Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory and Its Implementation in the Teaching of Integrated Reading

A. A. Istri Ngurah Marhaeni

Abstract: The transactional theory signifies that both the reader and the text play important roles in the formation of meaning. Meaning is produced by continuous transaction between the reader and the text, employing the meaning potential of the text and the reader's experiential reservoir. While the reader is active in selecting and synthesizing the potential in his reservoir, the text contributes to the shaping of his selection and hypotheses, resulting in an interplay between them. Reading and writing are interrelated skills in which the transactional theory is also applicable. The transactional theory provide some implications for the classroom language instruction. Then, an experience in doing journal writing for an English reading class, as one way to put the theory into practice, is presented.

Key words: transactional theory, reading, writing connections, journal writing.

Linguists and educators have long been debating about how the reading process happens. They have argued how meaning is produced in reading. The fact that in every reading process there are two parties involved, the reader and the text, has led to the question of which party or parties play its or their role(s) in producing meanings. Some linguists think

A.A. Istri Ngurah Marhaeni is a lecturer at the Department of English Education, STKIP Singaraja. This article is edited by Utami Widiati.

that print has already brought meaning in itself as formulated by its author, and the reader takes away meaning from it. Known as the information theory, it believes that message (meaning) is transformed pure and unchanged from sender (author) to receiver (reader) provided that the channel does not receive any distortion (Weaver, 1994). A completely different idea, on the other hand, says that the reader is the key to the process. Proponents of this idea maintain that text is no more than an inkblot whose meaning is created entirely by the reader (Beach, 1993). In between these two extremes emerges a strong belief that reading is a process of transaction between the reader and the text. Both play important roles in the production of meaning. Louise M. Rosenblatt has been very influential in the development of this transactional theory.

According to this distinguished linguist and educator, every reading act is an event, a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular configuration of marks on a page, and occurs at a particular time in a particular context. Thus, the meaning depends on the process of transaction, and it never occurs prior to this process. 'The "meaning" does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between reader and text' (Rosenblatt, 1988:6). Thus, reading means bringing meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it (Weaver, 1994:42).

THE TRANSACTIONAL THEORY OF READING PROCESS

Opposing the idea that print in itself brings meaning, the transactional theory emphasizes that what print carries is only meaning potential that interacts with the potential the reader brings during reading. As a reader sees a text, he uses his linguistic/experiential reservoir to interact with the text. At this time, there exist multiple inner alternatives in the reader that resonate to the words, phrases, and sentences of the text. Even from the beginning of the process, the reader has had expectations, tentative feelings which are actually the purpose of his reading. This purpose guides his selection of his potential in the reservoir, and his synthesis. As he looks at the print, he seeks cues on which to base the expectations about what is coming next. This cue process is based on his past syntactic and semantic experience that shapes the transaction.

As a linguistic pattern, the text is a part of what is being constructed. Through this process, possibilities concerning diction, syntax, linguistic

and literary conventions, ideas, themes, the general 'meaning' may develop. Every sentence that comes ahead will bring certain options and exclude the others, so that even when meanings have been developed, the process of selecting and synthesizing is constantly shaped and tested. If the printed marks cannot match with the emerging synthesis, assimilation cannot occur, or vaguely occurs, so the existing framework is revised. Here, rereading occurs. Now, a new framework is shaped until meaning is conveyed. Rosenblatt (1988) concludes that reading is a complex, non-linear, self-correcting transaction between reader and text that continues to arouse and fulfill expectations until finally, a synthesis or organization, more or less coherent and complete, emerges as the result of a to-and-from interplay between reader and text. Because no two readers are identical, the result of the transaction is not the same. Also, what is intended by the author of the text (the message he wants to produce) will not be received exactly the same by the reader. The transactional concept can be shown in Figure 1.

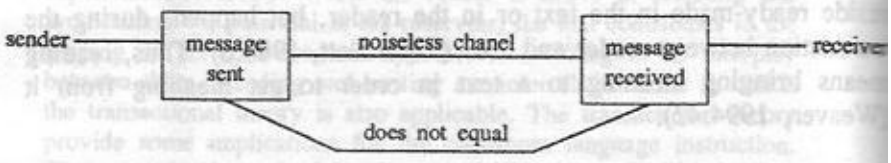

Figure 1 The Transactional Theory Schema (Weaver, 1994:27)

The Triadic Model

The development of the transactional theory is largely inspired by the triadic model stated by the American founder of semiotics C.C. Peirce. He contented that the sign (symbol) is in conjoint relation to the thing denoted and the mind. The involvement of the mind in the formation of meaning makes a clear distinction with dyadic, two-element relationship between the sign and its object from De Saussure. In the triadic model, meaning produced depends on the sign (symbol), the object, and the interpretant (Rosenblatt, 1988). The interpretant, the reader himself, has experience or schemata that influences how the sign-nobject relationship is interpreted. 'The sense of a word is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word' (Vygotsky as quoted by Rosenblatt, 1988).

The Role of Prior Knowledge

The interpretation that a reader makes depends on the experience or knowledge he has. This experience, which includes linguistic experience, provides a reservoir from which to pick up what is needed for making the interpretation. The reservoir (Rosenblatt, 1988) or the schemata (Weaver, 1994) is the prior knowledge that the reader brings during the reading process. It is not static, but an aura of potential, triadic symbolization. As the transactional theory emphasizes that there is an interplay between text and reader, the reservoir, and the potential selected also constantly changes until a perfect assimilation is produced, that is, a particular meaning for a particular reader in a particular context. But, however perfect the meaning is, it is also temporal. As the reader's reservoir changes, or the context is different, that particular meaning is no longer valid for the new transaction. Another meaning (whether similar to or completely different from the former) emerges.

The changes of the schemata can happen in three basic ways: formation of new knowledge, expansion of existing knowledge, or alteration of existing knowledge (McKenna and Robinson, 1993). According to Weaver (1994), the schemata depend in part on a variety of social factors: cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic background; age and educational attainment; interests and values; and so forth.

Not all the schemata are used in a particular reading. Only certain relevant schemata are selected and activated. This selection is based on the purpose of reading (this signifies the importance of the purpose of reading). Rosenblatt (1988) calls this *selective attention*. So, meaning is created through selective attention of the reader to a number of meaning possibilities (Hade, 1992).

Public and Private Meanings

From a single text, therefore, an array of meanings might occur. But still language is the property of a community which shares within the community members lexical concepts of the language. Thus, a word can have two meanings: private and public.

It is widely accepted that language is internalized by an individual as the result of his interaction with the environment. The particular meaning that emerges to a particular reader is a private meaning. On

the other hand, language also has lexical, public meaning shared by the users of the language. Making analogy to an iceberg, Bates (quoted by Rosenblatt, 1988) says that the tip of the iceberg is the public meaning which bases on the private meanings, the submerged part of the iceberg. So, there is an array of private meanings that underlie the public meaning(s). The meanings in dictionaries are public meanings.

Stances of Reading

It is rarely realized that in the process of reading, a reader may apply different directions of transaction toward a piece of writing. The direction depends on the purpose or stance of reading. Therefore, the approach that we use to read a scientific article, for example, is different from the one that we use in reading literary work, say, a short story. The application of a certain stance provides structure to a situation in order to limit possibilities of meaning (Hade, 1992), so that reading becomes easier. Rosenblatt (1978, 1988) is the first to use the term *efferent* and *aesthetic* to refer to those two stances.

In efferent reading, the reader focuses on what she/he carries away after reading. A clear example is when we browse a telephone directory to find out a number. Similar are in reading cooking recipes, directories, newspaper, etc. In this reading, the reader is away from personal, qualitative elements of his response to the text. He concentrates on the end sought, finding the information that he seeks.

In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is on what happens during reading. In this reading, the reader is absorbed in feelings of satisfaction, or even frustration when the reading takes place. '...the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is *living through* during his relationship with that particular text' (Rosenblatt, 1978:25). An example of this stance is in the reading of literary works like novels.

These stances, however, are not two distinctive things in which the presence of one during reading may exclude the other. Rather, they form a continuum where in a particular reading, the stance might fall in the aesthetic or in the efferent category. Figure 2 clarifies the continuum.

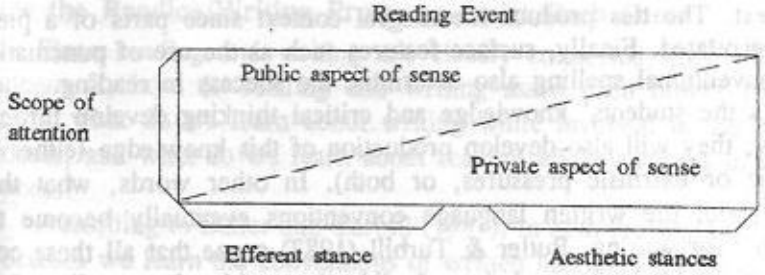

Figure 2 Stances of Reading

The figure above shows that in an efferent reading, for example in reading a scientific paper, the reader's focus is more on getting information, but it is possible that while reading some parts of the paper, he/she slows down not because the information is difficult to grasp, but because there is some enjoyment offered by those parts. Similarly, while reading a novel, a reader might find some important information in it that he/she acquires as part of his/her knowledge.

THE DYNAMIC, INTERRELATED SKILLS OF READING AND WRITING

Reading facilitates writing. People cannot write if they do not read. In the early stages, recognition of letters, word forms, punctuation, etc. during learning to read enables the children to write, either by activating their memories or by having a model from their reading. In later stages, when students read to learn, they read critically to obtain the message contained in a particular text. In this reading, they learn to get ideas and how ideas connect to each other. At the same time, the students also become more aware of the written language conventions which include presentation and layout, register, cohesion, and surface features (Butler & Turbill, 1987).

The ability to recognize the presentation and layout of a text enables the reader to differentiate among types of texts; like advertisements differ from cookery books. Register involves the appropriateness of the language used based on the subject areas and purposes; therefore, a novel and a science textbook employ different registers. Cohesion refers to the 'ties' occur among sentences in a paragraph, or among paragraph

in a text. The ties produce meaningful context since parts of a piece are interrelated. Finally, surface features such as the use of punctuation and conventional spelling also determine the success in reading.

As the students' knowledge and critical thinking develop through reading, they will also develop production of this knowledge (either by intrinsic or extrinsic pressures, or both). In other words, what they know about the written language conventions eventually become the reservoir for writing. Butler & Turbill (1987) argue that all these conventions cannot be learned through didactic teaching but reading. It is mainly through reading that the students acquire all the techniques (conventions) they know. To learn how to write for a newspaper one must read newspapers; to write poetry one must read poetry. Children must read like a writer in order to learn how to write as a writer. This clearly explains that reading facilitates writing. If the reading ability is low, it is positive that the writing ability is also low; in other words, literacy learning is not yet successful.

Reading and writing are, thus, two mutually reinforcing processes (Ede, 1990). According to the writer, both skills are the acts of composing, of constructing meaning through language; both challenge us to compose or construct meaning of a particular text. Readers, using their background knowledge and experience, compose meaning from the text; writers, using their background knowledge and experience, compose meaning into text.

In the writing process, when a writer faces a writing task, he recalls his linguistic and experiential knowledge. The meaning that emerges are the restructurings or extensions of the experiences the writer brings to the task. In writing, however, the flow of images, ideas, memories, words (the recalled past experiences) is not entirely random, even though the writer is engaged in freewriting. There is a selective process that comes into play. Like in reading, in writing the writer needs to make some choices from and synthesis of his past experiences. Parallel with the reading process, this selection is also a trial-and-error activity, that is, an activity in which the writer tries to 'match' between his linguistic/experiential reservoir with the intended purpose and audience. This selection can be very clearly seen in drafting and revising process. According to Rosenblatt (1988), the selection and synthesis the writer does is also guided by the stance (either efferent or aesthetic) he adopts.

How the Reading/Writing Processes Assist Each Other

Since reading and writing are closely connected, then our next concern is, how do reading and writing assist each other? In other words, what do we learn about writing while involved in the reading process, and what do we learn about reading while involved in writing process?

According to Butler and Turbill (1987), in both reading and writing processes we learn the conventions of written language. In terms of the text's presentation and layout, the reader learns the purpose of the writing from its layout, e.g. advertisements; and learns that symbols and other prosodics like pictures can add an impact and meaning to writing. On the other hand, a writer learns to expect different purposes as indicated by presentation and layout, and to see all the other information on the page like pictures.

In terms of register, the reader learns that: (1) the text should follow a logical sequence so that it makes sense, (2) different registers follow different sets of conventions, (3) there needs to be sufficient information to allow readers to follow what is happening and make predictions about what might be coming, (4) there are different registers for different purposes and audience, and (5) there are beginnings, endings, sequencing ideas, events. etc. appropriate to different registers. For the writer, what he learns about reading are: (1) to expect the text to follow a predictable sequence to make sense, (2) to appreciate and notice conventions authors use in different registers, and (3) to predict likely outcomes based on information given in the text.

Cohesion is another convention that readers and writers can learn. The reader learns that writers use cohesive devices like inferences to tie the text together so readers can follow it, and for the writer, he learns to expect cohesive devices used to tie text together. Finally, readers and writers also take benefits from their writing and reading in relation to the surface features contained in the text. About surface features, the reader learns about the function of punctuations in a text, and about spelling conventions. Similarly, from reading the writer learns to expect punctuations to guide him in his reading; and he also learns word attack skills like initial sound, final sound, and syllabification.

THE IMPLICATION OF THE THEORY FOR LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

So far we have discussed the personal interaction between the reader, the writer, and the text in reading and writing processes. In classroom instruction, however, there is an important component takes part, i.e. the teacher. The involvement of the teacher should provide a good environment for the students in their reading-writing activities (Maria, 1990).

First of all, teachers have to be aware of the nature of reading instruction. According to Pressley et al (1994), reading instruction aims at producing independent, successful readers who engage in such processes in their own. This implies that, although all readers read for meaning, they read differently in different contexts, depending on their purposes of reading, the nature and difficulty of the text, their knowledge of the world to which the text refers, their interests in the text, and their motivation to understand the text.

Probst (1990) draws the implications of the transactional theory for the classroom reading-writing practices. There are seven principles offered to teachers as discussed below.

First, students must be free to deal with their own reaction to the text. The words are just the symbols, and all the process happens in the mind. The students have their own mind, so they will develop their relationship with the text in their own way. This implies that instead of asking the students to answer a set of questions, the teacher has to encourage them to develop their interaction with the text, and let them deal with whatever first comes as the result of the transaction. In the initial stages, the students can be guided by the teacher. Routman (1991) recommends teachers to use open-ended questions before finally the students can formulate their own questions.

Second, the classroom situation and the relationship with the teacher should create a feeling of security. This principle talks about the condition in which the students can respond humanely and gently. Small group discussions are highly recommended for a variety of reasons such as: interactive discussions are very important in reading (Maria, 1990), and small group discussions promote the feeling of togetherness and ownership (Routman, 1991). Longer wait times also help students away from time-limit pressures.

Third, the teacher must provide time and opportunity for 'an initial crystallization of a personal sense of work' . This means that response beginning with 'I think.....' should be encouraged because such a response indicates that the students have had critical thinking which reflects their process of accumulating ideas and put them in their own judgment about the text. Journal writings and group discussions are very good activities.

Fourth, teachers must avoid undue emphasis on form in which the students' reactions are couched. This implies that the activities should not be geared on the recognition of text's style, or structure. The reader has to use what they have read and learned from the text for his own creative development. For example, after reading about slavery, the student can write a letter to, say, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, expressing his feeling about slavery.

Fifth, the teacher must try to find points of contact among the opinions of students. This is the fundamental principle for discussions in the classroom. Because reading has a social function, diversity in opinions will become the means to socialize the students with their environment. Here, they learn how to exchange ideas, to differ in points of view, and to build respect to differences.

Sixth, the teacher's influence should be 'the elaboration of the vital influence inherent in the text itself'. This implies that a text provides information as well as experience that make the students not only think about the text, but also feel that they are part of it. They are engaged in the situation and memory brought by the transaction between them and the text. The teacher has to help the students find ways to gain as much experience as possible from their engagement with the text.

Last, the students must still be led to reflection and analysis. So, the teacher has to provide room for the students to further engagement with the text by having critical analysis of it. The result of this process is whether they modify, reject, or accept the text.

JOURNAL WRITING: AN IMPLEMENTATION OF THE THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM

The implication of the transactional theory for classroom instruction as drawn by Probst above clearly shows that a reading activity cannot be separated from the other language skills, especially from writing. As two language skills of literacy, both reading and writing skills are most

effective to be taught integratedly. Relying on this theory, and convinced that a meaningful language instruction can only be done by integrating the language skills, I was trying to have a journal writing program in the course called Reading I. Reading I, given in the second semester, is the first reading class for students of the English Department of STKIP Singaraja.

Apart from the weekly classroom exercises on reading a variety of texts like chart, tables, ads, and more, I asked the students to read at home a text of their choice weekly. After that, they had to write an about-one hundred-word journal. In the journal, the students might write what the text was about (a summary), an interpretation of the text, another story related to the text, a description of a particular character, or whatever they liked to write about. Their journals were turned in weekly, and I made corrections and responses to them, then they revised and edited the journal based on my feedback . After the fifth journal, I asked each student to select one out of the five journals that they liked best for a reading conference with me. The conference was a face-to-face talk between a student with his/her selected journal and me. In the conference that lasted about seven minutes, I asked the student to read aloud the journal, checked the corrected version, asked one or two comprehension questions based on the text read, and invited the student's perception about the text by asking a question like: *'How do you like the story?'*, and other open-ended questions. The same conference was conducted again after the tenth journal was finished. At the end of the course, a questionnaire was given to the students, asking their perception about the use of journal writing during the course.

My observation throughout the program highlighted a number of important issues, namely: the text selection, the journal, the students' language improvement, and the students' perception about the program. In terms of text selection, it was found that there were a variety of texts selected by the students. At the beginning of the program, most students selected expository ones like the ones they usually read at secondary schools. Later, they asked me whether they were allowed to use other texts, and when welcomed, they began to read short stories, texts of popular songs, poems, and novels.

In their journals, they wrote summaries of the texts, comments to the texts, simple analyses, and interpretation of a character in the story.

For the text of the song *Unchanged Melody*, for instance, a student wrote about the true love of Sam to Molly as he told about the film *Ghost* in which the song was the soundtrack.

The students, as told before, wrote not more than a hundred words for a journal. As I looked through their journals, I did two things. First, I made comments on the ideas and organization of the ideas. As the students attached a copy of their texts when turning in their journal, I could check whether a summary, for instance, had covered the necessary information from the text. The second thing was correction on the language used. For the first two journals, I did local corrections by supplying the correct forms to the wrong ones. Then, the next week the students revised and edited their works based on my corrections. In the following four journals, I still did local corrections, but I developed with the students a system of symbols for correcting the mistakes. For example, for a word spelled incorrectly, I circled it and wrote the symbol *sp* above the circle. The students had to find out what the correct form was by consulting a dictionary. Gradually, I proceeded to global corrections by making only some notes at the bottom of the journal, such as : *'Please, check your spelling again'* or *'Make sure that your Simple Past Tense is correct'*, etc.

The questionnaire answered by the students at the end of the course revealed the students perception about journal writing program. All students considered that journal writing was a good exercise for them, especially in terms of language. They said that their vocabulary improved as they read and checked the unknown words in a dictionary. Besides, they admitted that by writing journals, they felt they could write. Commenting on my strategies in correcting their journals, the students said that gradually reduced corrections from local to global was challenging.

Another thing revealed by the questionnaire was that they read more than before. As they self-selected the texts to read, they said they enjoyed reading as they could read what they liked to read, and felt secure because they could express their feelings toward the text.

The only thing that they considered as the shortcoming of the program was time. They said that it took a lot of time, particularly in writing the journals. Time was also a major problem for me. With twenty-one students' journals to read and comment on every week, I had to provide at least two hours extra only for this course. Apart from this problem,

I myself felt satisfied and comfortable doing journal writing with the students. I enjoyed reading a variety of texts the students selected and their feelings through their journals. And I was happy seeing a flash of satisfaction on their faces when I rewarded their work.

CONCLUSION

The transactional theory signifies that there is a particular transaction and engagement between the reader and the text during the reading process. The implication of this theory for the teaching of reading is clear, that the teacher must facilitate the students' needs and interests so that the students' reading yields benefits for the improvement of their knowledge and language skills. Journal writing is an effective exercise in which the students can study language skills integratedly based on their interests. Students' reading the text, writing a journal, reading aloud in the conference, answering comprehension questions, and talking about the text with the teacher are all good language exercises that help them improve their language skills. With self-selected materials and opportunities to express their ideas freely, the students can realize that reading and writing exercises (the latter is considered the most difficult and neglected) are interesting language activities for them.

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