

Perspectives and Settings for Teaching Reading

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Resumo: *A leitura admite uma variedade de interpretações por leitores diferentes, amparados por diversos fatores tais como propósito, conhecimento prévio e relacionamento entre o leitor e o texto. Este artigo tem por objetivo apresentar algumas implicações pedagógicas para o ensino da leitura em língua estrangeira. Com o intuito de auxiliar professores de língua estrangeira, apresento uma visão panorâmica de aspectos relevantes para o ensino da leitura em um ambiente dinâmico e interativo.*

Palavras Chaves: *ensino; leitura; texto.*

Abstract: *Reading a text allows a variety of interpretation by different readers, governed by factors such as purposes, background knowledge, and the relationship between the reader and the text. This paper presents some pedagogical implications to the teaching of reading in a foreign language. Therefore, in order to help foreign language teachers, we present an overview of some relevant aspects to the teaching of reading in a dynamic and interactive setting.*

Key words: *teaching; reading; text*

1. Introduction

Reading a text does not imply that it does not have many unitary meanings potentially accessible to all. It rather allows a variety of interpretation by different readers, governed by factors such as purpose, background knowledge, and the relationship between the reader and the text (Nuttall, 1996; Aebersold & Field, 1997). From this perspective, reading is understood to be a complex cognitive process in which reader and text interact to (re)create meaningful discourse.

In the real world, reading is a means to an end and not an end in itself. It is always a purposeful activity and our job as ESP teachers is to help students identify these different purposes and to master the strategies best suited to achieve them. In other words, we must use reading lessons to develop students' reading proficiency rather than improving linguistic competence.

Outside the classroom the motivation to read is always supplied by a specific purpose the reader has in extracting the information that a text contains. We must simply seek to provide the materials and exercises that reflect the students purposes for that reading (Grellet, 1998).

The purpose of reading a text is the most important determinant of the reading strategies. We

do not always require the same level of comprehension and we have to convince our students that it is efficient and profitable to vary the technique and speed according to student's purpose in reading.

This article does not intend to be a set of recipes about reading. We treat some issues in foreign language reading and demonstrate that reading is a dynamic and interactive process.

2. Reasons for reading

We read because we want to get some information from a text: facts, ideas, enjoyment, even feelings (from a family letter, for instance). We want to get the message the writer has expressed. Getting the message is the authentic reason for reading: we are concerned only not with language learning, but also with the uses to which we put reading in our daily lives outside the classroom (Nuttall, 1996). Our problem is that our students do not read the foreign language for authentic reasons because they want to improve, practice, and consolidate specific linguistic items – vocabulary, structure, and so on. This, of course, is not the authentic use of a text. So, it is our concern to increase motivation in the classroom by making foreign-language reading interesting in itself. "The language is alive – its users have the

same variety of purposes for reading as anybody has when reading their mother tongue” (Nuttal, 1996). According to Nuttal, this a good *reason* teachers can use to increase motivation.

The materials to be read must reflect the authentic purposes for which people in fact do read. Thus we are not trying, as in a language-development lesson, introduce (or practice a given language item) , but instead we are trying to get them to grasp the knowledge themselves, to get them to make use of the knowledge they already have in order to understand new messages. The students can get this ability by constantly receiving “input”. This input must be roughly tuned, slightly above the level the students are capable of using, but at a level they are capable of understanding.

Hutchinson & Waters (1995: 108-109) outline a number of things that are provided by the input, such as:

- Stimulus material for activities;
- New language items;
- Correct models of language use;
- A topic for communication;
- Opportunities for learners to use their information processing skills;
- Opportunities for learners to use their existing knowledge both of the language and the subject matter.

3. The teaching of reading

In order to sensitize students to different reading purposes it is useful to get them to keep a list of everything they read in their native language in the last few days. This should include everything from a recipe to an invitation or area specific texts. This will create an awareness of the high-level purposes.

Objectives, stance (the reader’s attitude towards the text that he is about to read), texts, and tactics (the way of actually reading the chosen text) are the factors involved when people read in their native language. If we are for a realistic approach to teach people to read efficiently in a foreign language, then we have to take these same factors into account. Therefore, two basic questions must be investigated: (a) why can’t people who are efficient readers in their own language read efficiently in a foreign language? and (b) how do we teach people to perform the complex operation of reading texts in a foreign language? (Nuttall, 1996; Aebersold & Field, 1997).

A simple answer to the first of those two questions is that people who need to read texts in a foreign language do not know such language well enough to be able to read them efficiently. Foreign language readers start reading a text with the fear that they are going to have problems with vocabulary, unfamiliar structures, so they read slowly and carefully, weighing and measuring every word, with a dictionary at their elbow as a life-support system. In other words, they lack confidence and retreat into a submissive stance (the readers accept the writer’s framework and follow the way the writer has arranged the content of the text), even though they are quite capable of being assertive (the reader disregard the writer’s framework and simply take what she/he needs from the text) towards texts in their native language.

The first step in teaching people to read in a foreign language is to make them aware of what they do when they read efficiently in their own language . We can do this by starting a reading course with texts in the native language (Scott, 1986). Of course, not everybody is an efficient reader in the native language, and with such people this technique will not just make them aware about reading, but will actually teach them to read more efficiently. The second step is to give them guidance and practice in transferring the reading procedures in their native language to reading in the foreign language – how to recognise and respond appropriately to the type of text they need to read by adopting a suitable stance and suitable tactics.

Even in the early stages of a reading course, we have to remember that reading should be based on objectives. So, the teacher should try to establish an initial objective by means of warm-up questions to stimulate discussion on a topic expressed in the text.

3.1 Purpose for teaching reading in a foreign language

The overall purpose for teaching reading is to develop in the reader his attitudes, abilities, and skills needed for obtaining information, fostering and reacting to ideals, developing interests and finally, deriving pleasure from reading through understanding or ‘comprehension’ (Grellet, 1998; Nuttall, 1996).

Comprehension is a mental process. It is not getting meaning from the printed page, but only lines and curves that we call letters and from which we build words. Meaning lies not on the printed page, but in the mind of the person who wrote the words. Comprehension will not be found on the printed page, but in the mind of the reader who reads those words. If the reader’s background, training, attitude, and so on, are similar to the writer’s, he is

likely to interpret the text with no conscious effort (Nuttall, 1996). There are still dangers of misunderstanding. A careless reader may read into the text meanings that are not there simply because his sense of having much in common with the writer falsely assumes that the writer shares his knowledge, beliefs, etc.; the reader may have to struggle to understand the information given, and may sometimes fail.

One reason for reading is that we want to understand other people's ideas. The understanding may not be total, but the fact that we can't get into the writer's mind is no excuse for not doing our best to understand what he is trying to say (Nuttall, 1996). The meaning cannot be passively absorbed.

3.2 Reading and communicative process

The question is: is the reader's role passive? The figure below illustrates, as Christine Nuttall (1996.p.5) points out, a common view of reading.

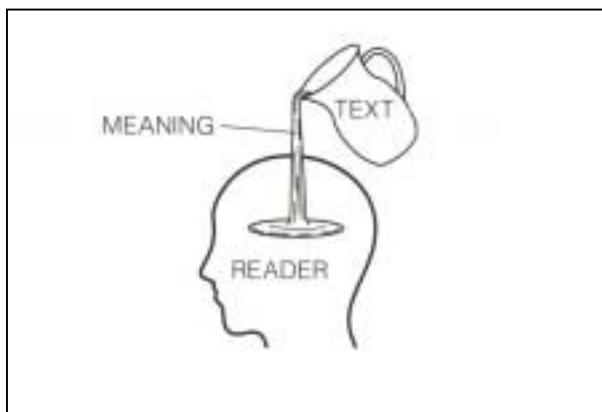


Figure 1: A common view of reading

The text is full of meaning like a jug of water, and it can be poured straight into the reader's mind, which soaks it up like a sponge. In this view, the reader's role is passive. All the work has been done by the writer, and the reader has only to open his mind and let the meaning pour in. We reject this view, however, for the obvious reason that it seldom happens like this. Not all the meaning in the text actually gets into the reader's mind. The figure should show at least some of the water trickling – if not streaming – down the reader's face. The fact that the meaning is in the text, there is unfortunately no guarantee that the reader will get it out, for we know from personal experience that a text that seems easy to one person may seem difficult to another (op.cit.)

3.3 Grammar teaching versus teaching through texts

Most early foreign-language books tend to make unsatisfactory reading texts because the authentic purpose of reading is often replaced by the purpose of language improvement. These texts are often contrived and distorted in order to include numerous examples of a particular teaching item or deal with over-familiar topics, e.g., the clothes we wear, transport, etc., or they tend to be overexplicit, so that there is no room for inference from the part of the learner. And many have really nothing to say, as the author of the foreign-language books is so absorbed in the need to include certain language items, that the message itself is overlooked. This gives the reader little or no chance to practice his reading skills so that it is not surprising that some students find foreign-language classes boring and irrelevant.

The difference between a lesson focusing on grammar and a reading lesson must be stressed. A reading lesson should not teach language, but rather it should be used for authentic purposes, e.g., giving information, entertaining, etc. The purpose of the reading text should be mainly to convey a message by making students read in-between the lines thus helping them to become proficient readers.

4. Comprehension as a focus in reading

Readers must be taught a number of specific skills to help them understand these skills. They have to learn how to read for the main idea, the details, the recognition of content; they need to be able to skim, read critically, outline, use the dictionary, and vary their reading rate accordingly (Nuttall, 1996; Grellet, 1998; Aebersold & Field, 1997).

Comprehension teaching should begin even before the first reading lesson. Some teachers are reasonably skillful in teaching students to identify and recognize words, but they fail to give attention to the comprehension skills. All activities that help to develop the learner's ability to think improve their reading comprehension. To encourage thinking, the activities must be purposeful, must relate to the students' experiences and interests, and require some degree of reasoning or the testing of ideas. Reading merely to find answers to specific questions should be discouraged and replaced by several types of meaningful exercises and activities – using illustrations, ticking multiple-choice questions, true-or-false questions, synonyms, antonyms, vocabulary activities listing content words, comparing several texts, matching text to pictures, note-taking, and many others (Grellet, 1998)

5. Conclusion

This work has attempted to show some aspects related to the teaching of reading in a foreign language.

We do not neglect intensive reading strategies. There are obviously many occasions when a close and accurate interpretation of a text is essential. But we cannot leave learners with the idea that reading a text always means understanding every word.

Different purposes demand appropriate comprehension and therefore the use of different reading strategies. Teachers can do a lot to steer students towards efficient independent reading by making reading tasks more explicit and helping them concentrate their efforts for a specific purpose.

Flexibility involves adjusting strategies to purpose, and these strategies do not simply develop naturally from intensive reading work. They require a great deal of practice in different subskills, which should be developed in English Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes with plenty of out-of-class follow-up. This means developing students' linguistic awareness as well as setting reading exercises. A central principle of our teaching should be to bear our own purposes in mind. Our objectives in reading classes must be to improve the strategies that will best help our students to consciously select and effectively use the most appropriate technique for a given reading task.

We should not forget the teacher's role. Our duty is to enable students to read, without help, unfamiliar authentic texts at appropriate speed, silently, with adequate understanding; and to evaluate their experience from reading. We, teachers, should always remember that reading is like an infection disease: it is caught not taught and you can't catch it from someone who hasn't gotten it himself. Therefore, students must develop the ability to read on their own. Our job as teachers is to make help unnecessary.

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