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The Application of Bakhtinian Theories on Second Language Reading Comprehension: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Due to the dominance of behaviorism, applied linguistics, and cognitive psychology since 1960s, many research studies in reading focused on the accuracy and speed required for successful comprehension. There exists a research gap in understanding the individual differences among readers when reading the same text. This study aimed at investigating the active construction of meanings by comparing two participants' reader responses. Each of the two participants in this study referred to their personal history, educational background, and professional knowledge in their quest for meaning. The results show that they were not passively decoding the text, but actively constructing meaning during the reading process. With the application of Bakhtinian theories, the analysis shows that second language reading comprehension should be redefined as dialogic and dialectic processes between the reader, the text, and the imagined author.

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has been recognized as one of the most important areas in second and foreign language research. Due to the dominance of behaviorism, applied linguistics, and cognitive psychology since 1960s, many research studies focused on the accuracy and speed required for successful comprehension (Bell, 2001; Carver, 1990 & 1992; Fraser, 2007; Geva, Wade-Woley, & Shany, 1997; Herman, 1985; Lovett, 1987; Taft & Leslie, 1985). The epistemological assumptions behind these studies regarded reading as merely a skill-getting process. Readers have to be equipped with the skills and strategies required for “successful comprehension,” which is mainly based on their performance on multiple-choice tests. Applied linguist Koda (2005) believes that reading depends mainly on the decoding of textual cues:

Successful comprehension is heavily dependent on knowledge of individual word meanings. The widely recognized relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension attests to the crucial role word knowledge plays in text understanding among both L1 and L2 readers (Alderson & Urquhart, 1985; Anderson & Freebody, 1983; Carrell, 1988; Carroll, 1971; Davis, 1968; Koda, 1988; Qian, 1999). (p. 169)

This viewpoint is also supported by Hauptman (2000), who mentioned that grammar, vocabulary, and the length of the text determine the level of difficulty of the reading task (p. 623). According to Mackey's (1997) definitions of "good enough reading", good readers have to strike "a balance between the need for accountability to the text and the need for momentum" (p. 428). It seems that all it takes to be a good reader is to read accurately with a reasonably fast speed and to have a large vocabulary size.

I do not object the importance of speed, accuracy, and vocabulary knowledge in second language reading. However, I argue that there are individual differences which are deterministic toward the comprehension of a text. The meanings that readers created from texts and the depth of the meaning actively constructed by them are also critical in the reading comprehension processes. Second language reading comprehension used to acquire a deficit model, which asked questions like "What do learners need to do in order to decode the sentence?" and "What is required to correctly understand the passage?" Alderson's famous question on second language reading was raised in 1984, "Is reading in a foreign language a reading problem or a language problem?" But my question is, "Are there any other factors influencing the second language reading process, other than the language barrier and the reading strategies?"

On an ideological level, the reason for the emphases on accuracy, speed, and vocabulary size is based on the belief in "abstract objectivism" that

- i) Language is a stable, immutable system of normatively identical linguistic forms...;
- ii) The laws of language are the specifically linguistic laws of connection between linguistic signs within a given, closed linguistic system...;
- iii) Specifically linguistic connections have nothing in common with ideological values...; and
- iv) Individual acts of speaking are, from the viewpoint of language, merely fortuitous refractions and variations or plain and simple distortions of normatively identical forms. (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 57)

The researchers in traditional reading studies (Bell, 2001; Carver, 1990 & 1992; Fraser, 2007; Geva, Wade-Woley, & Shany, 1997; Herman, 1985; Lovett, 1987; Taft & Leslie, 1985) believe that there is (1) a correct or incorrect interpretation of meaning and (2) a generalized speed that a non-native speaker of English should achieve, and that (3) word meanings are fixed meanings which are traceable in dictionaries. They conclude that, when reading a text in another language, the plight of the reader is to master speed, accuracy, and vocabulary knowledge. All research methods or pedagogies are rooted in certain philosophies. I take on an alternative perspective by referring to the Bakhtin Circle that there can be no correct or incorrect interpretations of a text, and that the dialogic process involved in reading comprehension is crucial toward the active construction of meaning by the reader. By "Bakhtinian theories," I refer here to the ideas and thoughts proposed by "the principal members of the Bakhtin Circle during the 1920s—Valentin Voloshinov, Pavel Medvedev, and Mikhail Bakhtin" (Moraes, 1996, p. 15).

It is true that for beginning second language readers, language barriers can be an obstacle in constructing meaning. However, this case study was conducted with a native speaker and an advanced learner of English with near native proficiency, and thus the language issue is not the most prominent concern; rather, the research focused on the depth of meaning constructed by the two readers, and the dialogic interactions between the readers and the author of the text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An often cited study on reading is that of Grabe and Stoller (2002), who investigated the reading processes of fluent native speakers. Unlike Grabe and Stoller, Birch (2007) and Koda (2005) studied the differences between first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) reading. Birch (2007) raised the metaphor of an expert decision maker to portray the complex decisions required of an L2 reader. His proposition of complex decisions is supported by Koda (2005), who argues that “prior literacy experience, limited linguistic sophistication, and dual language involvement” caused variations in L2 reading, and that L2 reading is a “complex and multi-dimensional construct” (p. 3). Both Birch (2007) and Koda (2005) agree that L2 reading involved L1 transfer, which is not only about linguistic structure, but also about worldview, reading style, and reading strategy. Different L2 learners might have different L1 backgrounds and L1 proficiencies. For instance, a highly educated L2 learner of English might have read many Chinese classic novels, which might directly or indirectly affect his or her reading comprehension in English in various ways because L1 and L2 require very different cognitive processing, reading strategy, and decoding skills. It is true that the linguistic distance between the two languages and the different required skills for processing them are the prominent factors influencing L2 reading; however, many of the previous studies emphasized mainly the cognitive or psycholinguistic perspectives when looking at L2 reading.

As previously mentioned, the epistemological assumption led to the preference of certain assessment instruments such as multiple-choice questions (MCQ). For most of the high-stakes norm-referenced language tests, for example, TOEFL and GRE, the reading comprehension sessions are measured by MCQs in which the test takers only have 20 to 30 seconds to make an expert decision among five answer choices. Such measurement valued speed and accuracy over the depth of meaning, which L2 test takers construct based on their life histories and personal experiences. Currently, MCQs are still the major means of assessing reading comprehension. Consequently, the validity of MCQs for second language reading needs to be reexamined. Responding to such need, Rupp, Ferne, and Choi (2006) studied the readers’ responses to MCQs, and concluded that

Learners view responding to multiple-choice questions as a problem-solving task rather than a comprehension task, and that different MC questions do not merely tap but, indeed, create very particular comprehension and response processes. Therefore, a blanket statement such as MC questions assess reading comprehension is nonsensical for any test. (p. 441)

In their studies, the results showed that MCQs are not adequate devices for measuring reading comprehension. They also commented that “asking test takers to respond to text passages with multiple-choice questions induces response processes that are strikingly different from those that respondents would draw on when reading in non-testing contexts” (p. 441). In other words, the results drawn from MCQs do not reflect reading processes in naturalistic occurrences. Thus, when investigating reading comprehension among participants, MCQs do not adequately reveal their comprehension ability. This conclusion is also supported by Ko (2005) who states,

The possibility that the L1 condition did not significantly affect the reading comprehension test results in this study could be due to test method. The reliability of the multiple-choice reading comprehension test was more or less low ($r = 0.61$). The low

reliability suggests the possibility that the MC test might not have measured the participants' reading comprehension accurately and consistently. (p. 136)

More and more L2 reading researchers (Rupp, Ferne, & Choi, 2006; Ko, 2005) agree that MCQs are not reliable instruments for measuring comprehension, which corroborates the claim that the traditional view of what constitutes reading comprehension might not be a legitimate parameter for assessing comprehension. What then constitutes meaning in the reading process? What might be involved in the reading process if reading is not just about speed, accuracy, and strategic planning? What is lacking in the current L2 reading comprehension research?

Since 2000, alternative theories opposing the traditional mainstream definition of reading comprehension have emerged. The New Literacy Studies of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, is particularly influential for it not only reformed the traditional autonomous conceptualizations of literacy, but also defined literacy as being able to read and write. Street (1984, 1993, 1995) reconceptualized literacy by referring to two models, *autonomous* and *ideological*. The autonomous model regarded literacy as a set of value-free skills, and the acquisition of such skills is thought to be simply a cognitive process virtually devoid of contextual features in the social process of reading and writing. Literacy was perceived as a noun, that is, with fixed meaning and usage. In contrast, the ideological model recognized literacy as situated in multiple layers of sociocultural and political practices. It portrayed literacy as a verb (cf. Street's *culture* as a verb) wherein the newly conceptualized literacy is not fixed and value-free, but situational and multi-dimensional.

By referring to the New Literacy Studies, reading comprehension should not be viewed as a merely skill-based event, but a social practice situated in the sociocultural contexts triangulated by the author, the text, and the reader. Bloome (1981) videotaped the reading practices of high-school students and argued for a social interactional perspective toward reading comprehension. Bussis (1985) argues that “[r]eading is the act of orchestrating diverse knowledge in order to construct meaning from text while maintaining reasonable fluency and reasonable accountability to the information contained in writing” (p. 40), which acknowledges the active construction of meaning rather than the passive decoding of textual cues among readers. Both Bloome (1981) and Bussis (1985) agree that reading is a social interactional process requiring active construction of meaning among readers.

In recent years, second-language acquisition has been reconceptualized as socioculturally situated. Swain and Deters (2007) echoed Firth and Wagner's (1997) argument that SLA has been expanded and enriched to embrace sociocultural theory of mind, situated learning, post structural theories, and dialogism (p. 820). Though there have been studies advocating a sociocultural perspective (e.g., Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005; Kramsch, 2000; Toohey, Waterstone, & Jule-Lemke, 2000), seldom can we find the application of Bakhtinian theories on second-language reading. The study reported here aims to fill this gap by referencing the ideas and thoughts proposed by “the principal members of the Bakhtin Circle during the 1920s—Valentin Voloshinov, Pavel Medvedev, and Mikhail Bakhtin” (Moraes, 1996, p. 15).

Bakhtin (1978) combats the ideologies of positivism: “Contemporary European thought is suffering keenly from the simultaneous crises of idealism and positivism” (p. 6) and “[t]o be convinced of this it is sufficient to recall positivist linguistics and the neogrammarians' history of language or positivist classical archeology. The futile and incorrect desire to reduce ideological creation to natural laws” (p. 15). In addition, Bakhtin (1993) refutes objectivism by saying that

“[w]e have conjured up the ghost of objective culture, and now we do not know how to lay it to rest” (p. 56).

No matter the terminology: “abstract objectivism,” “structuralism,” “formalism,” or “humanistic positivism,” the Bakhtin Circle held the consensus that the world view which believed in objective truth and the research method that followed (i.e., quantified results for the generalization to other situations), failed to acknowledge the specificities that each individual and research site possessed. Thus “these objective domains, apart from the act that brings them into communion with Being, are not realities with respect to their sense or meaning” (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 2). The subsumed objective truths are thus not applicable to real life situations which are always changing, multi-faceted, and multidimensional.

For example, Voloshinov (1986) declared that “[w]ords are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology” (p. 70). In the area of L2 reading, however, researchers highlighted the importance of the learners’ background knowledge, a derivative of schema theory. Further, Hauptman (2000) advocated that background knowledge was the most important factor in determining the difficulty level of a reading task in L2 (p. 625). However, what exactly is background knowledge? It is the categorized prototypes of meaning units in the brain? When the concept of background knowledge was brought up in linguistics, it did not recognize that every unit of knowledge has its social inheritance, which is constructed socially and is situated in a particular event. I agree with Bloome (1981) that reading is not merely a connection between the text and the reader’s brain, but is inherently a social behavior. Bakhtin (1981) maintains that,

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in neutral and impersonal language, but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (p. 293)

What is being suggested here is that language is heteroglossic in nature and, furthermore, that the speaker draws upon previous ideas and thoughts and combines them to construct his or her own in a refracted way. Creativity is shown in the new combination or new ideas formed from the previous work of others. In this sense, reading is the assimilation of voices which are heteroglossic per se and, thus, if we take reading to a deeper level, it is not only a one-on-one interaction between the text and the reader, but more so an assimilation process involving the social combination of various voices of other people. I see reading as not only a cognitive process, but as a social interactional process situated in multiple layers of sociocultural contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The study reported here utilized the qualitative method. It aimed to explore the depth of meaning actively constructed by a native speaker and a non-native speaker of English; that is, to investigate the construction of meaning of the two participants reading the same text—the newspaper commentary *Time to Correct Those Western Misconceptions* written by Yang

Wenchang, which discusses Western misconceptions about China. The native speaker of English was born in the US and had various life experiences in Asia. The non-native speaker was an advanced learner of English who came from China to the US in 2002. I recruited them among other graduate students in a Midwest university. The selection of these two participants was based on their life experiences in both the Eastern and Western societies. Before the study, I interviewed them in terms of their life histories, English proficiency, reading habits, and educational background.

During the study, each participant was asked to read the aforementioned newspaper article with no time limit. Both were advised to circle or underline some of the key words in the article. The interviews were semi-structured, took place in empty classrooms, and were conducted in English, with occasional code-switching to Chinese. Each interview session was audiotaped and I was responsible for the transcription and translation of the narrative data collected from the two participants. The following three research questions guided the aims of this study:

- 1) What is happening when a second-language learner is actively involved in reading comprehension?
- 2) What constitutes meaning in the reading process?
- 3) What is L2 reading comprehension? Who defines what successful comprehension is?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Personal Histories

The researcher of the present study is a PhD candidate in teaching English to speakers of other languages at a university in the Midwest. She is also an ESL instructor at a 4-year baccalaureate college in the Midwest. She was born in mainland China and migrated to Hong Kong at the age of five. Because of her family and educational background, she is particularly interested in ESL and second language literacies.

Participant A has a degree in accounting but changed his major to linguistics in graduate school. He speaks Korean and had been to a Korean university as an exchange student five years ago. He has a strong desire to learn East Asian languages, and has studied Japanese and Chinese before. Because of his active participation in an international church, he has made friends with many East Asian undergraduate and graduate students, and thus has developed cross-cultural awareness toward various languages and cultures. Given his interest in East Asian languages and cultures, he is interested in investigating the phonetic profiles of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean learners of English. The major goal of his dissertation is to find out the pronunciation patterns in English among East Asian students. In terms of working experience, he has worked as a research assistant and an accountant in the Midwest for several years. As a native speaker, Participant A is highly educated with a strong interest in reading, and he regularly reads news published by the Reuters and the Associated Press.

Participant B has a BA in English from a university in Wuhan, China, and an MA in Political Science from a university in the Midwest. She enrolled in the doctoral program in 2004 and is now a PhD candidate in political science. She speaks Mandarin and Wuhan dialect as her first languages, and has attained near-native proficiency in English. She has two years'

experience as a Teaching Assistant in political science. In her teaching, she has been devoted to educating American students about international politics, especially that of China. She is interested in researching the anti-corruption bureaus in Singapore and other Asian countries. As a non-native speaker in English, Participant B is highly educated with a strong interest in reading, and has been reading international news by both Chinese and American publishers. A summary of their profiles is given in Table 1.

Table 1. The Researcher and the Two Participants

	Gender	Age Range	Education Level	First Language(s) (L1)	Second Language(s) (L2)
The Researcher	Female	25-30	BA, MA, PhD candidate	Mandarin Cantonese	English
Native speaker, Participant A	Male	25-30	BA, MA, PhD student	English	Korean Japanese Chinese
Non-native speaker, Participant B	Female	30-35	BA, MA, PhD candidate	Mandarin Wuhan dialect	English

What is Happening When a Second Language Learner is Actively Involved in Reading Comprehension?

Responding with an Agreement or Disagreement

The text was written in English and was read by Participant A (a native speaker of English) and Participant B (a non-native speaker of English). The text *Time to Correct Those Western Misconceptions* is a newspaper commentary and discusses international relation issues and Western misconceptions about China. The reading comprehension requires not only linguistic knowledge, but also understanding of Sino-American relationship. By comparing the readers' responses, it becomes quite apparent that both participants did not only passively decode the textual cues, rather, they responded to the propositions made in the text and gave response by disagreeing with the author (see Appendix A). Bakhtin (1981) mentioned that,

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. (p. 282)

Active participation was observed in both participants' reading processes. Participant A said that, "I don't feel like they portray China as a threat to America. I don't think they are much of a threat. I feel more threatened by other countries other than China" (Lines 141-146). As a U.S. citizen, Participant A did not agree with the author that Americans see China as a threat, at least he himself did not think China was a threat to America. Conversely, Participant B applied her personal experience as a Teaching Assistant at a university, and she refused the use of the word 'threat.' She said that, "I don't use threat. I used the word expansionism" (Lines 134-135). The participants' disagreement on the China-is-a-threat theory confirmed Bakhtin's argument that the readers are actively responding to the text by agreement or disagreement. Both participants picked up the word 'threat,' assimilated the word into their own conceptual system,

and vocalized their disagreement concerning the notion or usage of the word ‘threat.’ If we put on the lens of abstract objectivism and analyze the text by a grammatical system and literal word meanings, then the responses articulated by these two readers should be the same. However, both readers gave very different interpretations and responses to the ‘threat theory.’ In the case of an MCQ, the question can merely solicit the reader’s understanding of the author’s stance, but what about the active construction of meaning and disagreement given by the readers? Bakhtin (1981) states that,

Language – like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives – is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it. (p. 288)

Therefore, if we use an MCQ to test the understanding of the text, we might easily get unitary results. But the findings from this study show that if we do not subscribe to the assumption that language and meaning are denoted by right or wrong answer choices, then it is logical to postulate that there could be different responses from various readers worth investigating even further. If feasible, how should students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds be assessed? What would be a dialogically appropriate pedagogy in teaching or how is reading comprehension to be facilitated? A culturally responsive pedagogy of reading comprehension, it is maintained, should not engender single answers to questions posed. Rather, the students should have the freedom to express themselves in writing. Instead of finding the correct single answer, teachers should look for reader responses which can be substantiated by life experience.

Heteroglossia

Both participants acknowledged the control of the media in China. Participant A said that,

It’s very tightly controlled. The media can’t print whatever they want. The things they print have to be approved by the Party. So the news people can’t just print something that’s critical and that doesn’t present the government in a nice way. (Lines 235-242)

Though Participant A found that the article was very biased (Line 279), he did not point out that there was a second voice behind the article, whereas Participant B directly pointed out that the government was the voice behind the article: “China Daily. This kind of saying is used a lot of domestically, for political propaganda, for domestic citizens to agree with the government” (Lines 228-231). From here, Participant B acknowledged that there was double voicing in the passage, that the government’s voice was reported by the journalist. Though the message was the government’s idea, the reporter was the one who conjoined the ideas and words in a new way, that is, in a refracted way, that he appropriated the voice of the government and gave new life to it in this particular newspaper commentary. According to Bakhtin (1981), “[h]eteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel, is another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse” (p. 324).

In addition, when talking about the doubts about China, Participant A appropriated the voice of other Americans by saying that, “Americans who don’t know anything, who don’t read the news, who don’t ever interact with internationals tend to be more closed-minded” (Lines 220-224). Interestingly, Participant B also appropriated other Chinese people’s voice by saying, “The people are so brainwashed by the government. So now you talk to any Chinese probably they will agree with this argument” (Lines 83-86). Both participants are attempting to refract and reflect their own ideas by heteroglossia, that is, appropriating other people’s voices.

Though reading the same text, the responses solicited from these two readers are entirely different. The idiosyncratic response from each of them is actually a representation of how they took agency to combine other’s thoughts and create their own. This also corroborates Bakhtin’s (1981) notion that “the ideological becoming of a human being, in this view, is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (p. 341). It is exactly the “idiosyncrasies” which had long been ignored by the abstract objectivism and humanistic positivism that are critical in informing us of the individual differences in interpretations.

Dialectical Relationship

When Participant A and Participant B were reading the text, not only did they actively construct meaning from the text, they also had dialectical conversations with the imagined author. Participant A highlighted phrases such as “failed to grasp,” “Chinese characteristics,” and “western scholars,” and he was provoked to ask questions on top of those terms: “Who failed to grasp? Who are these western scholars? They keep saying Chinese characteristics. What does it mean?” (Lines 286-290). Similarly, Participant B was also inspired to ask intriguing questions such as “What is the real thing behind the government? What kind of system they are giving us even if they claim they are doing this for the fundamental interest of people? Do they allow people to make decisions for their own interest? Are the things they are doing really benefiting the people?” (Lines 243-250). The findings demonstrated how they both experienced centripetal (trying to make sense of the text) and centrifugal (validating the author’s claim) forces in constructing their own meaning. Bakhtin (1981) writes, “[e]very concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear” (p. 272). Regarding reading comprehension, both participants were able to have dialectical conversation with the imagined author which further indicated their deep level of meaning construction and text comprehension.

What Constitutes Meaning in the Reading Process?

In this study, both participants discussed their personal opinions about the text. However, due to a lack of knowledge about the June 4th incident, Participant A was not confident in giving a judgment. However, Participant B took agency to add meaning to the text. She said,

You cannot know how because the Chinese people are so much influenced by the media and by the government. And China is a highly controlled society. The government controls a lot of ideology... But whether that’s freewill or not it’s hard to tell. The people are so brainwashed by the government. So now you talk to any Chinese probably they will agree with this argument [sic]. They will basically agree with what the government tells them. But it’s based on education and the media control. So it’s hard to call it freewill. (Lines 75-90)

By assuming that most mainland Chinese people will agree with the author, and by keeping a distance from them, Participant B clearly stated her skepticism to the author's claim about the June 4th incident. She did not accept the meaning put forth by the author; instead, she questioned the trustworthiness of the text, and added another layer of meaning to the passage—how much of the public's perception of that incident is based on education and media control. Moreover, Participant B reiterated her claim that,

That's the ideological slogan. That's their ideology. It depends on whether you adopt the ideology or not. Many people talked about it [sic] that's how we were raised. Many thought that's true because that's how you're taught. But you already know about the reality. You know what they've done and you know this is not the reality or not really true. (Lines 106-114)

The meaning constructed by Participant B was not compatible with that of the author's meaning precisely because she objected to what the author presented as the truth. What then constitutes meaning? Do we count the additional layers of meaning recounted by Participant B? What should we value, the literal meaning, or the meaning appropriated by the readers?

Based on these results, it is worth underscoring here that reading comprehension involves active construction of meaning in which meaning, as constructed by readers, is not only literal, but also ideological, political, social, and cultural. Readers construct their own unique meanings based on their personal histories and social and cultural backgrounds. More importantly, the quest for meaning is not merely the decoding of textual cues, but a dialogic interaction between the author and the reader. It can therefore be asserted that for advanced learners with near native proficiency like Participant B, the difficulty of reading is not a language or reading problem; rather, it is the quest for deeper meaning that matters. What constitutes meaning in the reading process goes beyond the correct decoding of *literal* meaning. Each reader's construction of meaning is unique and specific, which in turn cannot be assessed by a universal set of MCQs, nor can it be judged simply as a right or wrong interpretation.

Bakhtin (1986) states that “[t]he text is the unmediated reality of thought and experience. Where there is no text, there is no object of study, and no object of thought either” (p. 103). Written texts are realizations or representations of the thoughts of the author and his world. Written texts are thus textualized objects of his feelings, ideologies, social interactions with the world, and so forth, while the reader, who has only the text to refer to, constructs meaning from the textualized form. The image of the author as constructed by the reader may not be close to the real one, and the meanings constructed by the reader may not agree with those of the author's meanings. More importantly, Bakhtin (1986) argues that,

Any true understanding is dialogic in nature... Therefore, there is no reason for saying that meaning belongs to a word as such. In essence, meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding... Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener. (p. 102)

The evidence from this study corroborates Bakhtin's (1986) dialogic approach in terms of the definition of meaning. If we closely examine the participant's responses, it is obvious that they were having dialogic interactions while reading, because both of them were constructing meaning, as well as relating those meanings to their personal histories and forming judgments toward the ideas presented in the text read.

By extension, if we were to acknowledge meaning as the deeper connections of world view (ideologies, life histories, etc.), then we shall equally acknowledge that the deeper meanings are situated in the interactions between the reader and the author at a particular time and space. Even if the same reader reads the same passage again in a different time or space, the meaning may change due to changes in the sociocultural context or personal history. Mainstream applied linguists may not be able to offer palatable explanations here, but Bakhtinian theories clearly can: meaning resides in the interaction between the author and the reader situated at a particular time and space.

Yet another important insight from this study relates to personal histories. How does an individual learner use his or her personal history to construct meaning? Participant A was confident when making judgment as to whether China is a threat to Western civilization. He referred to his personal relationship with Chinese people he knew from church (Lines 209-211), and he realized that his contact with them shielded him from the insecurity that most Americans had toward mainland Chinese people. In addition, he related the Kent State riot in Ohio to the June 4th incident in Tiananmen Square, and his personal experience with Chinese people also assisted him to understand the Chinese media as controlled by the government. There is plenty of evidence in the responses offered by Participant B who used her personal history to interpret the text. For instance, she used her educational background to predict most mainlanders' response to the article, she identified the double voice behind the article, and she referred to her memory about the news around the June 4th incident. The most interesting comment made by Participant B was that she did not believe that her students, who majored or minored in political science, would be able to understand the article due to the particular sociopolitical context in China. She also refused to use the word *threat* in her teaching because it was biased and unwarranted.

As previously argued, a great many reading comprehension studies overlook the personal histories of the readers. Yet important questions remain: How do different readers construct meaning with their life histories? How does that affect the depth of meaning constructed by readers? As educators, do we continue to ignore the individual differences in reading comprehension due to sociocultural factors? For advanced and adult learners of English, their life histories might directly and indirectly affect their interpretation of the text. It behooves us then to find the most profitable way to value their active constructions of text meaning. Doing so would also allow us to better understand second language reading comprehension and who the agents are that define what successful comprehension is. This is discussed next.

What is L2 Reading Comprehension?

Who Defines What Successful Comprehension is?

Based on the insights uncovered in this study, I propose a dialogic pedagogy in reading comprehension, a pedagogy which values the individual construction of text meaning. Second-language reading comprehension should not be constrained by literal decoding, speed, accuracy, or vocabulary size. Alderson's (1984) now infamous question, "Is reading in a foreign language a reading problem or a language problem?" should be rephrased: Do second-language learners construct meaning the same way as their native counterparts? What all is involved in the reading process? What else constitutes meaning among second-language learners? From the narrative data collected from the two participants, I would argue that L2 reading comprehension is not just a combination of strategies and skills; it also involves dialogic interactions with the author (imagined or postulated in the reading process), the text, and the readers.

Second-language reading comprehension should therefore be redefined as dialogic and dialectic processes between the reader, the text, and the imagined author. ‘Comprehension’ needs to denote a complicated assimilation and production relationship between the reader, the text, and the imagined author. It involves a portrayal of rich heteroglossic responses which go far beyond the literal or intended meaning of the text. For most of the high stakes public examinations, the educators or the test designers themselves decide what successful comprehension is. However, such approach overlooks the rich meaning constructed by second language learners who base their interpretations and understanding of texts on their personal histories, educational background, and professional knowledge. Finally, a dialogically relevant approach to second language reading comprehension should value the meaning constructed by the reader and should redefine what successful comprehension is.

CONCLUSION

Voloshinov (1986) argued that “[w]ords are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology” (p. 70). Indeed, all acts and deeds originate from ideologies and philosophies, and this includes the definition of reading in another language. Many language researchers (Bell, 2001; Carver, 1990 & 1992; Fraser, 2007; Geva, Wade-Woley, & Shany, 1997; Herman, 1985; Lovett, 1987; Taft & Leslie, 1985) view the reading process as the textual decoding of individual word meanings; as a result, they highly value accuracy and speed, and tend to overlook the deeper meaning behind and beyond the texts. Based on the insights uncovered in this study, I would argue that reading is inherently a dialogic and dialectic interaction process between the reader, the text, and the author. Meaning does not reside in the individual words, but on the negotiations taking place between the author and the reader. Furthermore, I would define successful reading comprehension as having dialogic interaction with the author and forming dialectical postulations of meaning which are, in turn, related to the specific time and space issues involved in the reading process. It is also critical that there can be no right or wrong answers to the interpretations formed by each individual reader due to his or her life history, educational background, and professional knowledge. In the end, second language reading comprehension is an ideological process and is situated in multiple layers of sociocultural contexts.

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Appendix A. Comparisons of the Participants' Responses

	Native Speaker, Participant A		Non-native Speaker, Participant B
Active Recall			
<i>Recall of the introduction</i>	The author starts off by saying that in recent history, there were three times when the western media misread China. The section I read covers the first two of those. The first one was... it was talking about late 80s and early 90s saying that China... The second one was that China was a threat. We didn't get into the third one.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	The author revokes some wrong concepts about China. The first concept is China has fallen. The second concept is China is a threat.
<i>Recall of the first misconception</i>	The first one was that they predicted China would fall. Because Soviet Union has just fallen in late 80s, in 1989, so after the June 4 th incident, they predicted China would soon fall. The author was saying that this is incorrect and the reason is because the western media don't understand that China is fundamentally different from the Soviet system. Soviet system is really centrally planned. The economy is a model economy but the western media don't recognize China has its unique Chinese flavor to it and that makes it different from the Soviet one, and that Deng Xiaoping has been opening up for the past like 10 years and these reforms had been going on but western media had not picked up on them. So the Western media didn't realize that the Chinese system was really different than the Soviet's and that's	13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40	China's economy is growing and China has transferred from planned economy to market to capitalism. Soviet Union had collapsed but China kind of find a way out. The Tiananmen Square is not a reflection of... The economy can grow and people will have better lives. This political system is what the Chinese people want because of the stability.

	<p>why China system wouldn't fall. The Western media interpreted the June 4th incident as the extortion of people's opinion. But they said those Chinese people are the minority, and most Chinese people recognized that those actions are not in the interest of the country. And national unity, and harmony and things like that.</p>	<p>41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53</p>	
<p><i>Recall of the second misconception</i></p>	<p>The second one was saying that China is going to be a threat. This is propagated mostly by the US and Japan. And They were talking military and economically but the reason they said that was China was growing so fast. They compete for resources and they exported a lot so people have no choice but to buy them. Then the author refuted these and argues that actually China imports a lot of things. It's the biggest importer in Asia. And so China should be used as an opportunity so that other countries can export things to China.</p>	<p>54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73</p>	<p>China's economy is growing and they produced a lot of products for other countries so China definitely is not um... is not um... threatening or because it's more about the world's economy. So in this case China is producing for the world but not threatening the world. And also the US is trying to contain China but it doesn't work. Because China is expanding to the world economy and US also try to engage in China but it also said China will hold on to or independent to hold on to socialism. Not giving in to the US. And also China is seeking peace. Not seeking... So in this case China is not a threat.</p>
Personal Opinions			
<p><i>Do you have any comments on the June 4th incident?</i></p>	<p>I think the author's trying to say that the June 4th incident was not... It was in interest of Chinese people but he's implicitly saying that the Chinese people recognize that it's not in interest with the Chinese people. Whether it's true or not. I don't know. I don't know whether it's true.</p>	<p>74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83</p>	<p>i) It's hard to say 'cause it's really what Chinese people really want. You cannot know how because the Chinese people are so much influenced by the media and by the government. And China is highly controlled society. The government controls a lot of ideology. Yes, the Chinese people want what they say here. But whether that's freewill or not it's hard to tell. The people are so</p>

	<p>The people who were protesting obviously do not think so. But I am not sure about other people.</p>	<p>84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100 101 102 103 104 105 106 107 108 109 110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119</p>	<p>brainwashed by the government. So now you talk to any Chinese probably they will agree with this argument. They will basically agree with what the government tells them. But it's based on education and the media control. So it's hard to call it freewill. ii) I think the fundamental interest is what is said later here. That their nation... stability and union. According to this article the fundamental interest would be stability, national unity, political and economic development. They would say that the path of developing socialism is China's national condition. They might label it as... It is kind of like Marxism. The communist party represents the real interest of people because they are from the working class. So only what the communist party is the best or the fundamental interest of the people. That's the ideological slogan. That's their ideology. It depends on whether you adopt the ideology or not. Many people talked about it that's how we were raised. Many thought that's true because that's how you're taught. But you already know about the reality. You know what they've done and you know this is not the reality or not really true.</p>
<p><i>Do you believe in the China-threat theory?</i></p>	<p>No. I mean when it says peaceful development, I don't view China as like a military... I don't think China wants to conquer over other countries. I don't think China wants to attack. Um but I think China wants to develop and they will do what they need to do it. And</p>	<p>120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128</p>	<p>That's one of the theories I taught my students. I let them know the facts and let them judge whether China is a threat or is not a threat. I cannot... You never know what's going to happen in the future. In the past, there has been threats, and then domestic conditions, ideological condition, economic condition. So in China nationalism is</p>

	<p>if that means... for example in Xinjiang province, you know, were suppressing protests like that. Then they will do that and I don't think that's peaceful. So I question their commitment to peaceful development. But I think internally, internationally, they do seem to be committed to peace. They don't start wars as far as I can tell.</p> <p>I mean you can read it either way. I don't feel like they portray China as a threat to America. I don't think they are much of a threat. I feel more threatened by other countries other than China.</p>	<p>129 130 131 132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 141 142 143 144 145 146 147</p>	<p>growing up. In Germany, the economy grew very strong in Nazi Germany. In China the economy grew strong. The army is strong. And ideologically there is socialism. In this case, conditions are there. I don't use threat. I used the word expansionism. It's just... If you say threat it's from America's interest. If you use expansionism, it's just a fact of that country.</p>
Personal Histories			
<p><i>June 4th incident</i></p>	<p>Um I actually remember it. I remember seeing it on TV. I was eight years old. But Chinese people... some minority of Chinese people were um... unhappy with certain things about China. I guess in terms of freedom or certain liberty things. They want a reform. I read about it but I don't remember specific things. They wanted more specific reforms and so the people had gathered for a peaceful protest oh there were so many people. When you get so many people, they made a noise and not so peaceful. I don't remember who started the violence or why. The government or the people. I am sure it's a combination of both but the result was that um there was violence and people did die. I don't think the protestors</p>	<p>148 149 150 151 152 153 154 155 156 157 158 159 160 161 162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169 170 171 172</p>	<p>i) I was thirteen at that time. During that time the government is blocking the information. The government calling those students as the... traitors. They are calling them anti-government criminals and they are doing things which are damaging to the society and they are also calling them enemies. They also say that most of the students are just deceived by those leaders. They say the leaders are used by America to bring harm to the government, to the people. And everywhere the media tell that story. And they also tell that there is no people get killed. There are only 20 people accidentally hit by the car and there's not massacre there. And we call them rebels. Those were people with that... motivations. They want to overthrow the government so that the Americans can come in. The Taiwan people can come in to take over China. So that's the story they tell everywhere. No one actually knows what really happened. We really don't know how</p>

	<p>are innocent. But I also don't think they are as guilty as the government would make them seem. Average American knows about it. Some Americans do not know about it. Those who do think this is just an example of violent government crack down on a protest. I mean it was in America too. There was the Kent State Riot in Ohio and people died.</p> <p>I know it's about students. And that was the Vietnam War. There was anti-Vietnam war protest. And people were protesting. I am sure it started peaceful but along the way it went bad and um... the police... the national guard or what. Some people started firing and there were people who died. Not like the June 4th incident. That was huge. But we don't have a lot of similar things in America. Our peaceful protest, usually people don't die.</p>	<p>173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189 190 191 192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199 200 201</p>	<p>many people died. They can block the news and we just don't know. Then there are some other places we find out from like... voice of America. The government blocked the radio. They cannot get any signals from them and at that time there's no internet. Later, a lot of Americans show a lot of killings but the government said they are forgery documents. If I know someone who came from Beijing, I ask, do you really know what happened during that time? Unless you are really close to Tiananmen you don't know either. So a lot of people are afraid of telling. They will just say I don't know either. I still don't know exactly how many people died. Whether there're tanks over people, or whether there're killings and shootings in the crowd.</p>
<p><i>Is China a threat?</i></p>	<p>i) I know a lot of people from China. I mean if you were to interview someone who had never met a Chinese person. They might react very differently. They also might view China as a threat. I think maybe I am too optimistic. At church there's tons of Chinese people. I know people from China, and also from Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and you know. So I mean I think I have this view that they are not bad people. It's just people get insecure.</p>	<p>202 203 204 205 206 207 208 209 210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217</p>	<p>Yeah. Especially it says that the government of major western countries with US take the lead formulated their true side Chinese strategies... And the whole concept how America is trying contain China and engage in China, so like United States, Japan, Australia... Economic field containment was from limited import from China. Not recognizing China's economic status. So China has always valued its independence... All this kind-of thinking of Westerner as trying to invade China. Kind of make China lose its independence, inter-culturally or economically. And what the West</p>

	<p>ii) That's my experience. I mean I had a conversation with Americans who don't know anything, who don't read the news, who don't ever interact with internationals. They tend to be more closed-minded. They feel everything with caution and you know. We can't trust those people.</p>	<p>218 219 220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227</p>	<p>wants for China is not for China's good. It says it's not... Trying to incorporate China into the international... dominated by USA. All these words say that we are not in the same page.</p>
<p><i>Understanding of Chinese media</i></p>	<p>i) Like they don't have freedom like what we have here. Their government blocked the websites and things like that. Even though they have properties right, but for a while they didn't.</p> <p>ii) It's very tightly controlled. The media can't print whatever they want. The things they print have to be approved by the Party. So the news people can't just print something that's critical and that doesn't present the government in a nice way.</p> <p>iii) I mean that's why... I didn't read the title at first. I was like interesting. So I thought it was editorial, not actual news. Like the word, appreciate, so I think this seems very strange. The news usually wouldn't tell "appreciate," the news just gives you the facts.</p> <p>iv) I feel like we have more freedom here. It's easier to find news that are critical of the government. It's very easy to find something that's critical of the president. Like Bush it's easy. People always write criticisms about him. People can't write that if they don't have freedom. But I don't think</p>	<p>228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238 239 240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249 250 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259 260 261 262</p>	<p>i) China Daily. This kind of saying is used a lot of domestically, for political propaganda, for domestic citizens to agree with the government. China Daily is for Westerners, right? Its target is to Americans or Western readers, so I don't know why... Or translate this from a typical Chinese article. It defends its position to the western countries.</p> <p>ii) Every media has its own biases. I know this is bias and kind of after studying the political theories, what is really the case? Or how the government is doing with the people. Why they are saying those things. What is the real thing behind the government? What kind of system they are giving us even if they claim they are doing this for the fundamental interest of people? Do they allow people to make decisions for their own interest? Are they doing a lot of things really benefiting the people? Those are things whether they are really doing for the people.</p>

	Chinese people can do that in China. I don't think all news are equally unbiased in America. Like Fox news it's been conservative. But if you read enough of different things, you'll get a balanced perspective of all the things.	263 264 265 266 267 268 269 270 271	
<i>Overall Comments</i>	<p>i) No, I don't really like this article coz it was so... In the beginning he said... Even if he only presents the facts maybe they were, I don't know the facts. I can't argue with that but the way he wrote it was very biased. Even if he was just presenting the facts, it didn't come across as objective.</p> <p>ii) International arena. Failed to grasp, you know like, you will read better if they give specific example that they said that. Who failed to grasp? Who are these Western scholars? They keep saying Chinese characteristics. What does it mean? I don't know what that means. It's our unique... like self reliance, our policy which is unique to us. No one else can understand us. What this means? They just label it like this is our way.</p>	272 273 274 275 276 277 278 279 280 281 282 283 284 285 286 287 288 289 290 291 292 293 294 295 296	I think I already said a lot of my opinion. It's a typical propaganda and 'cause we're taught since we're young so it's very familiar to me. Even the tone, I know that's exactly what I would hear.