graded readers, in the university EFL classroom?
- What role(s) might learner collaboration play?
- What implications might there be for English language and literacy pedagogy at large?

Having identified the documentation and examination of participants’ “meaning making trajectories” (Kell, 2006) as the core concern, we settled upon a qualitative case-study research design, wherein the cases—the objects of investigation—were not the individual students themselves, nor the groups of students, but rather the semiotic characteristics and observable effects on learning of the meaning-making work that each group cooperatively undertook over a period of eight weeks. We recognized the inherent challenges in attempting to account for emergent qualities of understanding that may unfold in myriad ways through interaction with and around a literary text, *Silas Marner* in this instance. The key factor was creating a condition in which the accrued meaning-making resources that each individual student brought to the text (English lexical knowledge; subjective life experiences; metacognitive and metalinguistic tools (e.g., understanding of metaphor); etc.) were also made available to her classmates, that is, were openly articulated so as to be recordable and analyzable. To meet this requirement, a collection comprising three forms of data was assembled: recorded text-based group interactions, semi-structured group interviews, and the original and graded versions of *Silas Marner* themselves. In this paper, however, our analysis is limited to a detailed explication of the moment-to-moment negotiations performed by one group of learners around one segment of the novel, leaving the discussion of larger analytic patterns for a subsequent report.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this, the first of four such recorded in-class interactions, groups of four students, five groups in total, were asked to reflect upon and discuss, based on their prior reading, the following prompt:

What does the author compare Silas’s existence to in chapter two on page 14? Is this an appropriate comparison? Think about the nature of the work.

The dual pedagogical and research-related aims of this discussion were to allow and encourage the student-participants to pool their meaning-making resources—logical, experiential, emotional, ideological, etc.—toward the cooperative construction of textual meaning at both denotative and connotative levels; that is, to operationalize the sort of Zone of Proximal Development that Vygotsky (1978) described, wherein each learner is enabled to

actualize higher and richer aspects of developmental potential by virtue of her productive interaction with differently capable and knowledgeable peers. Semantically and functionally, each sentence in the three-sentence prompt (above) elicits a distinct kind of semiotic work. The first sentence requires the reader to identify evidence in the text, specifically on page 14, of a comparison between qualities of the life that Silas Marner leads and those of another creature; ostensibly a mere matter of recognizing that one entity, Silas, is likened in some respect to something else, to wit, a spider. The answer to this initial question, then, may be gleaned without understanding of how or why the comparison is made, only that it is. We underscore this perhaps obvious point because we were and are centrally concerned with the vital distinction between denotative and connotative levels of meaning, that is, between the most generic and conventional meanings that rest on the surface of a text and the deeper mythological (cf. Barthes, 1972; Cassirer, 1946) dimensions and nuances of meanings that lie beneath.

So, pertaining again to the text prompt above, we understand and here emphasize that addressing the second question—“Is this an appropriate comparison?”—is deceptive in its seeming simplicity. Yes, the comparison between Silas’s existence and that of a spider is explicitly made in the novel, evidenced by the following two extracts from page 14:

He worked far on into the night to finish the table of Mrs. Osgood’s table linen sooner than she had expected—without contemplating beforehand the money she would put into his hand for the work. *He seemed to weave like a spider, from pure impulse, without reflection.* Every man’s work, pursued steadily, tends in this way to become an end in itself, and so to bridge over the loveless chasms of his life.

Silas, in his solitude, had to provide his own breakfast, dinner, and supper, to fetch his own water from the well, and put his own kettle on the fire; *and all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect.* He hated the thought of the past; there was nothing that called out his love toward the strangers he had come amongst; and the future was all dark, for there was no Unseen Love that cared for him.

The italicized sections of these excerpts do support the conclusion that Silas is, in fact, likened to a spider and that the comparison may be justified, insofar as it is based upon the common occupation of Silas and the prototypical spider with the unconscious or instinctive spinning and weaving together of thread. But how far does this really go in satisfying the demands of an ‘appropriate’ comparison? Should a reader be content not to venture further into the text on the basis of such a cursory conclusion? We think not. A satisfactory answer requires not only the identification of shared qualities as delimited in the text by the author, but a more thoroughly situated, contingent examination of the significance of *appropriateness itself*: a shift in meaning-making focus from fixed, prescribed, denotative forms of “authoritative” discourse toward negotiable, fluid, subjective and intersubjective processes of “internally persuasive discourse,” adopting Bakhtin’s (1981) phrasing. The prompt’s third sentence, therefore, does not point the way to connecting the superficial dots in the text that reveal ‘the answer’ so much as suggest a starting point from which webs of meaning are potentially spun.

As follows, we present an analysis of collaborative semiotic work performed by one group of four female students in response to the abovementioned prompt. The class had

read the beginning of the novel, to page 14, depicting the main character's early life in the village of Lantern Yard, his expulsion from that community after having been framed for the theft of a dying man's fortune, and the start of Silas's new life in the town of Raveloe. The students were asked to examine a section of the text describing Silas's existence since his exile. We refer to the focal learners using pseudonyms: Namie, Yoko, Masami, and Sayaka. The following six sequenced excerpts comprise the full transcript of these students' ten-minute interaction, which we analyze by tracing and unpacking the cooperative 'meaning-making trajectory' (Kell, 2006) of these learners as they engaged with the prompt, *Silas Marner*, and one another.

At the outset (see Interaction Segment One below), Namie evidently had not yet identified the surface-level comparison in the text of Silas Marner's existence to that of a spider, which the other three students seemed to have grasped. But even at this early stage, the import of mythological conceptions, and misconceptions, comes to the fore.

Interaction Segment One

Transcription Conventions: [/] - overlapping utterance; [...] - brief pause

Line Number

- | | | |
|----|---------------|---|
| 1. | Namie: | I didn't find it! |
| 2. | Yoko: | Maybe many people don't like it. |
| 3. | Masami: | Creature. It has six/ |
| 4. | Namie: | /So, cockroaches? |
| 5. | Sayaka, Yoko: | No, no! |
| 6. | Masami: | A spider! (...) It is related to that he is a weaver. |
| 7. | Namie: | Ah! |

In lines 2 and 3, Yoko and Masami attempt to elicit the notion of a spider from Namie, indirectly scaffolding her further exploration of meaning in the text by supplying descriptive clues as to what the comparable entity might be.

Yoko highlights the affectively negative response and unpopular reception that the yet-unnamed entity is commonly considered to evoke. Masami frames the entity in broad categorical terms, classifying it as a "creature," a categorical label most typically (denotatively) assigned to animals, subhuman life forms, and, arguably, unpleasant or even monstrous beings. Masami then further specifies the class of "creature" as six-legged. Synthesizing this information, Namie then surmises that the entity to which Silas is compared is a cockroach, the archetype of an infamously shunned hexapod creature. Yet, though Namie's deduction is correct in view of the information supplied by her group-mates, her guess technically misses the mark, insofar as Masami's hint proves misleading. Roaches and other six-legged insects do, in fact, share a phylum (*arthropoda*) with their arachnoid cousins; but, as many know, a spider is most obviously distinguished from true insects by an extra pair of legs (eight in all). Importantly, however, Masami's 'misleading' clue, and Namie's 'incorrect' guess, significantly enrich and extend the students' comprehension of the narrative, rather than distract from it. Yoko and Masami both bring valuable extra-textual resources to this collaborative process of literary interpretation, serendipitously inspiring Namie to contribute discursive resources of her own. The expected

and agreed answer—‘spider’—did come to light promptly enough; but, by dint of an ostensible misunderstanding, so too did other relevant information: 1) the salience and superficial similarity of *arachnophobic* and *katsaridaphobic* tendencies in the collective consciousness and 2) the anatomical distinctness of spiders from cockroaches. The introduction of these resources, and their interconnection, convey nontrivial implications for learning, as may be seen at the close of the students’ discussion.

Interaction Segment Two (below) begins with Masami’s assertion that the comparison of Silas with a spider is in fact appropriate, addressing the second part of the question prompt. Sayaka then lends her tentative support to the proposition, an enthusiastic ‘Maybel’ in line 9, invoking the inherent authority of the writer, of George Eliot herself, to solely determine which artistic choices were or would not have been appropriate in realizing her own vision for *Silas Marner*; obversely, according to Sayaka’s reasoning, the appropriateness of any and all aspects of this celebrated novel is clearly implied, in that the novel comprises only those authorial decisions that Eliot actually, finally made. Then, in her next turn (line 10), Masami states, “Appropriate has a vague meaning, but I think it is,” suggesting another intriguing bit of semiotic work. With this statement, Masami tacitly acknowledges the validity of Sayaka’s contribution, but also draws metalinguistic and metacognitive attention to the inherent ambiguity of appropriateness. In line 11, Sayaka pivots away from her focus on the writer’s authority, suggesting that appropriateness might also be defined according to common characteristics, in this case the act of weaving. Had Sayaka read and considered the third sentence in the discussion prompt—“Think about the work”—before addressing the question in the second sentence, she might well have arrived at ‘weaving’ more directly, as Masami did. However, as with Namie in Segment One, Sayaka’s alternative definition and application of ‘appropriate’ was no blind alley. Rather than distracting or misdirecting the others from achieving the objective at hand, it precipitated an opportunity, a need really, to ‘go meta-’ in a way that may not have otherwise obtained. And, like the earlier cockroach digression, this critical text-oriented reflection on appropriateness itself seemed to pay dividends as the discussion progressed.

In line 12, Namie introduces another meta-level consideration, asking “Is it a metaphor?”, herself suspecting that it is. Sayaka contributes the semantic relation, the common occupation with “weaving” of Silas and spiders. Then, Namie proposes a name, a label for the relation. In fact, the most overt instance in the text of comparison between Silas and a spider (“*He seemed to weave like a spider, from pure impulse, without reflection*” on p. 14) is technically a simile, but, again, the technically inaccurate label should not belie the useful bit of semiotic work that this attempt at nomenclature nonetheless achieves. The only aspect of ‘metaphoricity’ that is relevant in this moment, and which Namie recruits as a resource, is semiotic mapping itself, the motivated linkage of two discrete entities from different domains of experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987) by virtue of some shared quality (in this case, involvement in weaving) which is a defining semiotic property of both metaphors and similes. This time it is Namie whose contribution to the group effort is somewhat off-base, which Sayaka’s tentative response in line 13, “Kind of,” may also signal. Still and again, Namie is correct enough for present purposes, and her comment serves to expand and refine the definition and qualifying characteristics of “appropriateness” that the group has been constructing thus far.

Interaction Segment Two

8. Masami: It was an appropriate comparison.
 9. Sayaka: Maybe! Because the author used.
 10. Masami: Appropriate has a vague meaning, but I think it is.
 11. Sayaka: I was inspired it has a common, their weave.
 12. Namie: Is it a metaphor?
 13. Sayaka: Kind of.
 14. Sayaka: Why appropriate?
 15. Masami: “Think about the nature of the work.” What is the nature?
 16. Sayaka: He does. Weave.
 17. Masami: In the case of spider they create a house with weave using *ito*/
 18. Namie: /Thread.
 19. Masami: Thread, thread! And also Silas used thread to make clothes.
 20. Sayaka: Spider’s work and Silas’s work is same thing. So the author used this spider.

The conceptual ground thus staked out, the rest of Interaction Segment Two (lines 14–20) becomes a process of cooperatively synthesizing the different bits of emerging theory contributed earlier. On the table are questions and suggestions as to which criteria may be properly applied to establish appropriateness. Does it begin and end with the author’s imprimatur? Or need there be an internal logic to the decision, a common thread appropriately linking the two terms, i.e., Silas and the spider? And might that logic of appropriateness be *appropriately* labeled as metaphorical, especially given that, as Masami points out in lines 17 and 19, the similarity between Silas and a spider is incomplete in that the spider employs thread to weave its ‘house’ whereas Silas weaves thread into cloth? Ultimately, in line 20, Sayaka declares the group’s mutual agreement that the common use of thread in Silas’s and a spider’s respective ‘occupations’ is both necessary and sufficient to tie them together; in so doing, the group also settles on, and capably articulates in English, a working definition of the abstract relation of *appropriateness itself*, for their present purposes, that importantly coordinates the objective need for a common criterial basis for comparison with the subjective acknowledgement of the author’s prerogative.

Segment Three (lines 21–30, below) begins with Sayaka’s open question as to whether the spider, among all other creatures, is distinct in its ability to spin thread. Intuitively exhibiting a habit of experienced researchers, Sayaka seeks disconfirming evidence, facts that might weaken or discredit the group’s theory-in-the-making. After a few moments of further consideration, she proposes an answer to her own question (line 22), standing provisionally behind the singular thread-spinning capacity of spiders. Masami then adds her support to Sayaka’s suggestion, “It’s a unique creature, the spider” (line 23). Technically, again, Masami and Sayaka are both mistaken. In point of fact, the list of creatures capable of producing silk in different forms is impressively long, including certain species of flies, fleas, ants, bees, crickets, mollusks, and, of course, silkworms. Once again, however, this factual error actually clarifies and facilitates the group’s semiotic work.

Interaction Segment Three

21. Sayaka: Any other creature use thread?
 22. Sayaka: Maybe no.

23. Masami: It is a unique creature, the spider. (...) They are told that they are outsider, alien?
 24. Sayaka: Many people hate spiders. Many people around him think that he is like a spider.
 25. He is solitude, like a spider.
 26. Namie: Maybe spider doesn't live together. Spider live alone.
 27. Namie: This point, Silas is similar to spider.
 28. Sayaka: Most people doesn't like spider, and people around Silas don't like Silas. They
 29. have many similarities.
 30. Masami: We believe that it also that they are evil worker.

Ultimately, as a web-spinner, the spider may not be unique, but its spinning ability is comparatively so salient—so present in the collective mythological imagination, e.g., through iconic instantiations like the ‘Amazing Spiderman’—that, to these students and for their purposes, it is apparently *unique enough*, the oxymoron notwithstanding. Moreover, this false attribution of uniqueness nonetheless inspires a further semiotic connection that is indeed productive and true.

Evident in the second half of Masami's utterance in line 23, which follows a brief pause, is another vital conceptual/linguistic pivot, a motivated metaphorical linkage of the exceptionality, or categorical *alone-ness*, that uniqueness entails with the physical, social and emotional experiences of being alone. Masami interrogatively suggests, “They are told that they are outsider, alien?” but this phrasing seems to indicate Masami's incomplete control of the convoluted passive construction ‘are said to be’, rather than a personification of spiders as such. Nonetheless, her proposed metaphorical alignment of uniqueness and alienation certainly does come across, and to generative effect.

Through the ensuing turns-at-talk, prompted by Masami's metaphor, the two circles in the Venn diagram describing the conceptual intersections of *spider-ness* and *Silas-ness* further converge. The seminal metaphorical mapping of categorical discreteness onto physical and social separation produces a cascade of interrelated terms and concepts—*unique, outsider, alien, hate, solitude, alone, evil*—further clarifying both Silas and spider, each more and more finely articulated according to defining qualities of the other. Further, the beginnings of a causal explanation for the solitary nature of Silas discursively emerges: in sum, his solitude and isolation are consequences of his being disliked (as spiders often are, stereotypically), and he is disliked because he is presumed to be evil (as spiders often are, mythologically). So, even with the introduction of several instances of misapprehension and misinformation, *and likely because of this*, the net effect of the group's discussion thus far is undoubtedly helpful in co-constructing coherent, relevant, nuanced meaning in the novel. Crucially, too, this discussion, conducted entirely in the target language (*ito aside*), has required these learners to focus joint attention specifically on meta-linguistic dimensions of communication, which is especially apparent in Interaction Segment Four.

Interaction Segment Four

31. Sayaka: When we compare we have to use two things. The similarities, it's appropriate
 32. comparison.
 33. Namie: What did you say?
 34. Sayaka: When we compare something and something, we have to use their similarities.
 35. Yoko: Yeah.
 36. Namie: What do you think about Silas and the spider? I can't understand why the author

37. used spider to describe. Actually there is the comparison. But I don't think Silas
 38. is a spider or not so bad man.
 39. Namie: The image, seeing that movie, just people hate him, but he doesn't do bad thing.
 40. Sayaka: He doesn't, he didn't do anything bad, but people around him don't like him.
 41. Because maybe he is always solitude.
 42. Namie: I wonder if no friends, no family.
 43. Sayaka: Because he leaves his home town.
 44. Namie: I couldn't image.
 45. Masami: But he is considered like a spider by people around him.
 46. Namie: I want to make friends with him.

A posited chain of causality now in place, the group, on Sayaka's initiative, engages once again the key conceptual touchstone for answering the demands of the original discussion prompt: appropriateness, as applied to the comparison of Silas with a prototypical spider. Heretofore, the group has identified a set of relevant similarities and differences between these two, that is, qualities of both comparison and contrast. Sayaka's comment in line 31, then, represents both a new, narrower parameter for discussing the problem at hand and a more specific, presently applicable definition of appropriateness itself. As she rightly points out, the conceptual process of 'comparison', technically and conventionally, involves analysis of the similarities between discrete entities, that is, how two things that are not the same are nonetheless similar. And here, importantly, she articulates the conceptual relation of comparison in abstract terms, viz. not specifically referring to the common occupation of weaving, as discussed earlier in the exchange (lines 16–20). This marks a significant qualitative shift from specific, localized observation and deduction to cooperative establishment and agreement of a general principle from which to proceed.

In lines 36 and 37, Namie again tests the stability of the conceptual framework developed thus far. Seemingly accepting that the identification of common characteristics does, in fact, certify an *appropriate comparison*, Namie raises a question as to whether one particular point of contrast might ultimately invalidate that comparison, or render the metaphor "inert" (Bartel, 1983, p. 38), so to say. In lines 37 through 39, she expresses her impression, based in part on an intertextual connection she makes to the opening scenes of the film adaptation of *Silas Marner* viewed in class, that Silas is not a bad man, and so is undeserving of the hatred that others show him. In lines 39 and 40, Namie and Sayaka both allow that Silas himself should not be judged as bad, because his actions cannot be judged as bad. Performing this logical test—bad *is* as bad *does*—and thereby 'introducing into evidence' a new and disruptive deduction, the group is impelled to explain the disconnect, and accordingly revise their working theory. In lines 40 through 43, Sayaka and Namie together construct a notion that reinstates the coherence of their theory, permitting the comparison of Silas and the spider to convincingly stand, albeit in a more restricted and nuanced sense. They advance the idea that, notwithstanding the abovementioned similarities, a fundamental question of causality is yet to be fully considered.

Again, the stereotypical, mythological image of the spider entertained to this point has been based on the presumption of a vaguely malevolent disposition as the causal pretext for the spider's isolation, and this presumption was initially mapped onto the students' conceptions of Silas's own character, with all the nasty, *spidery* entailments in tow. Yet, Sayaka's comments in lines 40 and 41, building on the preceding turns at talk, completely reverses this causal relationship. While the perception of malevolence attached to spiders is

seemingly upheld, as reflected in Namie's comments in lines 36 through 38, the ensuing recognition that Silas, *by virtue of his solitary nature*, is undeservingly entrapped in the spider's unfortunate reputation. This epiphanic rupture, with the attendant effort to make sense of it, prompts a critical reimagining of Silas as a figure with whom to empathize, and not to despise; a character perhaps shunned because he is isolated and alone, rather than isolated and alone because he is shunned. In line 42, Namie adds contextual substance to the newly revised theory, contemplating a subtly, but significantly different framing for the weaver's solitude, a possible lifeworld for Silas that is not delimited by the disdain and disregard of present, proximal strangers, but, instead, by the unhappy absence of conceivable loved ones. With this, it seems, Namie evokes a fresh impression of Silas as inherently lovable, if not also actually loved. Sayaka then, in line 43, moves to support this impression with complementary appeals both to the shared affective experience of the group members and, we emphasize, to direct textual evidence from the novel. Encoded in the statement "Because he leaves his hometown" is Sayaka's well founded expectation that her group-mates will understand and admit that moving away from one's hometown, especially for the first time, prototypically implies leaving one's immediate family and oldest, often dearest friends behind—a bittersweet condition that is quite familiar to many Japanese university students themselves. Furthermore, Sayaka connects this widely shared, experience-based impression to the text itself, in which the author describes Silas's relocation years earlier from Lantern Yard to Raveloe. Then, in line 44, Namie's outward, other-oriented speculation gives way to explicit personal reflection: "I couldn't imag[in]e." Taking Silas's perspective as her own, she is unable to envisage herself in his circumstances, or rather imagines herself unable to cope, according to the more typically idiomatic significance of this phrase.

In line 45, Masami, in her only contribution to this part of the exchange, refocuses the group's joint attention back onto the story and the task at hand, reaffirming the narrative 'fact' that, despite the cogency of their more sympathetic interpretation, Silas is nonetheless "treated like a spider by the people around him." This statement is not merely summative, however; neither is it any kind of retrograde move toward an only superficially serviceable answer—that is, one that fails to meaningfully approach what has become, over the course of the previous few minutes, an ever richer and more multifaceted set of question prompts, as we discuss in regard to Interaction Segment Five. Arguably, we suggest, Masami's spare restatement of the discussion's central trope can no longer be taken only in its literal, denotative sense. The collaborative meaning-making work performed on and around the provided prompts has progressively, broadly expanded what Masami's utterance is capable of meaning to these discussion participants, and so also has ineluctably and, we think, productively elaborated what it ultimately does mean to them, to which their continued exchange attests. Had it been uttered at the conversation's outset, Masami's statement might have been interpreted as an answer, a solution, a terminus; here, however, well into the course of the students' interchange, the would-be conclusion is linked to a number of other significant questions and issues, each begging answers of their own. We take the general lesson, then, that, in the course and discourse of classroom interaction, a point that might well be facilely, quickly grasped by the students—as the obviously 'correct' response, only satisfactorily meeting the demands of the task—may be more usefully transformed into another beginning: not a language-pedagogical *outcome*, but an *outset* instead. This point speaks directly to the meaning-making value of authentic literature vis-à-vis graded readers, addressed more specifically in the *Discussion* section that follows.

At the end of Segment Four, following Masami's renewed invitation to retrace the group's conceptual steps, Namie takes a new progressive step in engaging with the text. Having first reflected upon how she would feel if she were in Silas's lonely position (line 44), she steps back out of his shoes and expresses her wish to comfort Silas through friendship. With this, we see the level of textual engagement progressing and deepening further; Namie's identification with Silas qualitatively shifts, from self-directed projection of her feelings onto the character to an other-oriented, imagined form of empathic action.

Interaction Segment Five

47. Sayaka: If the author can't use a spider as a comparison, what creature do you want to use?
 48. Namie: Uh, *okami* [wolf]. Solitude.
 49. Masami: But he is weak
 50. Namie: Cockroach!

After a brief pause, Interaction Segment Five begins with Sayaka taking up the challenge implicit in Masami's preceding turn. She creatively introduces a thought experiment, asking her group-mates to imagine an alternative authorial choice, a newly refashioned metaphor, that would more comfortably align with the Silas Marner that they have come to know over the past ten minutes—a Silas Marner that must, in fairness, be seen and treated as un-spider-like, they all now recognize. Accordingly, they acknowledge and grapple with the issue of to what, if not a spider, Silas may be fairly compared. "What creature," Sayaka asks in line 47, "do you want to use?" In response, in line 48, Namie suggests '*okami*,' the Japanese word for 'wolf,' the justification for which is a disaggregation of spider-ly solitude, which still reasonably applies, from arachnophobic perceptions of evil, which can no longer be accepted. A wolf, to Namie's mind, is known for its solitary disposition, but it is also possessed of positive qualities that, again stereotypically, a spider is not (e.g., strength, bravery, beauty, and a happy resemblance to man's best friend). Still, as Masami points out in line 49, Silas cannot be convincingly described as especially strong or brave, and so he obviously falls short of prototypical 'lupinicity.' In fact, they surmise, the same weak, pathetic aspects of Silas's character that disqualify his spider-ness also make him decidedly un-wolflike. Fittingly, and also facetiously, Namie, in line 50, brings the discussion back to its beginning, likening Silas once again to the ignoble cockroach! In terms of text-based meaning making and language learning, however, once again, such a move is not a simple repetition, nor an unproductive recursion or relapse; it is yet another bump and another bend in the saccadic, spiraling process of collaborative interpretation and development of increasingly nuanced understanding.

DISCUSSION

At this point, we hope first to have persuaded our reader of the complex, nuanced fabric of literary meaning that Sayaka, Namie, Masami, and Yoko wove together in the span of scarcely ten minutes. The semantic web diagram presented in Figure 1, an artifact of our analytic process, graphically displays the intricacies and nuances of these students' semiotic work.

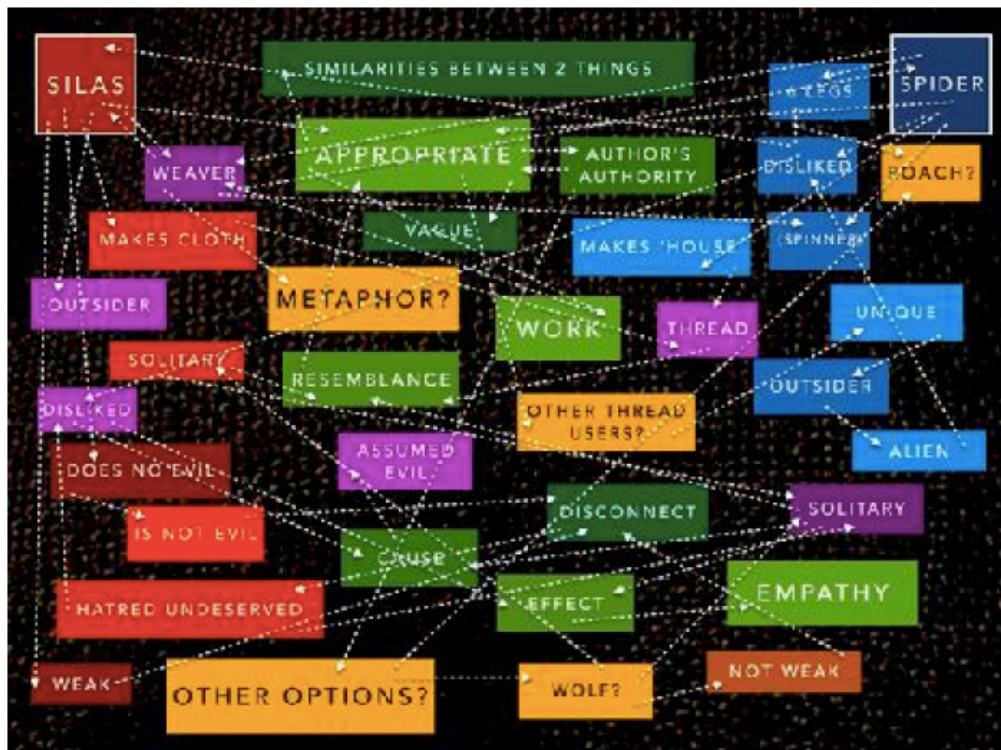


Figure 1. The graphically depicted semantic web of participants' meaning-making work

Without doubt, however, the original text of *Silas Marner* was for these individual students, in different ways and to different degrees, initially quite difficult to penetrate and intermittently perplexing throughout. Had their conceptual and linguistic burden been significantly lifted, moreover, they would almost certainly have made much shorter work both of reading the text and of answering the questions put to them in the prompt discussed above. Consider, for example, the following corresponding extract from a widely used graded version of *Silas Marner*, engineered for learners at Step Six/CEFR C3, matching generally the proficiency profile of our student-participants:

It was in this unhappy state that Silas had come to Raveloe. He had lost his faith in God and his fellow man. All that remained for him was work. *So he worked all day, every day, mindlessly, *like a spider spinning its web.* His customers paid him in coins of gold and silver, and he kept them in an iron pot.

*mindlessly: without a purpose

(Eliot, 2008, p. 22)

The comparison between Silas and the spider, as well as the basis for the appropriateness of the comparison, are set out in the graded reader in unambiguous terms. The answers rest on the surface, as it were; no digging required. The presented facts are these: spiders weave mindlessly; Silas weaves mindlessly; and the two are thus comparable. The comparison, by way of simple simile, is conceptually discrete and self-contained, even to the extent that 'mindlessly' itself is expressly, narrowly (and questionably) defined at the bottom of the page,

as ‘without a purpose’. In general, we find that graded texts—this being no exception—typically obviate the need for interpretation, and by design. As explained above, the design of the graded reader is centrally underpinned by an accepted set of co-constitutive or mutually reinforcing assumptions and conditions:

1. Level-appropriateness of texts enables facile, unimpeded, enjoyable, *fluent* reading;
2. Level-appropriateness is measurable and stratifiable, principally in terms of vocabulary frequencies;
3. Vocabulary frequency patterns identified through analysis of generic corpora (i.e., lexical evidence from the ‘wider world’) can be mapped onto specific literary texts as reliable indicators of difficulty level;
4. Literary texts can and should be reverse-engineered according to generic lexical frequency mappings to facilitate learners relatively unencumbered engagement with the text.

Our experience and that of our student-participants persuades us, though, that this textual redesign process—even bracketing out the “aesthetic and epistemic” compunctions mentioned in the *Conceptual Orientation* section (Para. 1) above—is ultimately problematic and self-defeating. The ‘semiotic logic’ of the graded-reader design unhappily conveys at least one ‘epistemological commitment,’ applying Kress’s (2003, 2010) phrase; specifically, as the mindless spider example above should illustrate, the validity of the lexically graded textual reformulation hinges on the requirement that a certain percentage of vocabulary items in the text are ‘known’ to the reader, and a tiny percentage are not. This is how level-appropriateness is systematically defined and designed, in terms of quantifiably, generically distinct lexical items and their decontextualized, immutable ‘dictionary’ meanings. The implied effect at the level of textual meaning-making, then, is to privilege denotation over connotation, comprehension (in the restricted sense of decoding) over interpretation, fluency over understanding (cf. Swaffar, 1985). To put it yet another, metaphorical way, the necessary inclusion and generic identification of *acer saccharum*, *pseudotsuga menziesii*, and other pre-selected tree species in a given grouping can make it all too easy to ignore the actual forest that these arboreal tokens together comprise.

Revisiting our central claim, then, we suggest that fostering fluency for its own sake—unaccompanied by negotiation and radial extension and connection of varied meanings, which may be intertextual, personal, metaphorical, historical, and so forth—is unhelpful. It may also be harmful, in fact, in reinforcing wrongheaded assumptions about words just *meaning what they mean*; about meaning in literature and other texts residing on the page, merely in the words, waiting to be retrieved; about the need for texts to be superficially and breezily comprehensible to be engagingly, enjoyably read.

A more helpful construct and aim than reading fluency, we suggest, may actually be ‘dysfluency.’ ‘Cognitive dysfluency,’ a construct developed within cognitive and experimental psychology, is described by Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley and Eyre (2007) as one of two main processing systems for human reasoning. The first system governs cognitive processes that are fast, effortless, and intuitive (i.e., fluent). The second system pertains to ‘dysfluent’ processes, which are slower, more intentional, and involve conscious analysis. These

researchers have found increasing evidence in recent years for the beneficial nature and importance of dysfluency—activated by communicative and cognitive difficulty, disruption, and disjuncture—in promoting capacities for metacognition, critical awareness, making logical (e.g., syllogistic) connections, and other modes of deeper, more deliberate reasoning (Alter et al., 2007; Alter, 2013). We, for our part, saw these conclusions similarly manifest in the text-based discussion examined herein. In the Interaction Segments above, we clearly see the participants pressing against the boundaries of lexical meaning; judging the applicability of heuristic explanations to concretely represented situations; testing the appropriateness and limits of metaphorical relationships; and even discursively constructing a presently fit-for-purpose definition of appropriateness itself. Through all of these twists and turns—not despite, but *because of* the blind alleys, false leads, misapprehensions, and misconceptions they dysfluently negotiated—these students co-created a tapestry of text-based meaning both singular and, we believe, stunningly rich.

Our final, and perhaps most vital point, then, is that these students did not only co-design rich qualities of meaning; another indispensable product of their cooperation was communicative and cognitive *dysfluency itself*. The dysfluencies that precipitated metacognitive and meta-communicative engagement, critical examination, and productive negotiation on these students' parts were, in a real sense, emergent *gestalten*; both the process and product of their semiotic work were fundamentally collaborative in nature. For this reason, too, engagement with graded readers, typically prescribed according to a student's individually assessed proficiency level, are ill disposed toward, or perhaps preclude, the emergence of productive, 'collaborative dysfluency.'

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we acknowledge that this article does not and cannot comprehensively examine first-hand the apparent meaning-making affordances of all or most graded readers, and so our judgments to this effect rest mainly on prior research in the field. The principal original contribution we have sought to make, however, has been in documenting and describing in some detail the rich and varied opportunities for meaning making and learning that a seemingly level-*inappropriate* (in the sense of level-appropriateness that governs graded readers) authentic literary text actually did provide, and which even the highest-level graded approximation—due to in-built design limitations, born of incompatible fluency-oriented aims—would imaginably not easily afford. Notwithstanding this key point, we also now recognize that easily afforded meaning is, in another important sense, perhaps a thing to consciously, deliberately avoid, opting instead for the rockier, more productive path of dysfluency—a path all the rockier, and so also all the more productive, when it is not traveled alone.

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