

In the Loop of Meaning Making: Exploring the Impacts of Drama Strategies to Students' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract. This article presents a case of two students who worked individually and collaboratively by using two drama strategies for providing in depth meaning making after reading. The case study was part of a one-year study that investigated the integration of educational drama strategies in an Islamic school in United States. Drawing upon transactional theory of reading, research about educational drama, and strategic actions of text processing of reading, observations and personal interviews were the methods used to explain participants' actions and thinking strategies as they were reading a novel and preparing for a dramatic performance. Through discourse analysis of the interactions, the participants evidently shared some similar range of strategic actions like inquiring for more information, making connections, and responding to the classroom literature when individually read the texts, differing only in their text productions and styles of performance. Nevertheless, situated by their roles and the objectives of the dramatic performance, both students performed different strategic actions, such as thinking within, about, and beyond texts, while working together to create a dramatic performance. Though the study took place in English speaking country, this study could shed a light on teaching reading comprehension in ESL/EFL contexts.

Keywords: *Drama, Students, Reading, Comprehension*

1. INTRODUCTION

Drama has been widely recognized as valuable approach to teaching and learning. Researchers argue that educational drama strategies improve students' achievement outcomes and facilitate their creative expression.[1] Through drama activities, students have opportunities to reflect on personal values and communicate with others. In the contexts of English Language Arts (ELA) and English as a Second Language/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL), previous studies examined the significance of drama for improving speaking skill at the high school level and drama in English literature at the tertiary level.[2], [3] However, there is a dearth of studies examining the contribution of drama strategies in enhancing students' reading comprehension in the ESL/EFL contexts. An essential skill in learning English, reading requires complex strategies, including activating prior knowledge, making predictions, analyzing, monitoring and revising. Considering its complexity, most of ESL/EFL students found obstacles to improving their reading comprehension. Therefore, it is important to use of various types of reading strategies appropriate for students' needs in the ESL/EFL classrooms [4].

A study reported an important finding on the impacts of drama on ESL/EFL students' emotions and

imagination of self.[5] Less is known about students' strategic actions in meaning making from texts and in collaborative drama performance in the ESL/EFL classrooms. In the United States of America, ESL/EFL students make up 9.6 percent or 4.9 million students of the student population. There is a reported persistent academic achievement gaps between ESL/EFL students and their native English language-speaking peers from pre-kindergarten to the university level.[6] To address the gaps, it is necessary to implement effective and meaningful pedagogical strategies. Integrating drama strategies in reading lesson could be invaluable to ESL/EFL students in understanding the texts and interacting with their peers.

This article explores the experience of two fifth grade students' responses and their strategic actions in processing texts and in processing texts with other people in a school of the midwestern state of America. It examines the talk of two students as they collaborated to produce dramatic performances that are based in the books / texts they read individually and together. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: How do educational drama strategies support students in making meaning from texts? and How do students construct meaning in collaborative dramatic performance? By the end of the

article, recommendations is made on how the the experience of the two participants be implemented in the ESL/EFL's reading classes.

2. DRAMA AND READING COMPREHENSION

Evidence shows that drama or the integration of drama strategies has important contributions to improve students' learning and language competence in both English Language Arts (ELA) and English as a Second / Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classes [5], [7]. Current studies in the ESL/EFL context, however, only mentioned the contribution of drama in improving students' speaking skills or the vocabulary of the participating students. There has been insufficient studies that explored the contribution of drama activities in improving students' reading comprehension. A study which investigated the impacts of drama on students' emotions and imagination, could be a pioneer that highlight the support of drama on ESL/EFL students' reading comprehension[6].

The study applies a conceptual framework by Fountas and Pinnell's Systems of Strategic Actions (SOSA) wheel that illustrates readers' thinking engagement within the text, beyond the text, and about the text of readers that read in English as their first language[8]. In thinking within the text, readers solve words, monitor their understanding and correct errors, search for and use information, summarize it, maintain fluency, adjust their reading for various purposes and genres. In thinking beyond the text, readers infer unstated meaning, synthesize, make predictions and connections with personal, world knowledge and other texts. In thinking about the text, readers analyze the author's craft and structure, and critique the text. All of these activities are cognitive systems that occur in the head of readers and appear in their talks and behaviors.

Fountas and Pinnell, furthermore, highlight the importance of oral language in effective reading as "the most powerful system the young child brings to initial experiences with the reading process" [8], [9]. For more proficient readers, oral vocabulary appears when they talk about their reading by using the language of texts. However, despite the detailed suggestions for systematic assessment and leveled texts for guided reading by Fountas and Pinnell, the oral language practices of diverse readers have been vaguely explored. To fill the gap in the literature, this article includes the analysis of the oral language and

interaction of two students in the integrated drama activities during reading instructions.

3. METHOD

To study the interactions between the two participants with texts and as they were preparing dramatic performances, I, the first author, participated in the class' activities for one year. Twenty students of the fifth grade taking the Language Arts subject were aware of my presence and my position as a researcher and what I wanted to study. The class teacher identified and introduced me as a "brother" to the whole class because I practice the same faith. This article is not about the twenty students, identities, or the narrative of the socio-cultural interactions. Instead, it focuses on exploring the interactions between Maya and Heaven who responded to texts individually and performed strategic thinking as they collaborated to produce dramatic performances.

Maya and Heaven, 11-year-olds, are third generation Americans. Their grand parents immigrated from Palestine and Algeria and had their parents born in the United States. At homes, they were exposed with both Arabic and English books, TV programs, and music. In an interview, both students openly stated that they were more comfortable being exposed to media that uses English or delivered in English rather than the media that used Arabic, their grand parents' native language. On many occasions, Heaven, unlike Maya, admitted that she did not really enjoy reading literary works.

As a researcher, having gotten to know students' familial cultural background, I also observed the two students' interactions in the classroom closely. I sat around or close to them as they were working individually with texts and discussing assignments and books. I took notice their individual thinking processes when they responded to texts and the distinctions in their verbal exchanges and wrote on my note what I believed was intriguing moments of knowledge construction or meaning making.

In addition to observation notes and journal, I also videotaped the two students' interactions then transcribed them. I analyzed the transcripts of the verbal interactions through the perspective of sociocultural discourse analysis that considers language as "the tool of the tools" for thinking together [18] and Fountas and Pinnell's [7] systems of strategic thinking about texts. At home, I cross examined the notes I made with the videos and the transcripts and put it on my reflective journal.

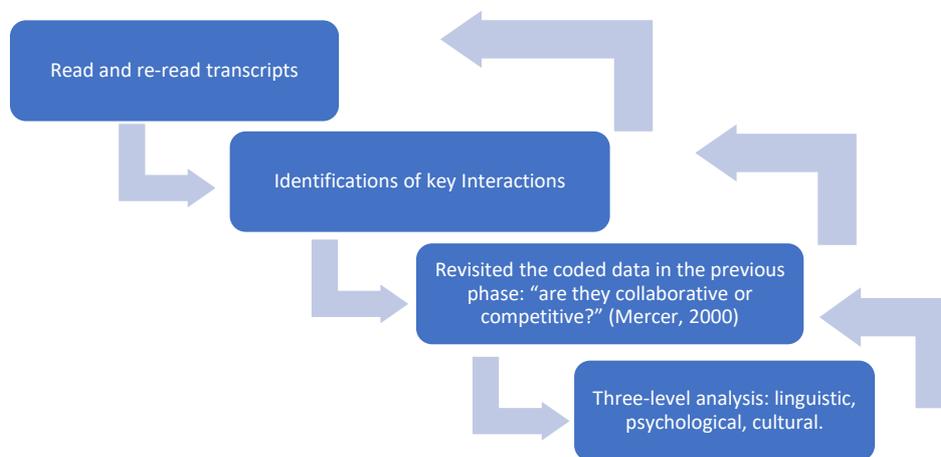


FIGURE 1. Four-step analysis of participants’ verbal interactions

In analyzing students’ collaborative thinking while using drama, I designed a four - step analysis on the interactions that happened in recursive cycle. At first, I read and re-read the transcripts multiple times to get the gist of the interactions that led me to the identification of key interactions. Based on the notes I made in the first stage and with the help of Nvivo 12, I identified key interactions while students were reading and working collaboratively. At this stage, I managed to identify a number of thinking strategies that students performed individually, as well as the strategies that emerged as the result of working collaboratively.

As I revisited the data, I started by conjecturing whether students were collaborative or competitive in their nature of interactions [10]. From there, I identified the strategic collaborative behaviors and thinking that both Maya and Heaven performed in their interaction. Lastly, I returned to analyze the functions of the language used by the students in the interactions to find whether they used at the linguistic, psychological, and cultural levels.

4. DISCUSSION

In the following subsection, we provide an interpretive analysis and the discussion of the interactions between the two students as they read together and reproduced the texts into dramatic modes. We divide the discussion into three main discussions: the discussion of drama strategy and individual’s transaction with texts, the discussion of drama strategy and text-mediated interactions, and lastly, the

discussion of drama strategies’ impacts on reading comprehension.

4.1 Drama strategy and individual transactions with Texts

For the Biographic Wax Museum (BWM), students were required to do research about their chosen African American figure and performed rehearsed line as waxed figures. Thus, the transaction, i.e., the process of meaning construction between the readers and the texts, mostly occurred before students were interacting with the audiences.

4.1.1 Maya

Maya conducted research about Gayle King, famous african-American celebrity, by gathering information from various resources like internet, books, and magazines. In doing so, she used two strategies: first, by separating “facts” from “opinions”, then, synthesizing and summarizing gathered facts and turned them into “biographical sketches” of Gayle King. Later, she called this “10 fun facts about Gayle King”.

Maya organized and displayed the texts she produced in three folds. The first fold consisted of five facts about Gayle’s life history that she put in bulleted points. In the second fold, she put a picture of Gayle King that was accompanied by famous Gayle King’s quotes. The organization of the informational texts followed the patterns texts improved the readability of the informational board as they were put from left to right, and centered Gayle King’s picture to attract audience



FIGURE 2. Maya as Gayle King's Wax Figure

In the performance as a wax figure of Gayle King, verbally narrated the short biography of Gayle King as soon as someone pressed a button placed near her. Maya narrated Gayle King's life that she summarized in the place and the time Gayle King was born and raised, her return to United States, and her meeting with Oprah Winfrey, her best friend, in excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

"I was born in 1954, in Chevy Chase, Maryland. I grew up in Turkey because my father was in military. When I came back to America, I was bullied just because the color of my skin. Later on, I moved to Baltimore and that's where I met Oprah Winfrey. Even though we do not run a show together anymore, our friendship remains".

4.1.2 Heaven

Heaven was a reluctant reader. She baldly claimed that she did not enjoy reading all forms of narratives and would rather spend time watching disney movies, instead of reading. With her strong attachment with

popular culture and Disney movies, it was unexpected that she had chosen a figure such as Harriet Tubman.

Before reproducing the texts, Heaven collected and sorted information from internet and printed materials like books from school's library. Having had sufficient information about Harriet Tubman, she then produced a multimodal informational board that displayed only short descriptions of Harriet Tubman's life. He board was dominated by figures, colors, money, houses and words / phrases that used as symbols to represent Harriet Tubman's life.

When performing a monologue about Harriet Tubman, Heaven retold Harriet's personal life as slave, her struggles, and triumph against slavery. Sitting on the floor as she was narrating the storyline of Harriet's life, Heaven embodied a weak, old, and sick Harriet. This embodiment revealed her knowledge and in depth understanding of Harriet's life story. By sitting on the floor, she also helped the visitors to see her performance while simultaneously reading the information about Harriet that she provided on the board.



FIGURE 3. Heaven performed as Harriet Tubman

4.2 Drama strategy and text-mediated interactions

In this subsection, we adopt Fountas and Finnel's terms, "thinking within, about, and beyond texts", to address the type of interactions that took place between students, texts, and students.[9]

4.2.1 Thinking within texts

Thinking within texts occurs when students search for and use information, monitored their own readings and self-corrected their own mistakes while reading, as well as maintained fluency and summarized what they read. In the context of integrating drama in the process, we used the term / phrase, to address the situations where students tried to understand the messages / themes from the author by monitoring their own understanding, performed reading strategies like synthesizing and summarizing, and maintained fluency.

Leaning on the tradition of Mercer's sociocultural discourse analysis [10], the analysis of the interactions is presented through the analysis of the excerpts of verbal interactions between the two participants.

Excerpt 2

Maya: ...princess.

Heaven: (correcting) It's prince.

Maya: before the prince took over, this place was full of dump and his father mmhhh ruled it and

Heaven: don't say "mmh".

Maya: and ruled it. Ruled it. (checks the chapter)

Heaven: his father ruled it (looking down to her shoes)

Heaven: You can later... wish we could get something else (looking around) just get a paper and like, write it.

Maya: (after checking the chapter) oh ok, so then the king Azaz called it the kingdom of wisdom...the prince!

Heaven: (playing with dramatic host-like intonation) After the prince established the kingdom, explain... After this young prince established... what was this place called?

Maya: So, actually they are two princes and one of them, one of them went to the south and he created. . .

In this excerpt, Maya was monitoring her understanding of the story and her ways of answering her partner's questions. She corrected her own mistakes when reading by going back to the novel to monitor the pace or the tone of her talk. In most rehearsals, Maya was also concerned about whether or not her answers were accurate by consulting the novel. In doing so, she regularly returned to selected pages of the novel to correct her answers. Maya also managed to recall important details about the plot, the characters, and pointed out at the conflicts and resolutions of the novel.

Maya's role as an invited expert in the pretend TV Talk Show framed her to think and to act in ways that experts, in her understanding, would. She frequently consulted the novel to know whether she provided correct answers and sought for advice from her partner and teacher. In this context of interactions, Maya and

Heaven: So, the mathemagician, he lived north.

Maya: He went north to, not south because their father wanted to expand so that'd be better if they were separated, to expand.

Heaven: (correcting Maya): They argued a lot. They didn't want to live together. So, simply because of that.

Maya: (realized her mistake and nodded her head) Ok, ok.]

4.2.2 *Thinking beyond texts*

When researching for reading resources, writing and synthesizing, Maya and Heaven mostly performed the thinking within the texts scheme. They summarized the information they read from various resources, synthesized them into written forms, and restates the summary of the information in the wax

Maya: Oh ya, and he also wanted to, since he ...King Azaz....

Heaven: What about the mathemagician?

Maya: So, the mathemagician was the ruler of digitopolis. He loved numbers.

Heaven: So, I am gonna ask you what's the word, and you're gonna say..." I agree with that"

Heaven: So, the mathemagician, he lived north.

Maya: He went to north, not south because their father wanted to expand so that'd be better if they were separated, to expand.

With the nature of being in the role, Heaven asked a lot of questions to Maya. Her questions functioned not only to deepen her own understanding of the texts, but also led her partners to perform strategic actions to deepen her own understanding. Her types of questions could be categorized as genuine as well as exploratory type of questions because they came out of her own curiosity and purpose [12]. In the above interaction, she also helped determine the type of question-and-

Heaven were inquirer and an expert [11]. Playing the TV host role, Heaven played her parts in asking questions and making sure that the pretend play would run smoothly. She regularly checked her her own reading and understanding of the story as well as Maya's, solved problems that arised in the discussion and remembered details of the story from the novel.

In excerpt 3, Heaven used her background knowledge to deepen her understanding of a new chapter that she co-read with Maya. In the process, she occasionally monitored her own and Maya's understanding of texts. In excerpt 3, Heaven corrected Maya's inaccurate understanding of the story's conflict. Maya instantly approved the correction made on her statement, although Heaven did not point to the textual evidence from the novel,

Excerpt 3

museum performances. The moment both students started to think of transforming the written information as a collaborative project, the moment of their interactions became an exciting process of co-construction of meaning.

Excerpt 4

answer sessions should have been like during the performance.

Excerpt 5

Maya: So, actually they are two princes and one of them, one of them went to the south and he created...

Heaven: oh shush! "One of them went to the south". Don't say that. Don't say that! That is my part, right?

In this excerpt of interaction, Heaven showed an passionate thinking beyond the text. She kept telling Maya not to use a part of line that she thought was hers. It seems that Heaven was making decision about how a role should be read based on character attributes and

the event of the plot. [13] This behavior indicates that Heaven also took part in deciding which part to include in the performance. In other words, she was thinking beyond the original storyline of the novel and was ready to transform it into a different form.



FIGURE 3. Maya and Heaven doing a pretend TV Talk Show

In the rehearsals, Maya was thinking beyond the texts by making connections with other text that she had read, i.e., intertextuality. One of the connections she made was when she called herself “Milolala”, an expert of the Phantom Tollbooth [14]. The name “Milolala” came from the combinations of fictional characters of two different books. Milo was the name of the boy character in the Phantom Tollbooth novel while Malala was taken from a nonfiction story book about Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani girl who was shot by a group of terrorists on her way school [15] The class had read the biography before they read the Phantom Tollbooth [14].

4.2.3 Thinking about texts

In thinking about the books, the students demonstrated some behaviors in using, acknowledging, or critiquing the storyline or the language of the novel. In excerpt 5, Heaven noticed the writer’s use of unique or new word for them. Heaven pushed Maya to use the word “diction”, which means choice of words, in the dialog. Heaven acknowledged and used the author’s style of language and put it into use in the new context to improve her understanding of both the new word and the story [7].

Excerpt 6

Heaven: You mentioned King Azaz. Who is he?

Maya: King Azaz is mmmh the ruler of Dictionopolis. He went to southern part and he also ...

Heaven: Don’t say south!

Maya: (expressing disappointment) King

Azaz is the ruler of Dictionopolis (pause) and he loved words...

Heaven: word choices (telling Maya)

Maya: I need some more of it...

Heaven: Say you love Diction. Say that. He loves diction. Say that. That is choice of words. Say that.

Maya: ...evidence.

From this excerpt, it can be referred that both students used some of the metaphors, similes, idioms, and words playing that they learned by reading the novel. In addition to the word diction, some of the

metaphors, analogies used to address the characters were used in the script and in the performance were: Rhymes and Reasons, The Whether Man, Mountains of Ignorance, and many more.

Excerpt 7

Heaven: After the young prince established this kingdom, what did he name it?

Maya: One of the princes went to the south and created Dictionopolis, he was called King Azaz, and another one went to the north creating Digitanopolis and called Mathemagician.

Heaven: Interesting. The two princesses' names were Rhymes and Reasons. How do they impact the Kingdom of Wisdom?

Maya: Their impacts to the kingdom was by solving every problem in the Kingdom. And also, they were loved by the Kingdom because of their beauty and their gentle ways in solving problems.

This *excerpt* shows Maya and Heaven's confidence in performing well-rehearsed lines in the pretend TV Talk Show. They integrated rich word plays and idioms taken from the novel in a new context that they created [3].

4.3. Drama Strategy and Reading Comprehension

Through the integration of educational drama strategies, students in this study were conditioned to work together to solve some problems deeper by being in the roles. When in roles, students did not only reproduce the texts they read verbally but also embodied the emotions and played the actions of the characters.

The learning stages of reading, writing, and performing gave the participants of this study a schema and the opportunities to extend / transform it. After carefully reading and selecting the text, thinking and discussing their story and plot, the two students produced script and transformed them into a form of performance. Rifai addressed this process of moving from one communication system into another as a representation of students' improved understanding [7].

Despite having similar objective in making a dramatic activity, both students were more situated by the roles than by the objectives of the activity. On many occasions, both students featured different action strategies while working collaboratively. Playing in or out of roles of a host in the pretend Talk Show, Heaven inquired a lot of questions, monitored and corrected herself and Maya's performance, summarized details from the texts they read, and made decisions in maintaining fluency of the performance. As an expert - guest in the Talk Show, Maya monitored and corrected her own understanding of the story, deduced to details in the texts, made connections to previous texts, synthesized new information with her schema, and used the metaphorical languages in her description of the story.

The questions produced by Heaven in the rehearsals deepened her own understanding of the story while simultaneously planning and projecting for the performance. Soter, Wilkinson, Murphy, Rudge, Reninger, and Edwards categorized this type of question as being "authentic" instead of "non-authentic" [12]. Authentic questions defined as the kinds of questions produced to improve one's comprehension, not to "test" other people, referred as non-authentic questions. Triggered by the roles they played, thus the questions that are asked in this dramatic context, are real since they came from students' curiosity notwithstanding the fictional roles and context [16]. Asking questions to oneself is the beginning of inquiry and reflections, while asking other people questions could lead the pair to create hypothesis or prediction [10].

In their interaction to prepare for a dramatic performance, the pairs were involved in what Mercer called "exploratory" talk, i.e., the kind of talk that occur outside of the teacher's control that allowed them to hesitation, nervousness, reflexivity, and questions [10]. When left to collaborate under such a project, both students were given flexibility and freedom from the teacher. This, indeed Mercer, often result in students accomplish genuine problem-solving experience [10].

The two dramatic strategies have engaged an unwilling reader like Heaven and situated a motivated reader like Maya with aesthetic activities [17], purposeful reading experience, and pretend play to improve strategic actions in processing texts [7]. They searched and explored resources, responded to them individually, then read, talk, and thought together to create a TV Talk Show performance. Even though both students performed different strategic actions when reading individually, bound by the objective of performing well, they performed relatively similar strategic actions to realize the objective of performing a dramatic act together.

5. CONCLUSION

Being involved in two dramatic strategies to explore texts, two participants of this study, Maya and Heaven became active constructors of meaning as they moved from mere literal understanding of the story at individual levels to a collaborative meaning making level. We call this as shift as loop of meaning making. Individually, Maya and Heaven performed a number of strategic actions in reading, searching for data, summarizing, and synthesizing resources and in the process of producing and reproducing posters. At this stage of meaning making, they took efferent stance of reading. However, as they went through rehearsals to prepare for the performance, they evoked the aesthetic experience of being the character to help them understand the meaning better.

In the teaching of English as second and foreign language field, drama as a medium for teaching and learning has been mostly used to teach speaking and listening skills. Little or no study has explored its advantages to support students' learning in reading or writing. This study identified the participants' strategic actions like inquiring for more information and making connections when working individually and thinking within, about, and beyond texts while working together to create a dramatic performance. Eventough the study was conducted in the L1 context where English was not a barrier for most of the students, with some adjustments, this study could be used as a reference for future research or classroom practices in the ESL/EFL reading and writing classes.

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