Enabling Higher-Level Thinking Process in ESL Reading:

An Examination of Three Instructional Approaches

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Abstract

Recent research on reading has focused on various approaches to classroom discussion as a means for enhancing students' reading comprehension. Most of this work, however, has been done with students for whom English is the first language (L1 learners). The purpose of this study was to review and discuss three currently most prominent approaches to classroom discussion and comprehension in reading research that have implications for English Language Learners (L2 learners). They are Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) *Instructional Conversations*, Raphael's (1997) *Book Clubs*, and Short's (1995) *Literature Circles*. Through a close meta-analysis of 11 seminal empirical studies on these three instructional methods, this study attempted to answer the following questions to achieve a better understanding of how to enhance the higher-order thinking process in ESL reading: (1) What theoretical frameworks motivate the use of these approaches with L2 learners, and (2) what are the possibilities and limitations for discussion approaches to enhancing reading comprehension for L2 learners? This survey on evidence-based studies concerning Instructional Conversations, Book Clubs, and Literature Circles revealed that ESL learners significantly benefited from these teaching approaches. Specifically, the strength of Book Clubs and Literature Circles is their employment of children's literature as teaching and reading materials, which meets children's love for stories and thus enhances their motivation for reading. On the other hand, the specialty of Instructional Conversations lies in combining native-English speaking students and ESL students in a regular subject class. Implications for practical ESL reading teaching and suggestions for further research are provided.

Key Words: Second Language Learning, ESL reading, reading comprehension, higher-level thinking, group discussion, Book Clubs, Literature Circles, Instructional Conversations

To many English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners, reading may be the most important of the four skills in language arts because reading is the foundation of learning, whether in academics or daily experience. Especially in the English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) situation, acquiring the ability to read may be the main motivation why millions of students around the world study English. It follows that how to effectively and efficiently improve students' reading comprehension in English as a second language is a great challenge.

As Garcia (2003) points out, most ESL reading comprehension instruction has been derived or adapted from teaching reading practice for native-English readers, except for a few programs that are designed exclusively for English-language learners. Garcia (2003) reviewed several ESL reading pedagogies for improving comprehension: literature-based practices in English, reciprocal teaching (question-answer-relationship instruction), cognitive strategy lessons, Collaborative Strategic Reading, and content-based instruction especially for secondary ESL students. Among them, classroom discussion seems salient, since it works well as an essential teaching component across various instructional projects.

A large number of researchers have testified to and assessed the efficacy of classroom discussion on ESL readers' comprehension performance. However, there is no comprehensive review of those studies, to date.[1] The main purpose of this paper is to conduct a review of recent studies that address the effects of classroom discussion on English-language learners' reading

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[1] Brock (1997) conducted a review of three empirical studies on second-language learners' participation in the Book Clubs program.

comprehension. This review attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the implications of using classroom discussion as a means of fostering comprehension for ESL learners?

2. Can classroom discussion benefit ESL learners' L2 language proficiency and reading abilities?

3. If so, what theoretical frameworks of L2 literacy learning might explain these benefits for ESL learners?

In order to answer these questions, I focus on reviewing the literature in three areas: (a) theories concerning second-language learning (SLL) and second-language reading; (b) studies on reading comprehension strategies teaching; and (c) empirical research on classroom discussion as an approach to ESL reading.

SECOND-LANGUAGE READING ACQUISITION
Second-Language Learning Theories

The aim of this section is to provide a general sketch of second-language learning theory.[2] According to Mitchell and Myles (1998), the development of second-language learning research since the 1950s can be divided into three main phases. SLL research initially began as a branch of pedagogical research, rather than as an autonomous field of inquiry. Hence, a salient characteristic of SLL study is that it is interdisciplinary, especially under the influence of linguistics and psychology. From the 1950s to the 1960s, structuralism and behaviorism dominated the field of SLL research. Linguistic structuralism held the notion of language as a set of structural patterns. Hence, it placed great emphasis on meticulously investigating the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 in terms of linguistic properties. Such an investigation is known as a contrastive analysis (CA).

From the structuralist perspective, the focus of SLL is on learning cross-linguistic differentiation. Corresponding to this structuralist view, behaviorism claimed that language learning was nothing more than the formation of habits through stimulus, response, and reinforcement (Skinner, 1957). This behaviorist view of learning, in combination with linguistic structuralism, led to the view that effective second-language learning was to concentrate on repeated practice in the areas of difference between L1 and L2. As a consequence, the major task of second-language teaching was to promote the formation of language habits, i.e., to transmit language skills through drills.

However, such a mechanical view of language teaching was severely criticized and dubbed the "skill, drill, and kill" model: tedious drilling practices only surmised students' learning interest before students could benefit from learning by rote (Ellis, 1994). Furthermore, this conventional notion of language acquisition was also challenged by Chomsky's (1965) pioneering concept of language acquisition device (LAD). That is to say, language learning undergoes an internal route, rather than working through mimicking the surface structure of language. The Chomskyan revolution in linguistics broke down the previous emphasis upon the superficial structure of language. Moreover, the behaviorist view of language learning was displaced by Piaget's (1970) cognitive developmental theory.

In the 1970s, psycholinguistics initiated the second phase of research on SLL. During this period, there was an explosion of various strands of studies: interlanguage study, morpheme studies, Krashen's Monitor Model, and Schumann's pidginization and acculturation model. Interlangauge study focused on the errors L2 learners committed, systematically conducting error analysis (EA). From L2 learners' errors, EA attempted to conceptualize the transfer between L1 and L2, concluding that negative transfer, or the interference of L1 in acquiring L2, can lead to errors, while positive transfer can produce the facilitation of L1 in learning L2. Morpheme studies continued to explore the relationship between L1 and L2. Through a systematic comparison of the L2 learning process between learners from multiple cultural and linguistic

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[2] Dulay, Burt, Krashen (1982) and Selinker (1992) provide thorough reviews on the theoretical evolution of second language acquisition.

backgrounds, it appeared that there existed a consistent acquisition sequence of L2, which was independent of L2 learners' L1, and similar to native speaker's learning order (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). Based on morpheme studies, Krashen (1978) proposed the Monitor Model with five major hypotheses: (a) the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis; (b) the Monitor Hypothesis; (c) the Natural Order Hypothesis; (d) the Input Hypothesis; and (e) the Affective Filter Hypothesis.[3]

Schumann (1978) proposed his pidginization/acculturation model in the late 1970s. His main idea was that the closer a learner came to the target language, the more easily s/he would be acculturated. Otherwise, the language he learned would be pidginized. Schumann's model played an important role in ushering in the sociocultural perspective to the field of SLL research, since he highlighted the importance of the social and psychological variables in language learning.

During the third phase, running from the 1980s to the present, SLL research has evolved as a field of inquiry in its own right. No longer restricted in the research line of curricular planning and teaching pedagogy, it investigates some basic issues as summarized by Mitchell and Myles (1998): (a) the role of cognitive mechanisms of language acquisition; (b) the role of first language; (c) the role of psychological variables; and (d) the role of social and environmental factors. Cognitive science and sociocultural theory of learning were brought forth to explore these areas.

From the cognitive perspective, Cummins (1981) proposed the concept of a common underlying proficiency (CUP) to contrast the idea of a separate underlying proficiency (SUP). CUP refers to the ability to transfer capacity and knowledge from one language to another in the process of acquiring a second language, while SUP means that what we acquire in one language is stored as one independent part of human cognition and is unlikely to be retrieved when we are learning another language. Cummins's research findings support a common, not separate, underlying proficiency. Consequently, Cummins's theory is more than often cited to justify the use of native language in second-language teaching and learning and bilingual education.

Another important theoretical perspective in the study of second-language learning is sociocultural constructivism in the mid 1980s (Thorne, 2000). Researchers who hold to this constructive perspective believe that social context and cultural factors contribute to L2 learning and are not less important than the cognitive aspect. Vygotsky's (1978) concepts of mediated mind, internalization, inner speech, and zone of proximal development open new avenues in the field of second-language acquisition.[4]

The following section reviews the recent history of theories of reading in English as a second language.[5] The purpose of this section is to clarify the relationship between SLL study and ESL reading research, examining whether there is a generic relationship between these two sister academic disciplines.

Theories of Reading in English as a Second Language

In the 1960s, studies on L2 reading tended to regard reading as a passive process. L2 reading emphasized the bottom-up model of decoding to reconstruct the author's intended meanings from text. L2 reading comprehension problems were addressed as being decoding

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[3] Acquisition is "spontaneous, focus on message," whereas learning is analytical, critical, non-spontaneous focus on form of message, covert output of acquiring knowledge. "Learning has only one function, that is, as a monitor or editor." The Monitor "is thought to change the output of the acquired system before or after the utterance is actually written or spoken." The Natural Order Hypothesis proposes that "we acquired the rules of language in a predicable order, some rules tending to come early and others late." The Input Hypothesis suggests that "we move along the developmental continuum by receiving comprehensible input" and so "comprehension input is defined as L2 input just beyond the learner's current L2 competence, in terms of its syntactic complexity." The Affective Filter Hypothesis theorizes about "to let the input in," and "how receptive to comprehensible input a leaner is going to be." That is to address the "relationship between affective variable (attitude, stress, pressure, and self-esteem) and the process of SLA."

[4] For a detailed discussion of the application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning to SLL research, see Lantolf's (2000) monograph entitled *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*.

[5] For a detailed history of L2 reading research see Carrell's (1996) article.

issues. Since the 1970s, L2 reading has been thought of as an active process, sometime after an interactive process has been recognized in English as a first language. Goodman's (1967, 1971) psycholinguistic model, which treated reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, began to impact English L1 reading. The model asserts that the major task of a reader is to reconstruct meaning from the text through using the graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic rules of the language. A skilled reader "merely used cues from these three levels of language to predict meanings, and most important, confirms them by relating them to his or her past experiences and knowledge of the language" (Carrell, 1996, p. 3). Although Goodman did not initially relate his theory to ESL reading, L2 reading research widely adopted Goodman's model.

Afterwards, the top-down processing perspective became prevalent in ESL reading research. In addition to Goodman's psycholinguistic model, other interactive theories on reading in English as a first language were also appropriated by the L2 reading research community: Rumelhart's (1977) interactive-activation model, Stanvoich's (1980) interactive-compensatory model, Taylor and Taylor's (1983) bilateral cooperative model, LaBerge and Samuel's (1974) autonomous-processing model, Perfetti's (1985) verbal-efficiency model and Anderson and Pearson's (1984) schema-theoretic model. This wholesale application of theories of English L1 reading to the situation of ESL reading illustrates that ESL reading research generally accepts the view that reading is an interactive process, where readers are active participants in constructing meanings and that meaning building is fundamentally based on the textual clues as well as readers' background knowledge and prior experience.

To sum up, the development of L2 reading research can be thought of as the stepchild of the study on reading in English as a first language because L2 reading research largely depends on the theories of reading in English as L1. The underlying logic of such dependence on theoretical foundation might be due to the fact that the L2 reading research community generally agrees on the viewpoint that the L2 reading process is the same as that of reading in English as a first language (Bernhardt, 2003).[6] It is reasonable to conclude that L2 reading research is not generically derived from SLL research, but has descended from the research tradition of English L1 reading.

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES TO L2 READING COMPREHENSION

Several factors are evidently attributed to reading comprehension: decoding abilities (phonemic awareness, phonetic skills, letter recognition), vocabulary development, knowledge of text structures, world knowledge (background knowledge and prior experiences), and reading strategies (Pressley, 1998). Among these, reading strategies play a crucial role in higher-level processing in comprehending text information. From verbal protocol study on skilled readers, several comprehension strategies have been identified: prediction, questioning, criticizing, evaluation, clarification, and summarizing (Pressley, 2000). Thus, comprehension strategies instruction becomes a pressing issue in reading acquisition.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, comprehension strategies instruction first set out to teach students individual reading strategies.[7] Afterwards came reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) with the goal of fostering a package of comprehension strategies, consisting of predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing skills. In addition, direct explanation strategy instruction (Roehler & Duffy, 1984) and transactional strategies instruction (Presseley et al., 1992) aimed to teach multiple reading strategies. The most critical objective of comprehension strategies instruction, regardless of whether single or multiple comprehension strategies are taught, is to have students articulate and internalize these strategies to the degree of their automatic, self-regulated use.

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[6] For a criticism on this debate whether L2 reading process is the same as that of English as a native language reading, see Bernhardt (2003).

[7] Individual strategies proven effective in enhancing reading performance are: prior knowledge activation, question generation during reading, construction of mental images, summarization, analyzing stories into grammar components (Pressley, 2000).

The application of Palincsar and Brown's (1984) reciprocal teaching to ESL reading has shown a mixed success. This is the first wave of research on ESL reading comprehension instruction. Studies conducted by Cotterall (1990) and Dashwood and Mangubhai (1996) indicated that their ESL students made no significant improvement in reading comprehension after receiving reciprocal teaching interventions. However, in Klingner and Vaughn's (1996) study, their seventh- and eighth-grade Hispanic ESL students benefited from the reciprocal teaching treatment on reading comprehension.

In light of Klingner and Vaughn's (1996) suggestion to reduce L2 readers' English language burdens when learning reading strategies, Fung, Wilkinson, and Moore (2002) investigated the effects of Ll-assisted reciprocal teaching on sixth- and seventh-grade Taiwanese ESL students' comprehension of English expository texts. The intervention comprised the alternate use of LI (Mandarin) and L2 (English) reciprocal teaching procedures. After 15-20 days of instructional interventions, students made significant progress in their scores on both researcher-developed and standardized tests of reading comprehension. Scripts of students' think-aloud during the course of reading provided evidence of qualitative changes in their comprehension processes when reading L1 and L2 texts.

Another wave of research on ESL reading strategies teaching has been to use the small-group discussion as an instructional means to foster higher-level thinking skills. In contrast to the method of reciprocal teaching, this classroom discussion method takes a more holistic approach to enhance reading comprehension, rather than emphasize teaching of discrete comprehension strategies. It is also less structured. In other words, this classroom discussion approach is not isolated skills-based instruction, but reading strategies are tacitly embedded within teaching and discussion activities.

In the field of English L1 reading comprehension research, Wilkinson and his colleagues (in press) identified 10 teaching approaches with emphasis on classroom discussion to develop students' reading strategies and develop their higher-order thinking skills: Book Clubs, Collaborative Reasoning, Dialogical-Thinking Reading Lessons, Instructional Conversations, Junior Great Books, Literature Circles, Philosophy for Children, Questioning the Author, and Paideia Seminar.[8] Among them, Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations are consistently applied to develop ESL readers' comprehension.

Book Clubs (Raphael et al., 1997) and Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002; Short, 1995) are literature-based reading programs. Both instructional literacy programs were originally designed for native-English speakers, but later were applied to English-language learners. On the other hand, Instructional Conversations (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999) is a content-based reading program, which was initially developed for Spanish-speaking students receiving a transitional bilingual education.

Now I will turn to review studies that respectively apply Book Club, Literature Circle, and Instructional Conversation approaches to ESL reading. A comprehensive search of ERIC database and Digital Dissertation Abstracts shows that 11 seminal works have investigated the effects of these approaches on ESL reading comprehension. The criteria used for selecting the studies were (a) classroom discussion used as an instructional method, (b) evidence-based assessment of reading comprehension, and (c) subjects of ESL learners. Studies fall into three overall categories of group discussion: Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations. The following is a review of empirical studies on these three instructional methods. The review follows a brief introduction to each approach.

Book Clubs

McMahon and Raphael (1997) define Book Clubs as a "group of three to five students

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[8] Ian Wilkinson, Anna Soter, and Karen Murphy are conducting a study to "identify converging evidence on the use of group discussion to promote high-level comprehension of text and to advance understanding of how teachers can implement discussions and assess their effects in ways that are sensitive to instructional goals" (quoted in Sweet, 2003, p. 211).

who meet to discuss a common reading, including specific chapters from longer books. They share personal responses, clarify confusing aspects of the reading, create interpretations, discuss author's intent, etc." (p. xii). In classroom activities, the Book Clubs project integrates five elements into a comprehensive literacy program: reading, writing, instruction, community share (whole-class discussions), and student-led discussion groups.

Raphael and Brock's (1993) case study described the participation of a Vietnamese fifth-grade L2 learner, Mei, in a Book Clubs program. Sources of data about Mei from third through fifth grades included her reading logs, journal entries, audio- and videotapes of her Book Club discussions, researcher's field notes, and interviews with Mei, her teachers, and her family. Three target Book Club discussions chosen from the entire data set were analyzed. Results indicate that Mei's discussions changed over time in the increased depth and level of her comments, along with an increased amount of overall contributions to the Book Club. The findings suggest that a Book Club is a valuable learning context for L2 learners to experience authentic opportunities of communication, learn to use academic discourse to discuss texts, and enhance higher level thinking skills.

Goatley, Brock, and Raphael (1995) continued to trace Mei's participation in the Book Club. This study attempted to explore the process of meaning construction of Mei's Book Club group where she worked with four fifth-grade students. The findings showed that the Book Club offered Mei the opportunity to practice English as her new language, engage in complex thinking, and articulate her thoughts with the support of her peers. In terms of language learning and thinking development, Mei substantially benefited from small-group interactions during literature discussions.

Brock, McVee, Shojgreen-Downer, and Duenas (1998) were particularly interested in exploring how Book Clubs could be used to provide L2 students with literacy learning opportunities. In this case study, the researchers examined how Adriana, a third-grade, monolingual Spanish-speaking, migrant student from Mexico, participated in a six-week Book Club summer program in a classroom where 27 students were bilingual in Spanish and English, and the remaining 4 students were native English speakers. The researchers focused mainly on Adriana's written work before and after small-group discussions. The results revealed that her written assignments were simply literal interpretations of the book or summaries of story events, which were not as satisfactory as anticipated. As a result, the focus student did not benefit from the instruction. Through further analysis of Adriana's unsuccessful performance, the researchers concluded that several factors affected the creation of literacy learning opportunities for English-language learners in this Book Club approach: the language of instruction, degree of English proficiency, differing concept of literacy task of the student from that of her teacher's, and the teacher's lack of "professional understanding of how to work effectively using the interpretive process" (p. 195), when the teacher has no knowledge of the students' native languages.

The purpose of Kong and Fitch's (2002) study was to investigate how students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds learned to participate in and benefit from Book Club discussions. This Book Club reading program was implemented in a combined classroom composed of ten fifth-grade students and fifteen fourth-grade students, among whom six were Vietnamese, four Hmong, four multiracial, three Caucasian, three Latino, three Haitian, one Somali, and one Bosnian. Data were collected over one school year, including instruction-based assessment like students' writing logs, vocabulary sheets, and self-evaluation, and standardized tests like the Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT) and the Meta-comprehension Strategy Index (Schmitt, 1990). Data analysis revealed that learning opportunities in the Book Club were beneficial to these diverse students. Students were pushed to think critically and reflectively about what they read by writing responses to interpretive "fat, juicy" questions. In addition, pre- and posttests of the Solomon Oral Reading Test (SORT) indicated that "[t]here was an average gain of 37.2 words in raw score, which is equivalent to 1.8 years of growth. About 95% of the students gained more than one year of growth in reading vocabulary" (p. 360). A Meta-comprehension Strategy Index also showed that "students especially improved their strategy use in

self-questioning, drawing from background knowledge, summarizing and applying fix strategies, and predicting and verifying" (p. 360). Obviously, Book Clubs produced significant effects on improving students' higher-level processing like reading strategies as well as lower-level reading skills like vocabulary growth.

Taken together, these studies on Book Clubs have tested or evaluated the efficacy of group discussions as an instructional approach to L2 reading. In general, they indicated that English-language learners can substantially benefit from the teacher's instruction, reading literature, writing response to the book, and participating in small-group and whole-class discussions.

Literature Circles

Similar to the grouping of Book Clubs, Literature Circles are also peer-led, small, and temporary discussion groups. According to Short's (1995) definition, Literature Circles offer "a curricular structure to support children in exploring their rough understanding of literature with other readers" and the object of this approach is to educate children "to become reflective and critical thinkers and readers" (p. x-xi). In practice, the main characteristics of this approach are: (a) "students choose their own reading materials," (b) "small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice," (c) "discussion topics come from the students," and (d) "group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books" (Daniel, 2002, p. 18). That is, four to eight participants of varied reading abilities form a discussion group. This heterogeneous grouping reflects Vygotsky's (1978) concept of learning through interaction with more skilled others. Students are allowed to choose what they like to read from teacher-provided trade books. This autonomous book choice can cultivate students' literacy ownership and allows them to assume learning responsibility.

Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson (1999) explored two questions: "Can first-grade bilingual students think and talk thoughtfully about literature?" and "What kind of talk do the children engage in as they discuss quality children's books?" They implemented Literature Circles in a first-grade class where more than half of 25 students were bilingual in English and Spanish. This 30-minute, small-group literature discussion was conducted weekly over four months. The researchers participated in and audiotaped a total of 13 literature circle discussions, some of which were transcribed as data. Data analysis indicated that four most frequent types of student responses in discussion were categorized: (a) "living through the experience"; (b) "looking closely at text and illustrations"; (c) "exploring social issues"; and (d) "making connections to prior knowledge and previous experiences." Moreover, the students were reported to enjoy their literature discussions and look forward to them. The results suggested that these bilingual students "were not only learning language and learning about language, but also learning through language" (p. 281). This finding breaks down the misconceptions that first graders are too young to think and that limited English proficiency (LEP) learners are premature to engage in higher-level thinking.

Peralta-Nash and Dutch (2000) investigated how Literature Circles nurtured native- and second-language learning for all students. The researchers conducted a one-school-year teaching project with twenty-eight fourth graders. Thirteen students were of Mexican/Latino origin and ten out of these thirteen students were limited-English-proficient. The other fifteen students were fluent in English. Data came mainly from the scripts of students' group discussions. Data analysis showed that students learned to assume responsibility for their learning. In addition, they were able to have in-depth discussions about the text. Students' discussions gradually became more complex as they inactivated their background knowledge, connected their personal experiences with the story, and built on each other's understanding. Moreover, bilingual students took more risks reading in their second language in order to share their responses with the other monolingual group members.

Although empirical studies on applying Literature Circles to L2 reading are not abundant to date, research has clearly demonstrated that this teaching format is beneficial to some populations of English-language learners. More research is needed to examine the feasibility of Literature Circles to second-language students at various levels.

Instructional Conversations

Instructional Conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, 1989, 1991; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1992) are also small-group discussions where teachers and students meet to discuss the themes of the unit, students' written responses to reading, and related personal experiences. This model of literacy pedagogy has five instructional elements: thematic focus, activation and use of background and relevant schema, direct teaching, promotion of more complex language and expression, and elicitation of bases for statements or positions. The five conversational elements of this pedagogy are fewer k*nown-answer* questions, responsiveness to student contributions, connected discourse, a challenging but not-threatening atmosphere, and general participation, including self-selected turns (Saunders, Patthey-Chavez, & Goldenberg 1997). These dimensions as a whole are beneficial to students because through peer discussion, students can build on each other's comprehension, knowledge, and experiences. Teachers can also benefit from participating in discussion with students in terms of improving their teaching practices because they can "(a) hear students articulate their understanding of the story, theme(s), and related personal experiences; and (b) in the process of facilitating the discussion, challenge but also help students to enrich and deepen their understandings" (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999, p. 297).

Saunders, Patthey-Chavez, and Goldenberg (1997) conducted a formative experiment, where twenty-four fourth-grade students transitioning from Spanish to English read an English short story. Next, the students were given an Instructional Conversation or basal-like reading comprehension lesson. The results of the study revealed that students in both groups achieved equivalent levels of literal comprehension, but essays of the students in the Instructional Conversation group demonstrated a more complex and differentiated understanding of concepts. These findings imply that quality classroom discussion can help L2 learners develop higher-level comprehension without sacrificing literal comprehension.

Saunders and Goldenberg (1999) investigated the effects of literature logs and instructional conversations used to study literature. One hundred sixteen fourth- and fifth-grade limited-English-proficiency (LEP) and fluent-English-proficiency (FEP) students were randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions: (a) literature logs only; (b) instructional conversation only; (c) literature log + instructional conversation; and (d) control. Posttests indicated significant differences among treatment groups. Students in the instructional conversation and literature log + instructional conversation groups achieved significantly higher scores on story comprehension than the control group. In addition, students in all three experimental groups performed a better understanding of the story themes than the control group. LEP students benefited greatly from the combined effects of literature logs and instructional conversations, but no such effect was produced for FEP students. In brief, besides factual understanding, this study provided evidence to support the effects of instructional conversation and literature log on promoting interpretive comprehension.

Echevarria and McDonough (1995) examined the instructional conversation approach in a special educational setting. In this study the participants, ranging from six to ten years old, were twelve LEP Hispanic students labeled as "learning disabled." The results indicated that the instructional conversation approach seemed appropriate for students with learning disabilities. In such a special educational setting, some salient features of Instructional Conversations included (a) providing opportunities for language development; (b) presenting lessons in a holistic manner; (c) connecting students' background knowledge to the text; and (d) creating a meaningful context for interaction that fostered language development. Instructional Conversations provided students with valuable opportunities for "language development (in both the child's first and second language), reading comprehension, and understanding of important concepts" (p. 118).

Perez (1996) introduced and organized Instructional Conversations in a class composed of sixteen second- and third-grade students who are acquiring English as a second language. Instead of doing drills, children were engaged in interactive discussions, in which the children initiated topics of their interest, talking about concepts from contents, and learned language that is

related to the content. The results showed that these students successfully acquired the second language as they built upon each other's ideas, knowledge, and experiences.

The purpose of Olezza's (1999) dissertation was to investigate high school students' cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) learning through Instructional Conversations. The participants were sixty L2 learners ranging from grades nine through twelve, enrolled in an intermediate ESL course in a bilingual program. The results suggested that through discussions with their teacher and peers, these students drew on their background knowledge and constructed meaning to understand complex contents. Moreover, Instructional Conversations promoted the learning and practice of content lexicon.

As a whole, these reviewed studies provide confirmatory evidence for the benefits of Instructional Conversations to English-language learners. The available evidence suggests that students who use Instructional Conversations made substantial progress in literacy skills and thinking abilities.

Key Findings among the Studies

In this section, I will sketch some of the main findings among the selected studies on Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations. In general, these approaches create a context where students can practice their second language to generate genuine communication. This use of language in meaningful ways further helps students develop cognitive skills. This is because L2 learners need to try to use their second language to reason, argue, or debate with their peers through group discussions. In so doing, students will engage in complex thinking while acquiring a second language. Through content-based discussion, their second-language learning will not be simplistic or concentrated on lower-level sub-skills. In this way, second-language acquisition and academic cognitive ability can be developed simultaneously.

At the core of the approaches of Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations is the social constructivist view of learning. These approaches draw on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory: the social nature of learning and learning through interaction with more knowledgeable others. From this sociocultural perspective, peer discussions play an important role in building meanings and constructing knowledge. Students learn to act as knowledge constructors rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

Through collaborative reasoning and multiple interpretations in peer discussions, students gain metacognition about their reading. In other words, they become reflective readers. They learn how to strategically construct meanings from text, and know how much and how they understand or do not understand what they read. They can perceive themselves in the interactive process with a text. Such self-awareness of comprehension is helpful for strategic learning.

The Book Club, Literature Circle, and Instructional Conversation approaches are rich in their capacity to promote higher-order thinking abilities. Through productive discussions, students tacitly internalize comprehension strategies like activating background knowledge, linking prior experiences, and questioning and clarifying any confusion. In this way, students can achieve a better understanding of complex concepts. In the long run, they make gains in cognitive growth in addition to basic literacy skills.

CONCLUSIONS

This concluding section serves to offer answers to the research questions, address instructional implications, and make suggestions for further research.

Answers to Research Questions

I will address the first research question, "What are the implications of classroom discussion as a means of fostering comprehension for ESL learners?" in terms of theory and practice. In theory, the social constructivist view of learning and the notion of reading as interactive are critical to ESL reading comprehension instruction. With respect to constructivism, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning has been widely adopted as a theoretical framework

of Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations.[9] According to Vygotsky, these discussion-based instructional approaches attempt to create an amiable classroom setting within which students can maximize their zone of proximal development. Through interaction with more skilled peers or the scaffolding of the teacher, students actively achieve comprehension and construct knowledge.

What students acquire through these instructional discussions is not discrete literary skills, but holistic comprehension strategies. To reflect this, a notion of reading as interactive is adopted. This interaction lies between reader and text, and lower- and higher-level processing.[10] For instance, during group discussions, students collaboratively construct meanings from text. Meanings are no longer regarded as inherently residing in text. Rather, meanings result from interaction between text and readers. To that purpose, students initiate text-reader interaction by activating their background knowledge and prior experiences. At the same time, students negotiate meanings among their peers. This is another form of among-students interaction in reading.

In addition to the interactive relations between text and reader as well as among readers, reading also needs the interaction of various component skills. Both lower- and higher-level processing abilities are necessary to achieve comprehension. Students not only depend on decoding skills, but also draw on comprehension strategies. Going beyond literal comprehension, students analyze, question, criticize, and clarify texts.

In practice, students are critically engaged with a text. Through such text-reader interactions, they can achieve reading comprehension. Furthermore, it is through peer discussions that students have abundant opportunities to learn, practice, and even internalize comprehension strategies.

There is no conclusive answer to the second research question, "Can classroom discussion benefit ESL learners' L2 language proficiency and reading abilities?" However, the available evidence suggests the potential of classroom discussion to promote higher-level thinking skills in L2 reading. Indeed, L2 readers, including SL learners, LEP students, and bilingual children, benefit from Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations. Although the gains on the reading performance of literal comprehension vary according to individual approaches, the benefits on higher-order thinking are quite certain, as mentioned earlier.

With regard to the third research question, "If classroom discussion benefits ESL learners' L2 language proficiency and reading abilities, what theoretical frameworks of L2 literacy learning might explain these benefits for ESL learners?" Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations did not heavily draw on specific SLL theories except Cummins's (1984, 1991) hypothesis of linguistic threshold and interdependence and Krashen's (1981, 1985) notion of comprehensible input, which are partially quoted in Table 1. This phenomenon is not surprising because second-language acquisition and L2 reading have their own history in origin and evolution as a field of discipline. As a consequence, these two research communities–second-language learning and L2 reading–independently have theoretical concerns and research agenda. Only recently have both fields agreeably borrowed Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to explore their issues of interest.

Instructional implications

Although we need to know much more about classroom discussion as a teaching method of fostering reading comprehension of English-language learners, some instructional implications may be drawn from the reviewed research on Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations. Since Book Clubs and Literature Circles are literature-based reading programs, both literacy projects are especially applicable to elementary ESL students. Using children's literature as teaching and reading materials meets children's love for story and thus enhances their

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[9] At the core of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural thoughts are mediated mind, genetic domains, activity theory, and zone of proximal development. For a detailed discussion on the implication of Vygotsky's theory on SLL, see Lantolf (2000) and Mitchell and Myles (1998).

[10] Grabe's (1996) study provides a detailed discussion of interactive models of reading.

motivation for reading. In addition, children's literature has no concessions in language usage, text structure, and story content as basal readers do. In this way, children's books can offer young readers opportunities to comprehend authentic and challenging texts.

Another advantage of adopting children's literature in the literacy curriculum is to develop students' critical abilities through discussing controversial themes presented in the trade books. It is especially necessary for ESL students to develop their own voice in English as a second language. This is not an easy task for English-language learners. It is probably through classroom discussion as a format of *thinking and speaking* in English that they can achieve second-language proficiency as well as thinking skills.

In comparison with Book Clubs and Literature Circles, Instructional Conversations is more practicable for secondary ESL students because this approach is content-based instruction. This content-oriented instruction can help English-language learners at the secondary level to meet two major challenges, which Garcia (2003) and Faltis and Wolfe (1999) identified as highly academic demands and second-language proficiency. As a matter of fact, content area reading instruction is also vital to native-English adolescents (Alvermann & Eakle, 2003; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). The specialty of Instructional Conversations lies in combining native-English students and ESL students in a regular subject class. In this way, L2 students are not excluded from the mainstream classroom. Besides having rich opportunities to interact with native speakers to sharpen their second-language communicative skills, they can also develop their content knowledge and academic cognitive abilities.

Another merit of Instructional Conversations lies in creating a risk-free context where L1 and L2 students can participate equally in small-group discussions. Under such a democratic learning environment, English-language students can use their background knowledge, prior experiences, and even L1 literacy skills to make substantial contributions to content-area discussion. Therefore, ESL students are incorporated into a learning community, rather than pulled out to a remedial program. Such a program often results in weakening students' literacy abilities, as Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Mueller (2001) point out.

Within the learning community of Instructional Conversations, adolescent L2 students are integrated into mainstream classes, and their cultural backgrounds and L1 literacy are employed as a resource, rather than regarded as a barrier, for acquiring second-language literacy and content-area knowledge. For that reason, these ESL teenagers may have a strong sense of recognition of their ethnical backgrounds, instead of feeling subjugated and subordinated into mainstream culture and education. As a result, this teaching practice may be beneficial to ESL adolescents in developing their dignity, identity, and self-respect. Correspondingly, because of the positive affective factors, the students' learning motivation might be increased.[11]

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[11] Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, and Muller (2001) hold that an ideal model of literacy instruction for L1 adolescents should take into account social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions and integrate these four dimensions into metacognitive conversation in teaching practices.

Table 1

Second Language Learning (SLL) Theory Cited in the Reviewed Studies on Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations

Source	Theories Cited
Ralphael & Brock (1993)	Garcia (1990)—natural interaction; Cummins (1984)—conversational language proficiency and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)
Goatley, Brock, & Raphael (1995)	Gee (1992)—learning the discourse practices of the mainstream community; Cummins (1994)—formal and informal content-embedded interaction in regular education classroom
Brock, McVee, Shojgreen-Downer, & Duenas (1998)	Charmot & O'Malley (1986), Cummins (1994)—second language learning through meaningful interaction in an authentic context
Kong & Fitch (2002)	Widdowson (1984)—second language acquisition as code and cultural learning; Cummins (1984)—the importance of native language in second language development; Snow et al. (1998)—literacy instruction in native language first
Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertsaon (1999)	No specific SLL theory cited
Peralta-Nash & Dutch (2000)	Cummins (1989), Wong-Fillmore & Valadez (1985), Krashen (1982)—the important role of mother tongue in developing academic skills before acquiring L2 academic skills
Saunders, Patthey-Chavez, & Goldenberg (1997)	No specific SLL theory cited
Saunders & Goldenberg (1999)	No specific SLL theory cited
Echevarria & McDonough (1995)	Cummins (1984, 1989), Ortiz (1986), Ortiz & Wilkinson (1991)—moving away from reductionism paradigm toward interactive approaches that are more holistic in nature
Perez (1996)	Krashen (1993)—"Conversational language doesn't make a large contribution to academic success"
Olezza (1999)	Cummins (1979, 1991)—basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP); Cummins (1993)—communicative interaction; Krashen (1981, 1985)—comprehensible input

Suggestions for Future Research

Research on Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations provides valuable insights into the ESL reading instruction, but there are some limitations. The studies reviewed here were all conducted in the United States, where English is the primary communicative language in education and society in general. Such an English-speaking environment is favorable to the development of L2 learners' language proficiency and thus may

tacitly contribute to their reading in English. In addition, some of the peers with whom these L2 learners interact in small group discussions are native-English speakers, and consequently they have more opportunities to achieve language learning through the support of more skilled others in terms of English language proficiency. These two factors may confound the effects of classroom discussion approaches. To remedy this, future research could investigate whether students in non-English-speaking countries can also benefit from these literacy programs of Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Instructional Conversations.

Another possibility for future study would be to develop a specific model of L2 reading. Fitzgerald (2002) made a call for achieving "a grand theory of interconnected webs of theories" (p. 120). As noted earlier, the fields of SLL and L2 reading independently develop their research concerns. Such a parallel research line lacks interdisciplinary connection. Bernhardt (2002) was even more severe in her criticism. She criticized current research on L2 reading for remaining at a superficial understanding of L2 literacy development. She pointed out that "the instructional or surface structure of reading instruction" is not in question (p. 115). At issue is to understand how ESL readers undertake the comprehension process between L1 and L2. Their underlying mechanisms of linguistic transfer and cross-cultural inference may be the central focus of future research. In the same vein, Garcia (2003) identified four factors that "may uniquely characterize the English reading comprehension of English-language learners" (p. 33). These are "native-language literacy," "cross-linguistic transfer," "oral English proficiency and second-language status," and "bilingual status" (p. 33). She suggested that we need a better understanding of L2 readers' cognitive, cultural, and linguistic development to devise a unique pedagogy for L2 readers. Indeed, insufficient attention was paid to these areas in the past. How to explore these issues would be a considerable challenge for future L2 reading research.

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