Understanding and explaining the relationships between main ideas and supporting details are well-known and necessary processes in transitioning adult learners to college-level literacy abilities (Neufeld, 2005). The use of digital video cameras, which students operate to film each other, offers a dynamic 21st-century option to investigate and teach critical thinking, reading, and writing processes.

In this article, we present pedagogical examples from an ongoing action-oriented research project for integrating digital video cameras into the instruction on reading and writing processes in pre-college courses. We first provide a brief explanation of a theoretical approach grounded in older Vygotskian and newer semiotic approaches to adult literacy, all of which support the idea that social interaction is germane to understanding human cognition (Tomasello, 2003; van Lier, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). We then present a specific process—Main Idea Video Presentations—for integrating digital video cameras into students' productions of summaries and responses to readings. Finally, while referring back to the overall theoretical approach, we present a brief summary of student exemplars from our data pool to demonstrate the process and potential of these methods. We begin with our overall theoretical approach.
Signification, Mediation, Pointing, Intention-Reading, and Joint Attentional Frames

Of particular importance to our action-based research and classroom procedures are the processes of signification, mediation, and the concepts of intention-reading and Joint Attentional Frames (Tomasello, 2003). Each of these processes and concepts are inseparable from the act of pointing, which is a crucial part of communication and language learning, and emerges early in human development; pointing also develops as part of the many semiotic systems that are a part of human existence (Kita, 2003; Tomasello, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Before providing more on the act of pointing and the creation of Joint Attentional Frames, we first present signification and mediation.

Signification

Signification can be generally understood as the process of assigning meaning to objects, ourselves, and the world around us (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). One illustrative paraphrase of a well-known Vygotskian (1978) description of signification is the idea of tying a knot in rope to indicate the number five, as in the first duck farmer who ran out of fingers and toes to count her ducks. Suppose she grabbed the nearest vine, tied a knot, and assigned each knot to mean five ducks. The knot is now a sign that stands for five ducks, and this is precisely the kind of mind-inseparable-from-sign cognitive relationship that is prominent in the field of semiotics (see Eco, 1976; Peirce, 1991), the process of creating and using signs (see van Lier, 2004, p. 57).

Mediation

Signification is also inseparable from the process of mediation, which can be described as the use of concrete objects and abstract signs and concepts to regulate and monitor mental activity. This idea can be illustrated in the use of knots as mediational means (Wertsch, 1998, 2007) for the farmer who needs to calculate how much grain she needs for her ducks. Perhaps the farmer will also draw a map to mediate a plan for how much land she needs to clear for grain. As the farmer creates additional mediational means for regulating her physical activity with the world, she works with more complex, layered systems of mediational means (see also Davydov, 1999), including language.

The Act of Pointing

Kita (2003) argues that all pointing activity is foundational to human communication and cognition (see also Goodwin, 2003; McNeill, 2005; Tomasello, 2003). Concrete and abstract deictic gestures (i.e., pointing
gestures) are ubiquitous in our everyday communications. For example, when asked the question, “Do you live around here?” it is very common to see people in a conversation point at the floor, and perhaps in the general direction of another town, or over their shoulders to indicate a past event (see McNeill, 2005). In addition to indicating placement in time and space, pointing may also indicate a hierarchical order. In so many formal lectures involving visuals, speakers point to information in a variety of ways to indicate some meaning and/or entity they want to make prominent, and as different types of media emerge, we are constantly pointed to specific intended meanings by creators of text, through music, light, sounds, and colors (Kress, 2003). Moreover, pointing is also a crucial feature of the unique human practice of reading the intentions of others (Tomasello, 2003).

**Intention-Reading and Joint Attentional Frames**

Tomasello (2003) described the links between pointing and intention-reading as comprising Joint Attentional Frames through two different, yet related circumstances. As an example, Tomasello describes an adult coming into a baby’s room with a diaper; in a triadic arrangement, the adult looks at the diaper, and the baby follows the adult’s gaze and also looks at the diaper (i.e., in this example, gaze is an act of pointing). The baby understands that the diaper signifies an intended sequence of events and context of changing the diaper. If the adult comes in later with a ball, the baby follows the adult’s gaze and movements to the ball and understands that the intended sequence of events and context is now playing with the ball.

For adults, Tomasello (2003) provided an example of how one might communicate in a foreign country at a train station without knowing the language. To communicate with the ticket agent, one could point at the train, a map for a destination, and buy a ticket, all the while depending on pointing to items to make the intended meaning clear. This creates a complex series of Joint Attentional Frames in which the act of pointing together with different entities mediates meaning and context.

**The Action-Research Project**

In this section, we describe a reading strategy that emerged from an action-based research project, and use student experiences as exemplars. The reading strategy is focused on understanding and explaining the relationships between main ideas and supporting details, using a process of students filming themselves discussing a text. The student exemplars presented are from the first semester of formal, systematic data collection from the project. All students in the project followed the
same current general directions we present here. We are following a broad, action-based research approach (Stringer, in press), supplemented by case study guidelines proposed by Yin (2009).

To track the creation of meaning across different modalities and to provide students and researchers with concrete units of analysis for assessment, we have translated this framework into three interrelated features that can often be found in communication: 1) speech, 2) a visual, and 3) the act of pointing (i.e., speech becomes writing in many contexts; the act of pointing is taken over by transition words and phrases and other grammatical forms; concrete visuals become metaphors) (see Kress, 2003, for extensive discussion on different modes of communication). We now turn to a description of the activity, including directions for integrating the activity into pre-college reading courses and other similar educational contexts. These directions are illustrated by exemplar data collected during this early phase of the action research project. The current iteration of the directions has been adjusted over several semesters, and these directions are proposed as a way to introduce the digital video cameras in reading classrooms, though, of course, with local modifications.

The Process and Potential: Directions and Data Examples from Two Students

The purpose of this strategy is to work on identifying the relationships between main ideas and supporting details, and this involves students filming themselves discussing texts. As the first step in the process, students are taught to use two well-known guide questions that appear in many pre-college English language/literacy textbooks to create main idea statements:

What is the topic?

What does the Author want you to know?

Students practiced using these two guide questions to create an original statement or two that expresses the answer to these questions; the answer is a main idea statement that is intended to be in their own words. Below the main idea statement, students identify material quoted directly from the text that they can use to support the main idea. The following two figures from one student illustrate the expected outcome. Figure 1, the first example, is a scratch paper that this student practiced on before putting these statements on his poster, which is the second example, displayed in Figure 2.
Figure 1. The draft of a main idea and supporting statement that will be revised and placed on the visual for the video recording.

What is the topic?
What does the author want you to know?

Create an original Main Idea Statement.

The topic is Vegan.

The author wants to proof that been vegan is healthy.

TSO. Been Vegan is a very healthy way of living.

"If you make the choice to go vegan, you can take a big step toward improving the environment."

What really makes me angry, though, is that many people think veganism is a big joke.

To produce an equivalent amount of vegetables and meat, the meat takes ten times as much land as the vegetables.
After the visual is produced, students used the directions listed below.

Basic Steps for Main Idea Video Presentations:
1. Begin by reading your pseudonym while pointing to it;
2. Next, read the title of the paragraph (if the paragraph does not have a title, give it one);
3. Then, read the main idea statement. Try to remember to point at the poster while reading;
4. Introduce your supporting details in sequence by saying the phrases below that are in quotes:
   a. “The first supporting detail is”: (read the supporting detail).
      “This supporting detail supports the main idea because”: (say why you think this supporting detail is related to the main idea);
   b. “The second supporting detail is”: (read the second supporting detail);
“This supporting detail supports the main idea because”: (say why you think this supporting detail is related to the main idea);

5. Conclude by saying something such as: “And that concludes my Main Idea and Supporting Detail Presentation about”: (say your topic here);

6. Download to appropriate archiving resource; make sure both you and the instructor have copies.

The Process and Potential: Two Students’ Examples

In this section, we present a summary of salient moments from two student exemplars that illustrate the process and potential of integrating digital video cameras using the framework and directions presented in this paper. One of these students, Dee, was specifically directed to find editorials, and after students watched their videos and answered guided questions, one of the lesson objectives was for students to create written summaries and responses, each of which were to contain a quote. In contrast, Andy was working specifically on mastering the video recording process using a reading on the topic of vegans.

Both students were non-native speakers of English, and Dee was enrolled in a pre-college reading course for non-native English speakers, though Andy ended up in a pre-college writing course for native speakers. Andy was recruited as a private, one-on-one, paid student participant ($10.00 an hour) so that we could have a model reference point for the procedures.

A prominent feature in all the data is how the students were explicitly positioned and prompted to point and refer to the text on the visual, a third entity. To make a point clear to an audience, students and audience were arranged in a triad, as in the adult/diaper/baby example or the train/map/ticket example, creating a rich context of meaning-making intentions. Students were creating Joint Attentional Frames, assigning meaning to chunks of language, along with distinguishing between more to less relevant chunks (e.g., evaluating their own supporting details), and making abstract relationships between supporting details and main ideas more concrete for the audience and themselves.

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1 Video recordings of the two students can be accessed at http://transitional-literacy.org/?page_id=9571. The password is rabbit57
Andy. Andy represents the ideal video recording by his explicit pointing to different supporting details and explaining relationships to the main idea, thereby purposefully making his meaning clear to the audience. Recall Tomasello’s (2003) description of the triadic arrangement involving pointing at an entity to indicate a relationship. Referring again to Figure 1, which displays the notebook paper with responses to the two guide questions, when this is compared to the drafts on the visual used in the video recording (displayed in Figure 2) that Andy discussed with the first author prior to making the video, revisions are made explicit. Through a purposeful arrangement of a triad (i.e., two interlocutors referring to a visual) with the paper in front of them, the first author prompted Andy to make corrections to very common types of word-form errors (e.g., “Been” for “Being” or “proof” for “prove”). Through this example, and many others in Andy’s and other students’ data, the potential for prompting more revisions is enhanced by the video recordings and procedures.

Dee. Dee, who did not correctly pick an editorial for a reading (she picked a news article about a kidnapping), is challenged by distinguishing between quoted material and her own words. She has the typical kind of difficulty in paraphrasing that many students demonstrate at this level; however, she is making some progress, which she demonstrates in her response and some of the revisions. As with Andy, salient in her data are the changes in revising the first draft and the second draft; for example, Dee moves around the word “inexplicably,” a word copied directly from the reading, to another position on her visual, in her writing, and part of her speech, thus demonstrating the use of a specific vocabulary word across different modalities and in different places. This type of moving of individual words, phrases, and other grouped clusters, again illustrates how the speaker is creating a rich context for revision and language learning, while providing another example of how this specific positioning of speech, the visual, and the act of pointing work together to create a Joint Attentional Frame, clarifying the speaker’s intentions. For Dee, as often happens, she first verbally expressed on the video recording what later will appear in a draft of formal writing. Also, by watching her own video, Dee was able to evaluate what seem to be the most important supporting details.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented Tomasello’s (2003) concepts of intention-reading and Joint Attentional Frames, along with the act of pointing, mediation, and signification as the theoretical concepts driving the integration of digital video cameras into the reading comprehension process. As teacher-researchers, we have found that the identification of speech, the act of pointing, and a visual can act as primary reference
points for students and instructors to assess and track the creation of complex semiotic systems. Summaries of the raw data from these exemplars have been shared to supplement the direction we have provided and to prompt collaboration and feedback from readers. We humbly offer these processes and the potential of digital video recording activities as a way to address the challenges our students face with literacy.

References


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