



Theorizing fiction reading engagement during wordless book reading



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ABSTRACT

Research on what reading engagement is and how it is achieved often takes the approach of identifying factors that motivate reading, as perceived from outside the reading experience itself. In this study, we examine reading engagement *as it occurs* with an emergent reader reading a wordless picturebook. Using a dialogic, relational perspective on reading engagement, grounded in transactional theory specific to fictional narrative, we illustrate the ways such a perspective can explain the deeply human experience of engaged fiction reading. Results suggest that intersubjective connections and Theory of Mind (ToM) are integral to a reader's construction of relationships within the fictional world and definitional to engaged reading. In addition, this study builds on the methodological promise of wordless book reading in reading research.

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1. Introduction

Reading engagement is a complicated construct. An engaged reader is one who cannot put a book down or experiences what Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) call “flow” or feeling “lost in the book” (cited in Nell, 1988). Even though there may be several good reasons to value this kind of reading experience, perhaps the most important reason is that engaged reading is associated with reading achievement (Cox & Guthrie, 2001). Furthermore, understanding reading engagement and how to foster it is of importance to educators since engagement in voluntary reading often wanes after the elementary school years (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009).

To date, the bulk of research on what reading engagement is and how it is achieved identifies factors that motivate reading as perceived from outside the immediate reading experience. Much of the data about reading engagement consists of abstract information about past reading experiences from student self-report or teacher observation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Wigfield et al., 2008). Although these studies offer insights into how students perceive reading, they do not address the phenomenon of reading engagement *as it occurs*. Indeed, Bruner (1986) has suggested that we know “precious little indeed about the ‘reader-in-the-text’ as a psychological process” (p. 5). Studying reading engagement in real

time is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) notion that it is the activity itself that initiates a “flow experience” (p. 68) and with Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) assertion that engagement is best examined within the activity itself. The purpose of this study is to describe and theorize reading engagement as it occurs with one highly engaged emergent reader.

Currently, studies of reading engagement often account for engagement in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Huei-Yu Wang and Guthrie (2004) identified components of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, noting that curiosity, involvement, and challenge are three important factors. It is unlikely that these three factors, however, reflect the full range of motivations that prompt engagement. For example, aspects such as readers' needs for connection, companionship, and the fundamental drive to make meaning with others have been largely unexplored (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Leaving out these relational human aspects of readers makes it difficult to explain the rapt engrossment of highly engaged readers. Altering the conceptual framework through which engagement is understood may be useful in accounting for these relational human aspects of reading and illuminating what fiction reading engagement looks like as it occurs, making it possible to theorize about what engages readers and why.

Further, reading engagement has been studied most often in populations who have already learned to read. Therefore, we know little about what engaged reading looks like in emergent readers. Studying engaged emergent reading may not only further understandings of emergent reading, but also the construct of reading engagement, generally, since research suggests some similarities between emergent and later proficient reading. In addition, because

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young children very often read aloud rather than silently their engagement may be more visible than that of older children. This is important, as, historically, the invisibility of the reading process has been a challenge for researchers (Pearson & Johnston, 1978).

This paper makes a unique contribution to the literature in two ways. First, we use wordless picturebook book reading to capture reading engagement as it happens. Our analysis provides an in-process view of a young child's engaged reading, unencumbered by the demands of decoding. In wordless book reading, children's transactions with texts are public, voiced, and fully visible to researchers and, thus, afford novel understandings of what constitutes emergent reading engagement. Second, we propose a relational perspective on reading engagement specific to fictional narrative, which is grounded in dialogic and transactional theories. This perspective is applied to a single exemplary case of one highly engaged emergent reader to illustrate the ways that such a perspective can explain the deeply human experience of engaged narrative reading. We thus ask, "What does reading engagement look like in the wordless book reading of one highly engaged kindergarten reader?"

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Dialogism

Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism has been taken up by literacy researchers as a useful tool in describing and theorizing aspects of classroom literacy practices and events, including the importance of an authentic, responsive writing classroom (Fecho, 2011), the transformative potential of classroom talk (Juzwik, 2013), and the social nature of intertextuality (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). In this study we build on earlier work by using dialogism as a central construct in understanding reading engagement as relational and transformative.

Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the dialogic self describes individuals as a set of conversations within the self, or what Hermans (2001) calls "self-positions." The multivocal, multipositional nature of personhood suggests that a flexible, inner relatedness defines human consciousness as relational meaning-making activity. The dialogues that comprise the self exist across time simultaneously, involving remembered pasts, presents, and imagined future selves (Bakhtin, 1981). This notion of consciousness implies that, in addition to cognitive resources, such as background knowledge, readers bring emotional resources (Bird & Reese, 2006) and relational histories (Matthews & Cobb, 2009) to the experience of reading, which inspire and provide material for readers' relationships with text.

Another aspect of the dialogic self that influences readers' relationships with text is that as relational beings, readers seek connectedness to others. Connectedness to others, Trevarthen (2009) argues is, "motivated by an innate human talent for companionship in experience" (p. 507). Bakhtin's (1981) reciprocal notions of *addressivity* and *responsivity* help to describe this connectedness; the self is in a continual state of being addressed and responding to the other (Holquist, 1990). If what engages humans is meaningful exchange with others in the actual world, then this same relational need for companionship could drive human engagement in the fictional world. The notion of text as dialogic further explains this potential.

2.2. Text as dialogic

Linell (2009) argues that, as humanly constructed artifacts, texts "harbor[s] several perspectives or voices, what Bakhtin and others have called polyvocality or multi-voicedness" (p. 168). This multi-voicedness invites readers to engage in dialogic activity with

characters in the fictional world, and is experienced as polychronic activity (Bakhtin, 1981). That is, engaging with characters involves being in the present moment of reading and, simultaneously in the "not here" and "not now" of the fictional world (Lysaker, 2014). In this way, texts, can be viewed as vicarious social contexts and dialogic objects (Bertau, 2007). The dialogic nature of fictional narratives, in particular, is enhanced by indeterminate meanings and gaps in plot, setting, or character development where aspects of story construction are up to the reader (Iser, 1978). Taken together, dialogism frames both reader and text as inherently relational.

3. Related literature

3.1. Reading as relational, dialogic activity

Relational conceptualizations of reading are not new. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional view suggests that reading is the reader's relationship with text: During reading, "the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation" (p. 1369). Rosenblatt argues that meaning resides neither solely in the reader nor in the text but in the dynamic dialogue between reader and text. Readers' relationships with texts and the shared location of meaning that results from them are central to reader response theories and to Rosenblatt's notion of an esthetic stance.

Sipe (2000) demonstrates empirically that read-aloud stories prompt sophisticated and varied esthetic responses from second-grade children. Of importance from a dialogic, relational view is Sipe's observation that children appeared to be "entering the world of the story and becoming one with it" (p. 268). Similarly, Langer (2011) describes literary thinking as the ways in which children and adolescents make sense of literature by both "being in and moving through" the story (p. 18).

The connections that children make to enter the world of story during the transactional event of reading are not generic but are influenced by personal experiences with language and with others. Gee (2001) describes these influences as *situatedness* and argues that reading is situated activity in which the meanings that human beings construct are linked to and influenced by their experiences in the material and social world. In this way, experience becomes part of the languaged transactions in which people engage. Experiences, memories of them, and the language that accompanied them remain with individuals and both situate readers in reading events and become semiotic resources for participation in those events. Drawing on Bakhtin as well as on Bauman and Briggs (1990), Dyson (1999) describes the use of semiotic resources in children's writing as re-contextualization: "We learn our words from particular people in particular places and then we re-contextualize them, and given the strength of our own intentions we re-voice them, aiming to make them bow to our will" (p. 369). The same can be said of reading. Because reading is situated, children re-contextualize experiences in the fictional world as they make connections and construct meaning.

3.2. Reader as relational being: theory of mind and intersubjectivity

An important part of making connections in the fictional world is recontextualizing understandings of other people. To engage in meaningful dialogue within fictional worlds, readers must recontextualize their understandings of other within the "landscape of consciousness" (Bruner, 1986, p. 14) including characters' thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, and Moll (2005) believe that children are innately motivated to understand and share others' minds because such connections are needed for survival. Human beings' understandings of the mind of the other,

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