

## LEARNING TRANSFER IN READING CLASSES

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The objective of this paper is to try to associate practical procedures in reading classes with some theoretical principles concerning the role of the language learning transfer. This attempt is the result of our ESP team efforts to develop our students' reading abilities by investigating the possible ways they learn so that, as teachers, we can understand their difficulties or errors in a better way.

In his cognitive theory, Ausubel (1968) says that one of the factors in classroom learning is the existing structure of knowledge at the time of learning - perhaps, the most important factor in his opinion. Since it involves, by definition, the impact of prior experience on current learning processes, it is closely related to the problem of transfer.

By the existing cognitive structure the author means both the substantive content of an individual's structure of knowledge (our students' knowledge of the world) and its major organizational properties in a particular subject-matter field at any given time (our students' specific knowledge of their technical subjects). Ausubel postulates that this existing cognitive structure is the principal factor influencing meaningful learning and retention in this same field.

Past experience has either positive effects (e.g. similar aspects of both languages) or negative effects (e.g. awareness of different word-order) on new meaningful learning and retention by virtue of its impact on relevant properties of cognitive structure. If this is true all meaningful learning necessarily involves transfer

because it is impossible to conceive of any instance of such learning that is not affected in some way by the existing cognitive structure; and this learning experience, in turn, results in new transfer by modifying the cognitive structure.

In meaningful learning, therefore, the cognitive structure is always a relevant and crucial variable, even if it is not deliberately influenced or manipulated so as to ascertain its effects on new learning.

We know our students already have different types of knowledge such as reading strategies in Portuguese, their specific subject-matter, and world knowledge: What we do, then, is to activate all these different types of knowledge by associating, for instance, their positive reading habits in Portuguese with the reading they have to do in English. In the example below the word *vasqueiras* is usually understood because of the context since it is not a very common word in Portuguese. We try to develop this same strategy while the students read in English.

*Ao ler em português, inglês ou outra língua, não damos atenção a cada palavra do texto e também não interrompemos a leitura ao encontrar uma palavra desconhecida, pois, é possível entendê-la através de "pistas" que o contexto oferece. Veja o exemplo a seguir:*

*"E, desse jeito, visto que Turíbio Todo talvez fosse ainda mais ladino e arisco, durante dois meses as informações foram vasqueiras e vagas, e nunca se soube bem por onde então eles andaram ou por quais os lugares foi que deixaram de andar".*

*Sagarana - Guimarães Rosa*

Besides, our students are false-beginners-or in Swan's (in Johnson & Morrow, 1983) terms, students who have learned the forms of the language but cannot use them.

This means that they may be strong on vocabulary but have not really developed their strategies to read proficiently in a foreign language.

For this reason, the first text we give in our course is in Portuguese and the students are asked to read it, fill in some blanks and explain their answers. Here is the beginning of this first text:

*Leia o texto abaixo e complete as lacunas de acordo com informações do próprio texto e seus conhecimentos do assunto:*

#### MATERIAIS COMPONENTES

*O concreto hidráulico é um \_\_\_\_\_ de construção constituído por mistura de um aglomerante com um ou mais materiais inertes e água. Quando recém-misturado, deve \_\_\_\_\_ condições tais de plasticidade que facilitem as operações de manuseio indispensáveis ao lançamento nas formas, adquirindo, com o \_\_\_\_\_, pelas reações que então se processarem entre aglomerante e água, coesão e \_\_\_\_\_.*

By doing this, we make sure the students are getting aware of some ways the reading process works in Portuguese so that they can transfer these ideas into their reading in English.

Another procedure is the emphasis we put on the identification of cognates since the first readings because this identification can act as a facilitating element for the students because they can rely on the existing similarity between the two languages. Furthermore, this procedure avoids constant and (unnatural) use of the dictionary saving the students precious time when reading.

### FINAL REMARKS

According to Swan (in Johnson & Morrow, 1983) we do not really know very much about how people get from language lessons to language performance. Gagné (1976) also states that we do not know how transfer works considering different individuals or the way they cope with it.

Even so, the use of previous knowledge by students seems to help them learn in a more meaningful way; it can also prevent them from having to process every new reading material as something completely isolated or disconnected; it can also avoid the feeling that false beginners (in fact, adult students with some unsuccessful attempts to deal with English) are always doing the same thing, over and over again.

Finally, we think this use of previous experience should be stimulated in class so that learning could be a richer and lasting experience for our students.

### REFERENCES

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