



A CASE STUDY OF TWO ESL READERS NEGOTIATING WITH STORY: 'ERRORS' OR 'CUES'

Dr. Sawan Kumari

Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.

Abstract

Reading is crucial at every stage of schooling. Understanding the complexity of the reading process and breaking it down to determine the reader's level of understanding is one of the significant challenges among reading researchers and teachers. A miscue analysis could give a solution to some extent. Reading in English as a Second Language adds more challenges to the readers. Research suggests that miscue analysis could guide teachers in understanding the areas where special attention is required. Further, miscue analysis on ESL readers supports the concept that the reading process is universal and seeks meaning, being holistic or transactional.

This paper will explore the reading process of two learners: one is above average, and the other is below average. The way they approach the story reveals and guides teachers in planning reading instruction.

Keywords: *English as a Second Language, Miscue Analysis, Psycholinguistic guessing game, Case Study.*

“Respond to what the child is trying to do” (Smith, 1973, p.195). Having presented conventional wisdom in reading instruction in the form of Smith’s (1973) *Twelve Easy Ways to Make Learning to Read Difficult*, offers this dictum as the one difficult way to make learning to read easy. These easy ways ironically highlight common instructional pitfalls—practices that prioritize rigid procedures and standardized materials over the needs and interests of the child. The idea involves observing and understanding the child’s reading strategies, providing scaffolding support, and fostering self-directed learning. Responding to what the child is trying to do makes reading easier by making it more relevant, engaging, and tailored to the child's needs. Therefore, Smith (1973) urges the teacher to focus on the learner rather than methods and materials. Nevertheless, how to do this is a question to think about. A miscue analysis gives the solution to some extent. As we know, reading is a complex process to navigate. It provides insight into the reading process as individual students perceive and apply it. More specifically, miscue analysis can assist a teacher in distinguishing between readers who have deeper processing issues and those with surface-level issues. Furthermore, it helps to understand the strengths and weaknesses, and how well the reader integrates the various cueing systems. Moreover, this aids teacher in tailoring their instructional plans to specific problems' needs. Ultimately, miscue analysis enables teachers to respond to the child's actions, fostering a more personalized and responsive approach to reading instruction. In S.W. Valencia's words (1990), “Miscue analysis examined students’ use of language cues and strategies, permitting a powerful 'window onto the reading process’” (Goodman, 1965). When strategies and cues are used ineffectively, comprehension is affected.”

Reading: The Psycholinguistic Guessing Game

Goodman's approach to reading focuses on the interactive and predictive nature. His theory on the cueing system of reading revolves around the premise that readers use multiple sources of information,



or "cues," to decode and make sense of written text. Readers do not just passively absorb information from the text. Instead, they actively anticipate, check, and revise their comprehension of the text as they read. In this process, the encoding, structure of language, and meaning in context all play crucial roles, as does the reader's prior knowledge.

Readers' prior or background knowledge plays an important role in reading comprehension. Any encounter with text evokes the existing knowledge and experience to make sense of the information, making connections, inferring meaning, and understanding context. The more information a reader could offer, the less s/he would have to rely on the text to make sense. Similarly, the less information the reader provides, the greater their reliance on the text. As a result, the nexus between the reader's previous knowledge of language, world, and cues given in text makes the reading process effective. Reading is more than just deciphering individual words letter by letter to summarize. Instead, it is an intricate interaction between the reader's prior knowledge, context, and the printed word.

He defined reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game," in which the reader constantly predicts what the text is about and then confirms or corrects those judgements based on the cues available. Graphophonic cues are the visual signals that correspond to the letters and sounds of words. Readers employ their knowledge of letter-sound correlations for decoding the text.

However, Goodman argued that this is merely one aspect of the reading process. Syntactic cues are associated with the structure and grammar of language. Readers use their knowledge of sentence structure, word order, and grammatical rules to predict and make sense of the text. For instance, if a sentence is incomplete or a word does not seem to fit, readers will use their understanding of grammar to guess what comes next. Semantic cues refer to the meaning of the text. Readers evaluate the text based on prior knowledge, context, and experience. If a word is unfamiliar, the reader might rely on the overall meaning of the sentence or passage to figure out the word. Thus, Goodman's cueing system highlights that skilled readers employ a combination of phonics, grammar, and meaning to decode and understand written material, and that reading is an active, constructive process rather than a simple mechanical one.

Research in Miscue Analysis

Ken Goodman designed a miscue analysis to understand the reading process better. It is a diagnostic technique that examines "an actual observed response in oral reading which does not match the expected response" (Goodman, 1973). The primary purpose of miscue analysis is to help researchers and teachers gain insight into the reading process. Conventionally, reading "errors" in oral reading are investigated using two assumptions. Firstly, oral reading should be accurate regarding pronunciation, fluency, accent, and tone; it also implies that "errors" are unacceptable. Secondly, "errors" expose readers' shortcomings and reveal deficiencies (Goodman, 1973).

Miscue analysis differs from typical "error" analysis in numerous important ways. First and foremost, miscue analysis incorporates linguistic perspectives in reading research and views reading as a transactional psycholinguistic process. Furthermore, miscue analysis emphasises readers' strengths rather than flaws. It is based on the belief that readers are all different and unique, and unexpected responses or miscues reflect readers' ideas, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Additionally, miscue analysis allows researchers and teachers to capture, record, and examine observable reading behaviour during a natural reading setting.



From the late 1970s, Goodman's reading theory has been widely used in English as a Second Language classes (Grabe, 1991). It helps to understand better how readers of ESL process written text. Teachers and researchers could peek into the strategies readers use to comprehend text by analyzing the process of engaging with the text through read-aloud. This practice helps to identify whether readers rely more on meaning structure or visual cues and reveals gaps in their language proficiency. As a result, miscue analysis enables teachers to tailor their support and interventions to address ESL learners' specific reading challenges. Further, miscue analysis on ESL readers supports the concept that the reading process is universal and seeks meaning, being holistic or transactional. These studies offer insights and recommendations for utilizing miscue analysis to characterize the reading habits of second language readers.

In a research study by Tatlonghari (1984), a qualitative description of the oral reading behaviour of learners of English as a second language was analysed through Goodman's miscue analysis. In this research, Tatlonghari (1984) investigates the reading process of fourth-grade ESL readers and finds that ESL readers make substitutions, omissions, and insertions during the reading process. Furthermore, ESL readers exhibit oral reading miscues at rates and qualities similar to native language readers. The research also indicates that good readers made fewer miscues than poor readers, and many miscues did not significantly alter the meaning of the text, suggesting that comprehension was often preserved despite deviations from the printed text.

Another research by Rigg (1986) into the readability of texts and the need to revalue ESL children's reading abilities examines the miscues of four Southeast Asian children when reading English. Rigg's work highlighted the importance of considering schema theory and the individual reader's experiences, suggesting that effective reading instruction for ESL learners must move beyond surface-level text features to address deeper cognitive and contextual factors.

Goodman's (1978) study explores English reading comprehension in children from Arabic, Navajo, Samoan, and Spanish language groups, examining if proficiency is determined by first language and if aspects of reading are universal. The results of the study not only demonstrate that ESL readers can read with comprehension, but they also reveal that one's first language does not determine ESL reading proficiency. Another crucial conclusion of the study is that the more the readers know about the content, the easier it is for them to read and comprehend the text. Miramontes' (1987) study included forty upper elementary Hispanic-American pupils from year-round schools. Students with the highest level of bilingual competence exhibit the most effective use of mistake techniques in decoding and semantic categories.

Collectively, the above-mentioned work highlights reading as a dynamic interaction between text, context, and reader strategies, shaping instructional approaches for diverse learners. By highlighting the value of comprehension over rote accuracy and the role of prior knowledge and context, these studies inform balanced, responsive teaching methods that address the varied needs of learners and ultimately promote more successful reading outcomes.

The Study: How do readers use these cues?

Indra and Dheeraj (names changed) have been selected for this study. They belonged to class six of a government school situated in North Delhi. Their marks of the previous year indicated a gap in their performance in the classroom. Indra was an average achiever, whereas Dheeraj was a below-average



achiever. The class teacher has also confirmed their performance in reading across the subjects. A purposive sampling method was used to identify these readers. For both the readers, English is a second language they have been engaging with for over six years. Their first language is Hindi, which they use in daily communication at home and school. It is primarily used for instructions. Per their declaration, they are very comfortable in Hindi; English comes after that.

An unfamiliar story was selected to be read aloud by the readers in separate sessions. The read-aloud was audiotaped. After reading the story, readers were supposed to retell the entire story and answer a few open-ended questions. In addition to the read-aloud, all of the act was audiotaped. Simultaneously, extensive notes were taken. Both were supposed to read a story, 'A Dumb Friend,' for the first time.

Indra: As a Reader

The story starts with these lines:

“Udit and Varun were 10th-grade students. Varun was an intelligent boy, while Udit was an average boy. But they got along very well as friends.”

Indra started to read and corrected himself as he read out numerous words, including 'while', 'along', and many more. He read first 'will' then corrected it with 'while'. The same thing happened with the word 'along'; he first mispronounced it as 'alone' before correcting it to 'along'. Even the words he had read before were correct; both “will” and “alone” exist. However, the meaning of the passage is not supported by these terms. Syntactically and semantically, he corrected himself to construe the meaning. One very particular miscue in his reading was the omission of the letter 's' from 'students' and 'friends'. These errors appeared unaffected by his basic understanding of the story, and he decided to continue reading rather than go back and fix them.

At one point, the phrase –

“Varun found that silly and had fun in class.”

Indra read this line as 'Varun found that silly and have fun in class'. In this instance, the substitution of 'had' with 'have' is acceptable because, in normal flow, we used to say 'have fun', so he moved on without correcting it.

In another instance, there is a word 'doubts' and below it there is the word 'dumbo'.

“He has so many doubts with an easy lesson like this. He is real dumbo.”

In this instance, he read the word 'doubts' as 'about' first, then repeated it with other miscue 'dumbos' and then again he stopped for a while and reread the complete sentence without any deviation. In this instance, we can realize that he is using graphophonics cues first, that is 'about', which looks similar to 'doubt'. However, he soon realized that it did not align with the meaning of the text. Then he got back to the word again, but this time his eyes caught the line below and he read it 'dumbos'. Finally, when he did not get the meaning again, he used the technique of rereading. He reread the sentence from the beginning. This time he read it as the text was. This example raised the possibility that the orthographic spelling patterns and the line breaks may have influenced his prediction and comprehension.

An enormous word, 'concentrated', appeared in the text. Indra made one attempt to say 'conkentr'd', but he did not pause or try to correct it. He most likely understood the meaning using the sentence's



context and other elements, so he did not alter this. The sentence is –“Udit concentrated on his studies and learned his own way.”

After he finished reading, He was asked to retell the story. He told the entire story, but omitted a few minor details that did not affect its significance. It indicates that the comprehension took place. Indra's act of reading supports Goodman's assertion that the main objective of compelling reading is to create meaning from the text through ongoing prediction, verification, and revision. Rather than striving for perfect word-for-word accuracy, readers prioritize comprehension, drawing on their grasp of grammar, word usage, and context. This process makes reading a dynamic, interactive activity where the reader's background knowledge and understanding of language play a crucial role in making sense of written material.

To conclude, Indra used graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic cues to comprehend effectively. He constructed the meaning, but it needed to be more detailed. Many strategies can help him become a more effective reader, for instance, self-questioning and looking for specific information. Teachers can leverage Indra's graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic cues to provide more targeted and effective reading instruction. By observing that Indra draws on all three cueing systems, a teacher can tailor lessons to reinforce each area and address his need for greater specificity in comprehension. Close reading could be one. Teachers can help Indra move from general meaning construction to more precise and accurate reading comprehension by integrating instruction across these cueing systems and providing specific feedback.

Dheeraj: As a Reader

Initially, Dheeraj started reading the story word by word, and occasionally syllable by syllable. For instance, ‘in+telli+gent’ for the word ‘intelligent’ among many others. He did not correct or replace the words; he just heard them. Instead of trying to make meaning, he was content to continue with graphophonically similar nonwords. His use of merely graphophonics signals is demonstrated by these examples. In essence, he is decoding the text. He did not pronounce the word ‘in+telli+gent’ together, even after reading them. Additional instances of this type include the words "along," which was read as "a+long," and "return," which was read as "re+turn."

He has omitted many words from the text. The cause could be his unfamiliarity with words such as ‘bombarded’, ‘concentrated’, ‘clarification’, and ‘sluggishly’. Due to their enormity, some words may appear too challenging to attempt. Throughout the text, he never corrected himself or repeated anything. He focused intensely on the pronunciation and decoding of each word. He rarely employed semantics and syntax in conjunction with his expertise in graphophonics. After he completed reading, He was asked to tell the story and began rereading it. He conveyed that ‘this is a story concerning two friends’. Afterwards, he was supposed to answer a few basic open-ended questions but struggled to get the answer.

Discussion

Based on an examination of both Indra's and Dheeraj's read aloud, it is clear that efficient reading comprehension necessitates a balanced utilisation of graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic signals. Indra can use all three cueing systems to construct the basic meaning of a text, but he has to focus on being more particular and precise in his understanding. Conversely, Dheeraj depends nearly entirely on graphophonic cues, prioritising word decoding and pronunciation over meaning or grammatical



structure. As a result, he reads mechanically, sounding out words but struggling to grasp or effectively repeat the story.

The contrast between the two emphasises the need for comprehensive reading training that addresses all parts of the cueing system. Teachers should provide targeted support to pupils like Indra to help him improve his semantic and syntactic awareness, allowing him to understand more. Instructions for learners like Dheeraj should focus on meaning-making and context-based learning, rather than just decoding. Finally, encouraging readers to use graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic signals together can help them become more proficient, thoughtful and independent readers who can understand the entire meaning and connect with the text on a deeper level.

Conclusion

Indra used graphophonics, semantics, and syntactic cues to comprehend well. He somehow managed to construct the meaning, but needs to be more specific. Many strategies can help him become a more effective reader, for instance, self-questioning and looking for specific information. Meanwhile, Dheeraj perceives reading as producing the correct words rather than deriving meaning from print. Such reader need to direct their attention towards setting a purpose for reading. Utilizing strategies like skimming and scanning content should help such students become more efficient. Using texts that he can relate to easily can help promote his reading habits.

Children do not spontaneously integrate their reading with what they already know (Paris & Lindauer, 1976). During reading, special attention should be paid to prepare children. This can be done in many ways, including asking for children's relevant experiences, giving more familiar texts to read, and many more. Activating his prior knowledge of the text helps him better comprehend. Focusing on receiving specific information can also help Dheeraj to comprehend well. This can be done through questioning before reading, as Pressey (1926) points out, questions asked prior to reading a text can also serve a learning producing function. He also emphasizes that protests increase a student's sensitivity to learning by alerting them to the nature of the task and its relevance and providing a means to evaluate, categorize, or generalize.

References

1. Allen, E. (1976). Miscue analysis: A new tool for diagnosing oral reading proficiency in foreign languages. *Foreign Language Annals*.
2. Anderson, R. C. (2004). Role of the reader's schema in comprehension, learning, and memory. In R. B. Ruddell & N. J. Unrau (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (5th ed., pp. 594–605). International Reading Association.
3. Grabe, W. (1991). Current developments in second language reading research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3), 375–406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586977>.
4. Goodman, K. S. (1969). Analysis of oral reading miscues: Applied psycholinguistics. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 5(1), 9–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/747158>.
5. Goodman, Y. M., Watson, D. J., & Burke, C. L. (2005). *Reading miscue inventory*. Richard C. Owen Publishers.
6. Miramontes, O. (1987). Oral reading miscues of Hispanic good and learning disabled students: Implications for second language reading. In S. Goldman & H. Trueba (Eds.), *Becoming literate in English as a second language* (pp. 127–154). Ablex Publishing Corporation.



7. Paris, S. G., & Lindauer, B. K. (1976). The role of inference in children's comprehension and memory for sentences. *Cognitive Psychology*, 8(2), 217–227. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285\(76\)90009-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(76)90009-7).
8. Pressey, S. L. (1926). A simple device which gives tests and scores—and teaches. *School and Society*, 23, 373–376.
9. Rigg, P. (1986). Reading in ESL: Learning from kids. In P. Rigg (Ed.), *Children and ESL* (pp. 55–92). TESOL.
10. Rigg, P. (1988). The miscue-ESL project. In P. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive approaches to second language reading* (pp. 206–219). Cambridge University Press.
11. Smith, F. (1973). *Psycholinguistics and reading*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
12. Smith, F. (1997). *Reading without nonsense* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
13. Stanovich, K. E. (2000). *Progress in understanding reading: Scientific foundations and new frontiers*. Guilford Press.
14. Tatlonghari, M. (1984). Miscue analysis in an ESL context. *RELC Journal*, 15, 75–84.
15. Tierney, R. J., & Cunningham, J. W. (1984). Research on teaching reading comprehension. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 609–656). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
16. Valencia, S. W. (1990). Assessment: Miscue analysis in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 44(3), 252–255. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20200599>.