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Submitted Abstract

Comparisons of literary experts and novices indicate that experts engage in interpretive processes to “get the point” during their reading of literary texts but novices do not. In two studies, the reading and interpretive processes of literary novices (undergraduates with no formal training in literature study) were elicited through think alouds during reading and a post-reading interview. Twenty undergraduates read one of two short stories in each study, using the same methodology, except that the instructions for Study 2 emphasized the importance of interpretation when reading literary short stories. Results indicate that literary novices noticed cues to interpretive meaning during reading but were more likely to provide interpretations for symbols and interpretive messages for the stories during the interviews as compared to when reading (Study 1 and 2) and when the instructions emphasized interpretation (Study 2 as compared to Study 1). In both studies there was a positive relationship between elaborative processing during reading and (1) the tendency to provide interpretations during reading and thinking aloud, as well as (2) the production of prompted interpretations during the post-reading interview. The present studies establish the importance of causally connected models of literary stories for interpretation. Implications for enhancing the literary interpretations of novices are discussed.

Purpose and Questions Investigated, Assessments or Tools developed

A major goal of the two studies reported in this paper was to explore the types of processing novice literary readers engage in, the features of texts they attend to when reading literary short stories, and the relationship between processing and attention to textual features and literary interpretations based on the short stories that were read. The first study investigated these questions using “neutral” instructions in which participants were told to read a short story and that they would be asked some questions afterwards. The second study included an instructional manipulation in which participants were given an epistemological framework prior to reading. The epistemological framework included in Study 2 was minimal and simply reminded students that considering a deeper meaning that abstracts beyond the literal aspects of a story is what people often do when reading literature.

Research Context or Methodology

Setting and Participants: This study was conducted in a laboratory setting. A total of 80 students participated in the studies reported in this paper. Participants for Study 1 ($N=40$, 30% male) were all undergraduates recruited from the introductory

psychology subject pool and received one credit for participation. All indicated they were not majoring in English and the majority (87%) reported that they had not taken any literature courses. Participants for Study 2 ($N = 40$, 37% male) were undergraduates recruited from the same subject pool who received the same credit as in Study 1. The majority of the participants reported that they had not taken any literature courses (78%) and all indicated that they were not majoring in English.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis: A think-aloud methodology was used to investigate participants' processing activities, attention to text features, and engagement in literary interpretation while reading. An interview methodology was used to investigate participants' understanding of the story on multiple levels including notice of literary cues, inferences about the story, symbolic and thematic interpretations and reasoning about the author's intended message. Think-alouds and interview responses were coded for presence and types of literary interpretations and mention of literary cues (rules of notice and symbolism).

General statement of findings

Results from Study 1 provide evidence that although literary novices can and do engage in literary interpretation (all participants offered at least one interpretation at some point in time during the study), they are more likely to do so when explicitly asked after reading than while reading and thinking aloud. The correlational analyses investigating the relationship between processing, attention to literary cues and literary interpretations show that there was a relationship between the types of processing observed while reading and literary interpretations. The overall picture is that processing that elaborated on the text was positively and significantly correlated with each of the variables associated with literary practices during reading as well as during the post-reading interview. Overall, Study 2 replicated the Study 1 findings and patterns of relationships between processing and interpretations. There was an increase in percentage of participants who offered interpretations while reading and thinking aloud for Study 2 when compared to Study 1.

Implications

The findings from the present studies indicate the importance of elaborative processing during reading for interpretation, a complex reasoning task. The relationship between elaborations and interpretations suggests that if novices engage in the construction of a strong situation model representation of the text, they are well positioned to abstract a broader message from the text.

Overall, findings from both studies suggest that, despite relatively infrequent mention of interpretations while reading, novices do engage in some "expert-like" behaviors in that they do attend to cues to interpretive meaning and that, especially when asked, they are perfectly capable of providing interpretations for the symbols and do connect these to larger messages about the character, the world, and human experience.

The increase in percentage of participants who offered interpretations while reading and thinking aloud when given an epistemological orientation (Study 2) provides support for the claim that literary novices possess at least rudimentary knowledge and practices

needed to engage in literary interpretive reasoning. However, they may not consider such reasoning an integral part of reading in the same way that experts do.

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