

Sample Beginning to an Essay — Highlighting Main Ideas, Supporting Ideas, and Transitions

Red – Main Ideas

Green – Supporting Ideas

Blue – Transitions

As both Sarig (1987) and Anderson (1991) have pointed out, reading in the native language and in other languages is of a highly individual nature; that is, no two readers approach or process a written text in exactly the same way. Nevertheless, there are general factors which do have an impact on reading comprehension. Much work has been done to increase our understanding of the influences of factors such as strategy choices and background knowledge on second language reading comprehension (Afflerbach, 1990; Barnett, 1988; Block, 1986; Carrell, 1983; Levine & Haus, 1985). However, a major factor that has been underexplored in studies examining the L2 reading process is the role of the reader's languages (L1 and L2). We know very little about how L2 readers might use their L1 and their L2 to help them comprehend what they are reading.

Several studies have shown that translation, using the first language as a means for understanding and/or producing the second language, is not an uncommon cognitive strategy for high school and adult language learners (Block, 1986; Chamot, Kupper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1988a; Chamot, Kupper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1988b; Chamot, [-1-] O'Malley, Kupper, & Impink-Hernandez, 1987). Cook (1992) argues further that all second language learners access their L1 while processing the L2. She suggests that "the L2 user does not effectively switch off the L1 while processing the L2, but has it constantly available" (Cook, 1992, p. 571). Cook also maintains that when working with second language learners, teachers must not treat the L2 in isolation from the L1. In fact, according to Cook, one cannot do so: "The L1 is present in the L2 learners' minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not. The L2 knowledge that is being created in them is connected in all sorts of ways with their L1 knowledge" (Cook, 1992, p. 584).

Despite these observations that L2 learners do make use of their native language, at least in the early stages of language acquisition, Cohen makes the general observation that there has been little research on the "extent to which non-natives' thoughts are in the LT [target language] and the effectiveness of 'thinking in the LT' as opposed to thinking in the L1" (Cohen, 1995, p. 100). Kern specifically points out that, "at present it remains unclear precisely what role the native language plays in L2 reading comprehension" (Kern, 1994, p. 441).

However, several recent studies do provide some intriguing insights. Haenggi and Perfetti (1992, 1994), examining first language readers, argue that comprehension is determined primarily by the efficiency with which readers can identify words and encode propositions into working memory. Bialystok (1991) makes a similar argument for second language proficiency in general. This hypothesis has important implications for understanding how L2 readers make use of their L1 and L2 when reading and how this affects comprehension. Two other recent studies add support to this hypothesis for L2 reading.

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First and Second Language Use in Reading Comprehension Strategies of Japanese ESL Students