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# Reading in your first and second language. On the use of prior knowledge when processing fictional texts at school

**Anna Lyngfelt**

*University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

**Abstract**

This study, which is grounded on a sociocultural framework (Lantolf 2000, Säljö 2000), seeks to determine whether giving L2 pupils the opportunity to use fictional texts that correspond with their prior knowledge makes a difference in developing text response and to identify and discuss any difference found. The use and processing of L1 teaching materials were expected to increase pupil motivation and enhance L2 skills (DeFazio 1997; Cummins 2001).

Twelve third-year pupils contributed 24 texts in L2 (Swedish). The results indicate that the use of texts in the pupils' first language does make a difference to L2 acquisition. When pupils were able to use their prior knowledge, their texts became more than twice as long, more elaborated and more independent. L2 pupils seem to belong to the group who display distinct differences between the language skills they demonstrate in the classroom and the knowledge they possess through prior knowledge.

**Keywords:** education, communicative competence, linguistic diversity, language ability, bilingualism



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Focus on textual research is not well-represented in studies of second language acquisition and nor is the study of reading comprehension and the relationship between L2 learners' reading and writing skills. In an attempt to fill that gap, this paper will discuss ideas on how L2 pupils' language acquisition may be enhanced and connected to reading processes. Following an overview of the implications of L2 learners' reading processes, I will present a pilot study which seeks to discover whether or not it makes a difference if L2 pupils are given the opportunity to use fictional texts that are (likely to) correspond with their prior knowledge when writing about the texts they have read, using the text content. As that which is being investigated in the study is how reading processes facilitate pupils' ability to express themselves in words, emphasis is on these reading processes and not the writing.

**Significance of reading skills to L2 learners**

Reading comprehension among L2 learners should arguably be paid more attention, for a host of reasons. One is that reading literacy scores decline in particular for L2 learners from socially deprived groups (National Agency for Education, 2004; National Agency 2007: National Agency for Education 2010). This raises the question of whether L2 pupils are being given adequate help to succeed in school. For instance, although it is well known that primary language schooling plays an important role in the acquisition of the majority language (Teleman 1991; Hyltenstam 1996; Cummins 2001: Thomas & Collier 2002; Tuomela 2002; Parszyk 2007), are L2 learners given the opportunity to develop and use their primary language through school activities? Homogenization is also a problem; homogenization shapes the perception of immigrants and if L2 learners in educational contexts are lumped into a vague, undefined group with no identification of individual needs or recognition of specific skills and knowledge, they may lose the opportunity to develop and attain their full potential at school (Bunar 2010). It appears that disregard of pupils' prior knowledge may impair motivation and commitment in the classroom.

**Prior knowledge and text processing**

Prior knowledge is essential to text processing and may be regarded as a useful starting point for the development of reading comprehension. Langer's research on text processing is thus relevant here (Langer 2005). Langer defines reading as a process-oriented activity: readers create conceptual worlds, including context and meanings that change, develop and grow while building up their understanding of a literary text. In other words, there is constant interaction (or transaction, as Rosenblatt (1978) would have it) between the reader and the text, since the perceptions that arise when reading are being clarified and developed by the social context in which the readers finds themselves.



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Since the creation of an imaginary world includes the readers' thoughts - what they think, feel and sense (sometimes unconsciously) - reading is characterized by the ability to use prior knowledge and reading between the lines (inferring). Prior understanding may then be described as the ability to understand at a conscious or subconscious level, through knowledge of the circumstances of the texts that the reader reads. It can thus be argued, in agreement with Langer, that readers use their prior knowledge as a starting point when reading and interpreting texts.

Throughout the reading process the reader explores interpretations of the text, first by conceptualizing the world and testing the ideas the text raises, then by stepping out of it. Langer argues that it is only when the reader explores the interpretations of the text and steps out of their imagination that the reader can objectify the reading experience. Pre-understanding is thus crucial for the reader when exploring the text content and interpretations; pre-understanding is the very premise of a reader's ability to connect to the content of a text. At school, the teacher's task could then be said to get pupils to 'clarify' in connection with the prediction. It is this clarification that may lead to second language acquisition; 'clarifications' give L2 readers the opportunity to discover connections between the knowledge they have in their primary language and the text processing they do in the classroom.

**L2 learners and reading comprehension**

When processing text, L2 readers are likely to find themselves in situations that differ from those of readers reading in their first language, and yet it is difficult to separate knowledge about reading comprehension in L2 learners from knowledge about reading comprehension in general. One reason for this is the complexity of reading comprehension; many different factors interact in a non-linear and non-sequential manner, and factors arising from individual circumstances play a predominant role. As Janks (2010) points out, reading is an active process of bringing one's own knowledge of culture, content, context, text use and text structure into an encounter with those of the writer in an active process of meaning-making.

From a historical perspective, it is possible to see how the perception of reading in a second language has changed due to dominant research interests. In the 1960s reading was looked upon as a skill for learners to acquire, mainly through the study of grammar and vocabulary, while in the 1970s psycholinguistic models constituted the base for reading theories (Goodman 1967, Smith 1979). The reading processes of L2 learners received no special attention until the 1980s, but even then the research on L1 readers constituted the point of departure and reference (Bernhardt 1991, Goodman 1985, Smith 1982).



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The reading process has been described using metaphorical models such as 'bottom-up reading' and 'top-down reading'. In short, bottom-up models emphasise textual decoding; they can be seen as data-driven and stressing the priority of the texts as input and lower-level processes like letter and word recognition. In contrast, top-down models place primary emphasis on reader interpretation and prior knowledge. They are seen as concept-driven in the sense that the text is 'sampled', meaning that predictions are made on the basis of the reader's syntactic and semantic knowledge (Goodman 1967). There are other models that are more balanced in suggesting that linguistic knowledge from several sources (orthographic, lexical, syntactic and semantic) interacts in the reading process (Rumelhart 1977), since readers may try to compensate for deficiencies at one level (such as word recognition) by relying more on a source at a lower or higher level (such as the contextual level) (Stanovich 1980).

The reading process is often considered interactive. As Chun & Plass (1997) point out, two different conceptions of interaction are discernible: (a) the general interaction between reader and text, which means that readers make use of information from their background or prior knowledge in (re-) constructing the text information, and (b) the interaction of many component skills that work together simultaneously in the process. From this point of view, reading is supposed to involve an array of lower-level rapid, automatic identification skills as well as an array of higher-level comprehension/interpretation skills (Grabe 1991, p 383, Williams & Moran 1989). An interactive approach to reading takes into account the contributions of both lower-level processing skills (identification or decoding) and higher-level comprehension and reading skills (interpretation and inferencing). Comprehension results from these interactive variables are thus supposed to operate simultaneously, rather than sequentially.

It is also difficult to separate L2 learners' reading comprehension from that of L1 learners because of the interaction between knowledge in the first and second language. For instance, it is difficult to know how L1 literate a second language reader has to be to make the second language knowledge work and how much second language knowledge a second language reader must have to make the L1 literacy knowledge work (Bernhardt & Kamil 1995).

There is research, however, which shows that differences between L1 and L2 readers exist. Firstly, L2 readers tend to start with a smaller L2 vocabulary than L1 speakers have when they begin to read in their native language. Secondly, there are differences in language processing when it comes to transfer effects or interference from L1 to L2 on the orthographic, lexical, syntactic and discourse levels (Koda 1992). Thirdly, differences in the social context of literacy are likely to affect expectations about reading and pre-understanding of how texts can be used (Grabe 1991).



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In this context, what works as a facilitator of text comprehension for L2 learners is also interesting. In 1984, Mayer pointed out three types of aids that seem to be relevant: (a) aids for selecting information, (b) aids for building internal connections and (c) aids for building external connections. Aids for selecting information mainly serve to focus the reader's attention on certain aspects of the target information. Thus, they improve the likelihood that this information will be processed. Aids for building internal representations, on the other hand, could be characterised as support for the reader's building of internal connections among the units of information presented. Building internal information then includes organising the presented information into a coherent structure of the logical relations among idea units in the text, which helps assure a coherent structure of the propositional representations. The third type of aids for text comprehension, aids for building external connections, help the reader build connections between the ideas in the text and an existing mental model, thus integrating these new ideas into the existing mental model (Mayer 1984). These aids all support the construction and extension of the mental model based on the propositional representations.

Obviously, this implies that prior knowledge affects reading comprehension, which in turn means that cultural background information is likely to facilitate the work of reading comprehension. This is also what has been stressed within the framework of schema theory; these theories point to the importance of pre-reading activities and comprehension strategy training. The idea is that prior knowledge is being integrated in the reader's memory and used in higher-level comprehension processes (Carrell 1984, 1987, Anderson & Pearson 1984). Readers need to activate prior knowledge of a topic before they begin to read and it is supposed that this activated knowledge is what facilitates the reading process.

According to this approach, text comprehension takes place as the learner actively selects relevant information from what is presented and constructs mental representations of the text's linguistic surface structure. The process here involves the interaction of the linguistic features of the text and the reader's language proficiency, since the reader has to construct propositional representations of the semantics of the text. In so doing, the reader organises the pieces of information into a coherent mental representation. To comprehend a text is therefore to integrate these newly constructed representations into the existing mental models of the subject matter.

**Teaching reading comprehension to L2 learners**

This approach, in turn, could be said to be consistent with Cummins's research on L2 learners (Cummins 2001). He argues in favour of focusing on meaning for L2 readers and points out that 'the interpretation of the construct of comprehensible input must go beyond just literal comprehension' (Cummins 2001:



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337). What matters, according to Cummins, is to affirm L2 pupils' cultural and linguistic identities, since this encourages pupils to put effort into their own linguistic development. A study by Abu-Rabia (1996) is also interesting in the context. His study of Arab pupils in Israel shows that when studying Hebrew, pupils achieved the best performance in reading comprehension when they read stories from their own (Druze) cultural setting; for L2 learners he stresses the importance of texts that pupils can relate to culturally.

Other research shows that language learning for immigrants is enhanced if teachers base their teaching on substantive context, rather than focusing on exercises with isolated words and phrases (Axelsson 1998, Author 2013). It has also been proven that active use of the primary language in the classroom has positive impact on language development among L2 learners (Axelsson et al. 2002, Cummins 2001, Gibbons 2013). It is well-established that the primary language is highly significant to pupils' identity and that identity work is an important factor when learning a new language (Back 1996, Economou 2007, Otterup 2005, Bunar 2010). Work with language development that is communicatively oriented and intercultural is also essential (Sandwall 2013); according to Feinberg (2000) teaching should focus on meaningful negotiations with the target language. For this reason, it could be argued that pupils' prior knowledge should be utilized for second language acquisition and the development of reading comprehension.

According to all these factors, text selection is important. The fact that text selection does play a role within second language acquisition has been remarked upon earlier; selection of inappropriate texts is a factor that is likely to impede language development for pupils, who are offered no opportunity for identification and interpretation. In the absence of interaction with the text, in-depth textual understanding may not develop (Carrell 1987, Author 2006b, Olin-Scheller 2006). With reference to the Swedish textbook tradition, it is also likely that textbook texts contribute to a sense of exclusion among Swedes with a non-historically Swedish background; textbooks traditionally have served nationalistic interests and celebrated the L1 language and (traditional) Swedish culture (Thavenius 1999, Author 2006a). In light of the above, contextual and discursive aspects of pupils' text response are essential.

**Literacy from an Intercultural Perspective: A pilot study**

The pilot study seeks to discover whether or not it makes a difference for L2 pupils' text response if pupils are given the opportunity to use fictional texts that are (likely to) correspond with their prior knowledge. If there is a difference, the more specific aim is to identify what difference it makes in connection with elaborated text response.

Theoretically, the study is grounded on a sociocultural framework. This means that learning, including language learning, is understood as an activity that is



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socially and culturally determined and dependent upon on the social and cultural context in which learning takes place. A split between individual and social processes, as well as between language learning and language use, is understood as impossible since individuals constantly learn and evolve in interaction with their environment (Lantolf, 2000, Säljö 2000). In other words, language learning is seen as a complex social practice rather than an abstract internalized process (Lindberg 2009).

Individuals' learning opportunities are related to the social environment and L2 learners' ability to use the language they bring to school is understood as contextually contingent and dependent on majority language representation (Feinberg 2000). In this project, knowledge and skills that L2 pupils are likely to have in their first language were considered a resource. Supported by the research of Thomas & Collier (2002) and Axelsson et al. (2002), a variety of languages, knowledge and experience was regarded an asset. The use and processing of teaching materials in the first language was expected to increase pupils' motivation and second language skills (DeFazio 1997; Cummins 2001).

A qualitatively oriented research approach is reasonable for this study. Samples of the pupils' text response were useful for discussing *why* and *how* L2 pupils responded to fictional texts as they did. This approach made sense: a pilot study cannot claim any valid, generalisable results and instead seeks to find relevant questions for future research.

To be able to discuss *how* and *why* the pupils responded as they did, their texts were analysed on the basis of the discursive function they could be said to demonstrate (Fairclough 2009, Author 2006). The assumption here was that readers are supposed to construct and enact social identities in specific social situations while interpreting what they read; by giving priority to contents and modes of expression that fit well with their perception of a specific social situation, they manifest discursive identities which determine what could be termed the functions they assign to their texts when expressing themselves about the contents.

In this study, three kinds of functions are relevant: communicative, cognitive and social. Communicative function is considered to be text response intended to communicate in a conventional, well-structured form, according to text types taught at school, while cognitive function is supposed to be typical of text response emanating from new insights and senses of coherence by the author. Social function in the sense meant here refers to text response characterised by the use of language to mark identity and/or social position.

### *The design of the pilot study*

Twelve third-year pupils selected from two different classes at the same school in a multi-ethnic school setting were asked to read two texts each and write a short text about what they had read. All pupils spoke Swedish as a second



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language but attended school in 'mainstream' classrooms. They were all born in Sweden, but it emerged in one-on-one interviews with the pupils that they used their first language at home and socially. The native languages represented in both classrooms were Arabic, Somali and Sorani.

Comparisons were made by asking the pupils to read a text in their native language and in Swedish. After each reading, the pupils were each asked to write a text connected to the contents of the texts they had read. A letter from me was handed out, with a question about how they perceived what the main character was doing in the story. Nothing more was added, except from an initial greeting, 'Hello, I'm Anna' and (at the end), 'Regards, Anna'. No scaffolding during the reading and writing processes took place.

All the texts the pupils were asked to read are fictional. So as not to interfere with regular teaching, the texts in Swedish were taken from the pupils' textbook in Swedish (*Läsdax 3*). The pupils read one story a week from this textbook, as a homework assignment, and the stories chosen were supposed to be discussed on the days I visited the classes. One story was about a boy in hospital, designed as a comic strip (but with lots of text). As a reader you get to know him when he falls ill with appendicitis and has to go to hospital and then you follow his story until he leaves hospital again. The other was a retold Swedish folktale (also illustrated), about a poor boy in the countryside who ultimately profits by giving what he earns to other poor people.

Both texts were about the same length, yet it was difficult to know what kind of difficulties the reading of them would bring. Since the pupils were all born in Sweden and attended regular school classes they were not tested for any linguistic difficulties and it is hard to judge what kind of difficulties the textbook texts would offer when relating to the contents. The pupils' teachers had told me that the pupils' Swedish was very poor. This was confirmed by me during two days of classroom observation. It is, however, difficult to say whether the communication difficulties were the result only of the pupils' limited capacity to express themselves in Swedish in the classroom.

The selected texts were written in the pupils' native languages. The texts were chosen in consultation with classroom teachers and librarians at the International Library and the city district library, with which the pupils' school extensively collaborates. Efforts were made to find texts about the same length and (supposed) linguistic level as the textbook texts in Swedish. Although bilingual librarians did their best in this effort, it is hard to tell whether the matching of the texts was successful; no deeper linguistic analyses in Arabic, Somali and Sorani were performed. The ambition, however, was that all texts used in the study should be (linguistically) equivalent from a reading comprehension perspective.

When it comes to the contents, the texts were fairy tales about a girl's Eid celebrations (in Arabic, *Samīrah fī al-'īd*), a girl playing with her mother's shawls (in



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Somali, *Xijaabkii Dabayshyu Sidatay)* and snowflakes crossing borders (in Sorani, *Du kluwa bafr*). The texts referred to here are thus texts written in the pupils' native languages, which *might* engage specific groups by promoting group identity based on linguistic affinity. (What contents that engage different groups of students, because of cultural bounds, are impossible to say.) For the choice of texts, comparable when it comes to reading difficulties, I had to rely on the librarians involved and a translator (for the text in Somali). As mother tongue speakers in Arabic and Sorani, meeting L2 learners at libraries, they helped me with translations and useful advice.

### *L2 pupils' external connections when responding to fictional texts*

Even though the study suffers from lack of deeper knowledge about the pupils' linguistic skills, it seems obvious that they found it easier to leave behind their initial reading impressions and re-examine, develop and enrich their understandings of the characters in the text, themselves and the world when they read a fictional text in their first language than when they read a fictional textbook text in Swedish. The twelve third-year pupils included in the study, who contributed 24 pupil texts, demonstrated this by their text response.

To make this clear, six pupils' texts will be presented below. These texts are representative, bearing in mind the texts the pupils used as a starting-point for their writing. Three of the pupil texts based on the textbooks were written about the story of the boy in hospital (by pupils from class A) and three were written about the textbook version of a Swedish folktale (by pupils from class B). When using the fairy tales written in their first language, three pupil texts were based on the Arabic story, two were based on the Somali story and one was based on the Sorani story. This sample can be said to be representative of the L1 languages found among the pupils in both classes. Six of the texts were written by girls and six by boys. Although this cannot be said to be representative of the number of pupils (see Figure 1), it does provide an opportunity to discuss the results from a gender perspective.

Immediately below, I will present and comment on the pupil texts from the perspective of how the pupils make external connections using the contents of the fictional texts when expressing themselves in Swedish. By the way they organise the pieces of information into coherent mental representations, it is to some extent possible to see how they re-examine, develop and enrich their understandings of the characters in the texts, themselves and the world.

### *Twelve text examples from six pupils*

Although the depth of understanding is hard to judge when *Pupil 1* writes about the boy in hospital in the textbook text, he relates to the text by commenting



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on the text and telling the reader that he has been to hospital himself. He also tells the reader that he has suffered a concussion. This is his story:

Hello my name is
*Pupil 1* I
Have be en Many
times and Have
I Con cussion
For anna

When using the Arabic story the understanding of the characters in the text is unclear at first sight, but since *pupil 1* elaborates his text by telling the reader about his own Eid celebrations he could be said to share the experience of the main character in the story, Samira. This is his text after having read the story in Arabic:

Hello anna i
Have Been Part
of Eid You Must
Fast i Ha ve
Fas t At Eid
Then You
mak e Feast anD
Then You Get Present.
And You eat
At 9
At nigh t
and r en You Mus t
Wake At
2. At night.
For anna. and
then You FasT
ag ain
an d the n
You mus t n ot eat
Food. *Pupil 1*

In writing like this, *Pupil 1* could be said to be re-examining, developing and enriching his understanding of the story. As the story is about a girl celebrating Eid, he connects to the content of the story by explaining how he celebrates Eid.



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*Pupil 2* also chooses to write a more elaborate story after having read the story in Arabic about Eid than after having read the textbook folktale about profiting by giving to the poor. After reading the textbook text in Swedish, she writes very briefly:

Hello Anna!
I wuld not give him or her. But
if I know them I give them.
*Pupil 2*

After reading the fairytale in Arabic, she writes:

Hello Anna!
Yes, I would have done like Samira.
And It was fun when I read.
Ramdan is when fasting almost whole
day. but we also eat at night.
And then we fast again. When ramada
is over there is Eid, those who
are muslims go praying, Then when they
go home them get good food and new clothes
So this is Eid.

*Pupil 2*

*Pupil 2* may also be said to be re-examining, developing and enriching her understanding of the Arabic story, while the response to the textbook text in Swedish is terse and unelaborated. By connecting to the main character in the Arabic story, Samira, she uses identification and comparison to develop her own story.

*Pupil 3,* after having read the folktale in the Swedish textbook is also brief in her written response:

Nou I SHall not give my food to someone
if I was hungry.

After having read the story in Arabic she - like *Pupil 2* - connects to the main character and elaborates her own story:

Samira has id. Samira got nuw jumper.



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There were men Who prayede in the mysque
When all peple go to mysques then they
pray and sometimes if you want you eat
breakfast in the mysques efter breakfast then pray
we  everyonne al toggether men and wommen.
and children. and when you come home
from mysque then we go to all my cousins.
And then visit. And give then food.

*Pupil 3* also seems to identify with the main character and uses the story in Arabic as a comparison to explain how she celebrates Eid. In her own story, she transitions from Samira's celebration to her own by using the description in the Arabic story of people praying in a mosque. In so doing, she re-examines, develops and enriches her understanding of the story about Samira and of herself and the world around her, when Eid is being celebrated.

*Pupil 4*, on the other hand, uses the story about the boy in hospital when reading the textbook text as the basis for his own writing. He is very brief in his response to the text, as if quickly handing over an answer: 'Answer: No I have not done that.' When he writes about the text in Somali about how shawls can be used in different ways, his text is slightly more elaborated:

I have not playid with
a Shawl. And I think that
they are not nice

In writing these lines, he takes a position and shows indirectly that he does not share the character's fascination with shawls. Still, he cannot be considered as having enriched his understanding of the characters in the text or of himself or the world. He simply makes declarative statements with only a slight connection to the contents of the text he has read.

*Pupil 5*, who read the folktale and not the story about the boy in hospital is also very brief when she uses the textbook text to write a text of her own:

Yes I have read the golden goose.
No I would never give
food even if I do not know
that person.



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When writing about the Somali text about shawls, she also writes as if she was supposed to answer a question:

No I have not played with
shawl only when I was little.
Yes I found shawls are nice.
I think shawls are nice
only because one may perhaps
not show ones hair I do
not want to show my hair.

*Pupil 5* could be said to be re-examining the text and enriching her understanding of the text by making her perspective clear when it comes to the use of shawls. Yet she - like *Pupil 4* - only makes use of the contents of the text to some extent, by letting her statement emanate from the concrete use of shawls in the story.

*Pupil 6* differs from all the others in all respects: his text is not more elaborated when using the text in his first language, Sorani, than when using the textbook text in Swedish as a starting-point and he is completely removed from the characters in the stories. After having read about the boy in hospital he describes a similar situation to the one in the textbook story:

for hussein in the hospital

once it was a
guy whose name is
hussein he wasin
The hospital for a year
he was very ill
after a montht I
send a letter and
wrote how are
you ne answer
The letter and said I
m better now.

When writing about the text in Sorani, he renders the contents of the text literally
and writes a summary:



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Kurdistan to Sweden

once it was
two snowflakes
the one in kurdistan flies
to Sweden then he
sees the girl the girl
also is from
kurdistan. Then both
fly back to
kurdistan and then send
the a letter to
Sweden

### *Tendencies and text functions in all 24 pupil texts*

Since the same tendencies are typical for all 24 pupil texts included in the study, the texts presented above may be considered representative. The pupil texts are coherent, though elaborated to a varying extent when it comes to connecting to the contents of what they had read and developing thoughts of their own.

As noted, the pupil texts were, on average, twice as long when their writings were based on the culture-bound texts. The pupil texts also seem to emanate from different perceptions of text functions. Notably, the pupil texts become more comprehensive when they fill a social function, which happens when the pupils write about fictional texts in their first language. The same difference is found, although to a lesser degree, in the pupil texts that reflect cognitive and communicative text function, especially cognitive function. (See Figures I and II below.)

It is no surprise that all text response reflects communicative function. First, the pupils were given a letter from me which included a question to which they responded. The pupil texts actually included not only a response to the fictional texts, but also to my letter. Second, the letter-form may have served as scaffolding for the pupils, since they seemed to use Swedish only when (more or less) compelled to in the classroom (not on the playground outside, for instance).

The results also show that the opportunity to write about texts in their first language is more significant to girls than to boys; the texts written by the girls were particularly likely to contain elements of social function and to be longer. It is however important to remember that some of the contents of the fictional texts might have appealed more to girls than to boys, and vice versa. For instance, *Pupil 4* (a boy) might have resisted identifying with the girl playing with shawls in the Sorani text (since shawls could have religious implications, related to girls and



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women). However, the fact remains that the texts written by both boys and girls became more comprehensive after they had read the texts in the first language. (See Figure I.) Generally, when elaborating the texts a noticeable difference in writing agility emerged: when pupils based their writing on texts in their first language, they made more extensive use of the concrete contents of the source texts and wrote more independently and in greater detail. (See Figure II.)

\I. *Number of pupils, sex, school classes and discursive function of pupil texts*

The numeral one denotes texts from textbooks as a base, while the numeral two denotes texts written with culture-bound texts as a starting point. A means class 'A' while B refers to class 'B'. F indicates that the text was written by a girl and P that the text was written by a boy.

| | 1AF1 | 1AF2 | 1AF3 | 1AP4 | 1AP5 | 1AP6 | 1BF7 | 1BF8 | 1BF9 | 1BF1 0 | 1BF1 1 | 1BF1 2 | 2AF1 | 2AF2 | 2AF3 | 2AP4 | 2AP5 | 2AP6 | 2BF7 | 2BF8 | 2BF9 | 2BF1 0 | 2BF1 1 | 2BF1 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communicative function | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cognitive function | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Social function | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

II. *Relation between text length and writing agility*



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| Writing independently, using comments, and in greater detail | Extensive use of the concrete contents of the source texts | Word count | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 35 | 1AF1 |
| | | 45 | 1AF2 |
| | | 18 | 1AF3 |
| | | 25 | 1AP4 |
| | | 15 | 1AP5 |
| | | 43 | 1AP6 |
| | | 19 | 1BF7 |
| | | 13 | 1BF8 |
| | | 12 | 1BF9 |
| | | 13 | 1BF10 |
| | | 18 | 1BF11 |
| | | 7 | 1BP12 |
| | | 17 | 2AF1 |
| | | 48 | 2AF2 |
| | | 35 | 2AF3 |
| | | 62 | 2AP4 |
| | | 56 | 2AP5 |
| | | 38 | 2AP6 |
| | | 38 | 2BF7 |
| | | 87 | 2BF8 |
| | | 44 | 2BF9 |
| | | 68 | 2BF10 |
| | | 65 | 2BF211 |
| | | 15 | 2BP12 |



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**Prior knowledge and L2 learners' text response**

The results corresponds with Janks' (2010) idea that reading is an active process of bringing one's own knowledge of culture, content, context and text-use into an encounter with those of the writer in an active process of meaning-making. Even if it is impossible to know how first language (L1) literate the L2 pupils were when they read the texts in their mother tongue, and what exactly possible cultural affinities meant to them, the results of the pilot study indicate that the texts related to the pupils' background helped facilitate the pupils' work with reading and thus responding to what they had read.

According to Carrell (1984, 1987) and Anderson & Pearson (1984) the pupils might have activated prior knowledge of a topic before they began to read (or early in their reading process), and thus activated knowledge that facilitated the reading process. If the texts in Arabic, Somali and Sorani facilitated the reading process, this could explain why the pupils were motivated to put an effort into writing agility and write texts that are on average twice as long, in Swedish. As shown in Figure II, the pupils made more extensive use of the concrete contents of the source texts and wrote more independently, and in greater detail, when they based their writings on the texts in their first language than on the textbook texts.

In line with researchers like Cummins (2001), Thomas & Collier (2002) and Axelsson et al. (2002), who all stress the benefits of using the first language for developing language skills, the results of the study are unsurprising: text content with connections to cultural background and the opportunity to use their first language in the classroom is likely to facilitate pupils' efforts. The arguments presented here, as explained by the results, support and expand upon these earlier conclusions. Enacting and constructing social identities (while interpreting the fictional texts and manifesting this in their text response) gives the pupils an opportunity to show (more of) their full potential when it comes to formulating ideas and reading comprehension. Being able to give the fictional texts a social function thus results in more elaborated text response than if the pupils see only the possibility of connecting the texts to communicative and cognitive functions (see Figures I and II).

In a more comprehensive study, it would be interesting to investigate the connection between text structure, the positioning of the fictional writers (in terms of voice), and the form and contents of the pupils' texts. It is only then that the analysis of the pupil texts would be truly relevant. To achieve this, fictional texts professionally translated in all actual languages would be essential base material; preferably a large amount of texts should be translated and thoroughly analysed and compared, before the study begins. In addition to this, knowledge of the pupils' L1 and L2 linguistic skills and reading comprehension would be needed.

Nonetheless, the present study in its current design is interesting from a discursive point of view. It seems likely that the pupils' texts sprang from a



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situation in which the pupils were motivated to write not only by connecting to prior knowledge but also by the task of writing to me. Although I remained as unobtrusive as possible as a researcher, I did hand out letters and may not have been perceived as a typical Arabic, Somali, or Sorani speaker who shared the same experiences as the pupils I met. The writing situation in which the pupils began with the cultural-bound texts may therefore have been perceived as authentic, in the sense that the pupils thought they had something to tell me that I did not know about. This is indicated by the pupils' use of my first name in their stories when addressing me.

The results of the pilot study also accentuate the quality of text coherence as an element of practical activities in the language acquisition setting. Despite the poor spelling, grammar, etc, the structure of the pupils' texts may serve as a valuable starting point for pupil/teacher interaction and dialogue aimed at furthering language acquisition. There is a logic behind the expressed thoughts on how to celebrate Eid and so on that may be used and communicatively developed; the contents of both the fictional texts and the pupils' texts could be used to develop writing and reading strategies for the pupils individually and in groups. This should be borne in mind considering how much focus within second language acquisition is on teaching isolated words, phrases etc, contrary to the recommendations of researchers like Axelsson (1998) and Cummins (2001).

Another highly interesting idea is that of not basing reading instruction for L2 pupils exclusively on models that emphasise textual (bottom-up) decoding. The pupils in the study seem to have benefited from the opportunity to construct propositional semantics from the texts they read, perhaps without being able to understand specific words or syntax in their first languages.

**Building bridges**

In conclusion, it should be remembered that many L2 pupils are likely to belong to the group who display distinct differences between the language skills they demonstrate in the classroom and the knowledge they possess through prior knowledge. It might very well be so that L2 pupils have prior knowledge in their first language but do not realise that there is any connection between this knowledge and the texts they read in their second language. This in turn indicates that pupils need help in discovering this connection – presumably with many different languages – and thus in building bridges.

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