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The language teacher researcher in the L2 reading classroom

Challenges and responses

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ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

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00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978–88–548–1211–6

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1st edition: June 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to a number of people who have stimulated my professional growth as a language teacher researcher over the past decade. First and foremost, I wish to thank Christina Howell-Richardson at the English Language Institute, University of Surrey, U.K. for her patient guidance and valuable suggestions in reviewing earlier drafts of the first two sections of this work. I would also like to thank TESOL-Italy for giving me the chance to implement action research in the L2 classroom, deepening my understanding of how to pursue evidence-based practice. Special thanks also go to Simon Borg at the School of Education, University of Leeds, U.K., whose suggestions have helped me reflect on how to develop teacher research methods which support classroom inquiry. Finally, thanks are due to all those at the University of Calabria, Italy who have allowed me to implement teacher research in different classrooms. I am particularly grateful to Carmen Argondizzo for always offering me the chance to experience new pedagogical contexts and projects which trigger my research, to the Department of Linguistics for the research grant and to all the students who willingly took part in the case studies and did their very best to faithfully *capture* their *invisible* reading processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Although different perspectives have been adopted in defining what is meant by teacher research, «a similar overall message emerges: enquiring into their own practices, individually or collectively, is a process which benefits teachers' professional growth and pedagogical activity» (Borg, 2006:1-2).

This volume focuses on the value of language teacher research in the L2 reading classroom and is the result of both theoretical commitment and classroom practice leading to constant inquiry. Over the years, we have witnessed a paradigm shift from very elementary models of reading towards more sophisticated interactive frameworks. Despite this shift, reading classrooms continue to create an *instructional effect*, produced by *product-oriented* approaches to reading, which ignore how L2 readers are processing meaning.

The volume is divided into three sections. In Section 1, theoretical insights into L2 reading are offered. In Chapter 1, an in-depth analysis of different reading models is sketched to pinpoint the shift from a *product-* to a *process-oriented* approach to reading. What emerges from the interactive model of reading is the need to advocate the importance of reading strategies, discussed in Chapter 2. Although strategies are universally cognitive ways of processing reading in any language, different variables such as L2 contexts may strongly alter reading proficiency levels and, above all, reading processes.

Subsequently, Section II deals with researching L2 reading in the academic context. In particular, Chapter 3 focuses on *how* and *why* teacher research ought to be carried out in the academic instructional context. In Chapter 4, the main mentalistic techniques or *process-oriented* techniques are examined so as to develop a L2 reading-related research methodology which supports action research in the academic context. Focus is placed on the validity of evidence-based

practice which uses mentalistic techniques to capture *direct* evidence of learners' reading processes.

Section III bridges the theoretical aspects of reading with practical accounts of what occurs in different L2 reading classrooms. The main aim is to provide a set of *process-oriented* case studies which describe the challenges faced in researching L2 reading, the responses offered by learners who reflectively act as informants, and the pedagogical benefits drawn by both in developing *reading-as-a-process* awareness through systematic inquiry. The case studies refer to three different L2 reading classrooms within the same academic context – the University of Calabria, Italy - and are the outcome of systematic language teacher research practised over three academic years. Chapter 5 moves within the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom, where a group of EAP readers inform the language teacher about their use of L1/L2 reading strategies, shedding light on their internalized reading models, their *product-oriented* reading performance, and on the prior *instructional effect* which has disregarded strategy-based instruction. A closer look at one specific strategy, namely, mental translation is the object of another case study in Chapter 6. In the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom, mental translation appears to be informally and constantly used when ESP texts are processed. The case study offers insights into the *invisible* and underestimated sphere of mental translation, activated by both skilled and unskilled tertiary readers while addressing textual problems. In Chapter 7, reading is at the core of the translation training classroom. Research leads to understanding which strategies are used before and after strategy-based instruction is delivered to a group of student translators, who grasp the meaning of reading in *understanding*, *searching* and *revising* texts with translation intention.

Chapter 8 offers final reflections on the challenges faced by the language teacher researcher and the responses given by the informants of all the case studies. The potential of *process-oriented* teacher research is provided through both theoretical and pedagogical reflections which draw attention to the value of *capturing* invisible mental processes which construct meaning for L2 readers and teachers alike.

TO ALFREDO AND WILLIAM

SECTION I

INSIGHTS INTO L2 READING

[...] reading efficiency is a matter of how effective a discourse the reader can create from the text, either in terms of rapport with the writer or in terms of his purpose in engaging in the discourse in the first place (Widdowson, 1979:174).

CHAPTER 1

MODELS OF READING

INTRODUCTION

Models of reading support researchers and teachers in understanding the multi-faceted processes involved in reading comprehension. They are also are the result of in-depth research into specific aspects of the complex nature of the reading process and have often drawn data from L1 contexts which appear compatible with L2 research carried out in recent years. This chapter provides an overview of the main research models, highlighting the various factors which need to be taken into account when teacher research on instructional practice is attempted.

Teaching reading was at long strongly influenced by the audio-lingual method which restricted its dimension to the perceptual and decoding levels of the process. Within this framework, good readers achieve comprehension when they sequence acceptable language data as a result of their reading behaviour by means of low-level skills (speed, chunking, comprehending textual meaning). The lower-level processes which are at stake include lexical access, syntactic parsing, semantic proposition formulation and working memory (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). In other words, *automaticity* is the key to the activation of lower-level reading processes:

> Why does automaticity matter? [...] Decoding and comprehension compete for the available short-term capacity. When a reader slowly analyzes a word into component sounds and blends them, a great deal of capacity is consumed, with relatively little left over for comprehension of the word, let alone understanding the overall meaning of the sentence containing the word and the paragraph containing the sentence. In contrast, automatic word recognition (i.e. recognizing a word as a sight word) consumes very little capacity, and thus, frees short-term capacity for the task of comprehending the word and integrating the meaning of the word with the overall meaning of the sentence, paragraph, and text (Pressley, 1998:61).