

Fluency Miscue Analysis and ELLs

The reading process is dependent on the reader's prior information about a topic and on motivation to read. Because no two people have identical knowledge, experiences, and thoughts, readers do not match the author's meaning but only approximate it. Because of the imperfect match between author's message and reader's expected message, there will be differences—deviations from the print representing these messages.

K. Goodman (1967) coined the term “miscue” to reflect his belief that the cues on the page can mislead the reader and cause the reader to predict something different from what is printed. The differences between what is printed and what is read are not random error or evidence of careless reading but are a result of a reader's active use of various cueing systems as the reader constructs meaning from the text.

Four cueing systems are used simultaneously in predicting meaning from text and creatively constructing meaning in the reading process:

- 1) Pragmatic system (social and cultural context and beliefs about ability to read)
- 2) Semantic system (words and associated meanings)
- 3) Syntactic (glue of grammar)
- 4) Graphophonic (sound system and writing conventions)

Text may provide cues which can mislead readers, causing them to predict something different from what is printed on the page. Syntactic irregularities, story structure irregularities, shifts in narrative style, and differences between expectations (cued by background knowledge and experience) and information found in the text causes miscues in Rigg's study (1986).

Second language learners of English may not know where to look for cues in the graphophonic, semantic, and syntactic systems and will be slower in sampling from them, sometimes causing “tunnel vision” from reading too slowly and intensively.

The basic assumption underlying miscue analysis is that a reader's miscues are “windows on the reading process” (Goodman, 1967). That is, patterns of miscues show how the cueing systems are being used in the sampling, predicting, and confirming cycles.

Miscues should not be considered in terms of *quantity*. In fact, ESL research has shown very poor correlation between number of miscues and quality of comprehension as demonstrated through retelling tasks. In several studies of LEP children's oral reading miscues, those who focus on word-perfect accuracy lost the meaning of the story, and those who had the highest number of miscues gave the best retellings. Focus seemed to be either on meaning or on form in these studies.

Not all miscues deserve equal attention. *Quality* of miscues refers to the degree to which they significantly deviate from the meaning represented in the text.

Miscues that are mispronunciations should generally be ignored since ESL students may still not have mastered the sound system of English and may be pronouncing English words using first language rules, especially when words are cognates.

Proficient readers tend to rely less on graphophonic information, tend to predict more actively, preserve meaning when they do make miscues, and make more spontaneous self-corrections of

unacceptable miscues. Nonproficient readers tend to rely more on surface graphophonic information than on syntactic and semantic meaning in reading.

Function words (articles, prepositions, etc.) are typically the most frequent category of words to be omitted or inserted in text. The surface structure of the reading may vary but the deep structure (meaning) will be retained. Some research shows that omissions and deletions are less frequently associated with meaning distortions than are substitutions and that this type of miscue should be considered more carefully in analysis.

Dialect Miscues

Research has shown that ESL learners and speakers of “nonstandard” dialects may read passages and add (or more frequently omit) certain surface grammatical markers that are not always present in the first language, their interlanguage (that is, a language system between the first and second language being learned in that rules of the first influence the production of the second), or their dialect.

The most frequent examples of such deletions of grammatical surface markers related to dialects of English are:

- 1) Absence of past tense marker (“look” for “looked”, “have”/”had”)
- 2) Absence of plural noun marker (“thing” for “things”)
- 3) Absence of third person singular verb marker (“look” for “looks”)
- 4) Absence of possessive noun or pronoun marker (“Bob” for “Bob’s”)
- 5) Substitution, omission of forms of “to be” (“was” for “were”, “we” for “we’re”)
- 6) Hypercorrection (use of two grammatical markers of the same type: “likeded” for “liked”)

With oral reading, we do not need to be concerned about such miscues, as they do not reflect lack of understanding; rather, they are an alternative surface structure common in the reader’s everyday speech. Having understood the deep structure (the meaning), the reader simply expresses it in an alternative surface form (the words).

Positive attitudes are needed toward reading miscues, in general, and toward dialect and ESL miscues, in particular. In a survey in which 94 Midwestern elementary teachers rated miscues as acceptable or unacceptable, Tovey (1979) found that only 16% of the teachers would not accept miscues that were syntactically and semantically appropriate in their own dialects. However, when the miscues reflected translation into the reader’s dialect, 60% of the teachers would not accept the miscues. Other research has replicated these results. Teachers must have the knowledge, experience, and positive attitudes which will enable them to recognize and accept miscues that merely reflect an alternative spoken dialect.

Some research indicates that it is the best readers who produce the most dialect-based miscues, supporting the assumption that good readers express their understanding of the author’s deep structure in a surface structure which is partially their own.

Suggestions in Administering and Interpreting Running Records

- Select topics the reader will be familiar with but use materials that are new.
- Don’t draw conclusions based on one text sample. Give the reader more than one way to demonstrate strengths (and weaknesses).
- Analyze 25 or more consecutive miscues, preferable from the same reading selection. The quality of miscues change after the first 200 words of text as the reader gets a better sense of the meaning of the text.

- Always provide a check on miscue analysis by asking readers to retell to demonstrate recall and understanding. This provides a balance to the assessment and a measure of both the process and product of reading.
- Use an entire selection when following up with a retelling, so it will have “episodic” coherence.
- Do not mistakenly associate near perfect pronunciation or word calling by ELLs with reading comprehension.
- Insistence on exact word-by-word oral reading may be counterproductive.

Since we read more effectively when we read silently, the major portion of reading assessment should focus on silent reading comprehension. ELLs need plenty of chances to read silently once they are past the beginning stage since this is the way they will develop fluency and speed. They should read topics that are meaningful and interesting to them. Retelling of predictable stories and content is a good way of assessing reading ability.

Impressionistic Scoring of Miscues

Various taxonomies of reading miscues have been proposed. Reading teachers will want to choose or devise one that best suits them and their students. When listening to a student read and analyzing results, it is critical to ask: **“Was the miscue either meaning-preserving in context or corrected?”**

More Information Means a Better Assessment

When teachers know something about the native language of students, they are better able to interpret results and determine if the miscue is really an error if whether there is transfer or interference from the first language.

In addition, teachers can rate the following information on a scale from seldom to usually:

- 1) Does the reader use preceding context to predict what is coming next?
- 2) Do the reader’s miscues make sense in context?
- 3) Does the reader correct miscues that do not make sense in context?
- 4) Does the reader pay too much attention to graphophonic cues and too little attention to syntactic or semantic cues (or vice versa)?

What are important are not the miscues in and of themselves, but rather the reasons for them and whether they interfere with deriving meaning from the text.

Sources:

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