

Learning-shop of the KODOMO Project:  
Introduction of Reading Identity in Texts in Toronto

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1. Reading as Social and Cultural Practice to Negotiate Identities

Reading texts is an active process of connecting the readers' previous knowledge and new understandings of the texts, and also connecting the texts with other contexts. Overall, it is not merely a process of decoding. Furthermore, reading texts can be a practice that readers connect their understandings of the text with socially and culturally shared understandings. In the cultural-historical model of reading (Cole & Engestrom, 1993: Cole, 1996), the necessary cognitive processes are distributed, for example, among a teacher, the student and other students, and cultural artifacts in a classroom. Teachers and adults read texts, mediated with the cultural past, and project an ideal and cultural model of the future. In other words, the children access to the cultural past (adults' world mediated by a text), and projects a (ideal and cultural) future model based on that, through a reading activity with adults (Cole & Engestrom, 1993, p.19). Considering the case of reading in a classroom, understandings of texts can be achieved through the students' acquisition of shared and cultural understandings in the classroom. Thus, the cultural historical model of reading provides a perspective of considering learning to read as the appropriation of cultural and social understandings.

Critical pedagogists position reading activity with inquiry of identity by readers. Freire (2000) conceptualizes literacy learning as the educational practice that raises the learners' consciousness toward the social inequity and deepens an understanding of the learner's position within the social world. In this sense, reading texts is the activity of "reading the world" where readers connect text messages with their functions in the social world, actively ask questions such as whose perspective is in the text, whose voices are missing, and question what the alternative perspective would be like. Freire's perspective shows that reading texts involves a process of understanding the reader's identity in relation to the broader society and history.

Methodology of reading can encourage culturally diverse students and parents to bring their own identities into learning of texts. Ada (1988) develops the methodology of Creative Reading for Spanish background children and parents through which the participants start to recognize their historical roots. This educational practice contributes to understanding the text in

relation to readers' previous experience, critically analyze the texts, and apply readers' understandings to real life situations.

## 2. Context of Reading Identity in Texts: Japanese-Canadian Youth and Community Language Class

“Reading Identity in Texts” is an educational practice as a reading group as well as the research site, which encourages readers to evoke inquiries into the texts' world with the collaboration of other readers. Participants in Reading Identity in Texts are youth living between multiple borders of languages, ethnicity, and nations. Through the reading activity, they are negotiating their identities within these borders and between the cultural past and the (ideal and cultural) future.

Reading Identity in Texts has been conducted in a Saturday community language school of Japanese in Toronto. The term “community language” is one of the terms to refer to the minority languages other than official languages, English and French (J. Cummins, personal communication, September 20, 2006). I selected to employ this term, community language, in order to emphasize the aspect of the language, as a tool for the language users to participate in the linguistic communities. In addition, the education to maintain the language is often organized by the linguistic communities with the collaboration of parents. In Ontario, Canada, the term “heritage language” was used, and was officially changed to “international language” in October 1993. The attempt for this change was to avoid the misrepresentation of “heritage” language which has a connotation of learning about past traditions, rather than language skills (Cummins & Danesi, 1990; p.8).

The participants in my research are 12 Japanese-Canadian youth ranging in age from 14 to 22 years old. They are fluent in English because they were born in Canada, or they came to Canada at an early age. They all go to the “regular” high school in Canada, where all classes are conducted in English. However, the environment of Japanese use varies. Some of them use Japanese everyday as a home language in order to communicate with family members. For others, the chance to use Japanese is only limited to the community language school. In terms of ethnicity, 10 of them have Japanese ethnic origin. However, their ethnic background is diverse considering the fact that seven of them are children of inter-ethnic relationships such as Japanese-Korean, Japanese-Arabic, Japanese-French, and Japanese-Caucasian. Also, four of them moved from one nation to another, and experienced the change from, for example, a Japanese to a Japanese-Canadian. The rest of eight participants were born in Canada. All of the

participants have an experience of studying in Japanese schools or stay in Japan even in a short period of time. Thus, the participants are crossing multiple borders of language, ethnicity, and nations.

The Heritage Language Program has been institutionalized within the public school system in Ontario, Canada since 1977 and is provided with full funding for community language instruction outside the regular five-hour school day. The school board needs to agree to establish a program to meet the ethnic community’s needs if held outside the school system. Two and a half hours a week is funded for these students from Junior Kindergarten through to Grade 8. The teachers are paid by the government support funding as well as by parents, and are recruited mainly by the parents.

Reading Identity in Texts is being conducted with the students of Grade 9 and above, and they are motivated to continue learning Japanese after finishing the funded community language program. Although there are other Japanese language that can be taken for high school credit in Toronto, participation in this Japanese class is not counted for school credit. The information mentioned above regarding the context of Reading Identity in Texts is summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1.  
Basic Information Regarding the Participants and the Japanese community language school

Participants	Japanese-Canadian Youth (between the age of 14 and 22) (Permanent) Immigrants in Canada/ Born in Canada
Where	At Japanese Community Language School in Toronto, Canada
Participants’ Mother Tongue	English/ Japanese
Official Language in Canada	English/ French
Frequency of Reading Identity in Texts	Once a Week, on Saturdays
Affiliated Organization of the Community Language School	Parents Organization, Regular Schools (Credit Exchange up to G8), Cultural TV Program, Japanese Canadian Cultural Center

### 3. Reading Identity in “*Obasan*”

Literature for the first session of Reading Identity in Texts (from March 2006 to June 2006) was intentionally selected. I introduced the novel, “*Obasan*” written by a Japanese-Canadian writer, Joy Kogawa (1981). The novel is a fiction story, which draws upon two families’ sagas in the history of internment and relocation of Japanese-Canadians during and

after the Second World War. The characters in the novel, including the main character Naomi Nakane handle this experience in different ways, and therefore the official history is told in a personal manner (Byrne, 2002). McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) emphasized the importance of text selection for critical investigation of texts among students and suggested using texts, which could be interpreted from multiple perspectives, and treat the social issues within its history, such as Japanese-American or Japanese-Canadian internment and the Holocaust experiences. Participants are Canadian students who have Japanese ethnic origins. As a result, their connection to the novel, "*Obasan*," and their comparisons between the historical past and their present lives is crucial for examining their understanding of self. In addition, I chose this novel because (a) it is a text which has been used in an educational context (e.g., Dyer, 1995) and has been critiqued in the study of literature (e.g., Byrne, 2002), (b) it includes cultural contents with which the participants can connect (Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 2000), and (c) it uses the rhetoric of word-level code switching between Japanese and English. The final point (c) is important for the participants to evoke the discussion on their unique language use of Japanese, English and the mixing of these two languages. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, a translation text in Japanese and opera version of the text are available.

#### 4. Intervention and Expansive Learning

My research methodology in Reading Identity in Texts is strongly influenced by the developmental work research (Engestrom, 1987; 1991), which analyzes the collective activity system through the researcher's intervention. Engestrom (1999) specifies that Vygotsky's method of dual stimulation (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) is a foundation of this developmental work research. Different from a traditional view of experimental designs, this dual stimulation method emphasizes the role of interpretation and reconstruction of the task by the participants in experiments. More specifically, the experimenter acknowledges the fact that she/he cannot fully control the task as she/he designed, because participants interpret and reconstruct meanings of the task with their psychological tools. By utilizing this nature positively, Vygotsky provided the participants potentially useful mediating tools, and investigated the emergence of new psychological formation of the participants. This intervention can be conducted in the form of applications of new tools to re-mediate the activity system, in the developmental work research method. Thus, the researcher as an interventionist can actively engage in the local activity system by mediating, recording and analyzing the numerous cycles of expansive learning.

The first session of Reading Identity in Texts functions as the research site to investigate the possible interactions which enable participants to engage in reflective processes to construct and (re) construct their identities. Using discourse analysis method, I carefully examined the discussions happened among participants, and identified interactions which emerged as an intersection between contextualizing their identities and literary understandings. Through the analysis of the first session, I developed the methodology of reading which can encourage participants to engage in reflective process. This methodology subsequently can be examined through the second session of Reading Identity in Texts.

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