READING COMPREHENSION EXERCISES: HOW TO DESIGN PROCESS AND PRODUCT-ORIENTED TASKS

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This paper focuses on reading comprehension exercises, but this does not mean that we assume the use of exercises isolated from a syllabus. Instead, we are going to concentrate on reading comprehension activities as part of course design.

Our rationale concerning reading is that it is an active process in which the learner has to decide upon the skills and strategies he is going to use depending on his/her purpose. We try to make our students realize that there is a trade-off between visual and non-visual information and that in order to be a competent reader they have to use their own experience and knowledge in terms of language, reading and world in general at a maximum possible degree. This makes them less dependent on the visual elements of the text and stimulates the process of guessing.

An attempt is made to provide the learners with a wide range of skills and strategies in situations that are similar to the ones they face in real life. By getting them accustomed to reading authentic materials suitable to their level of knowledge and interest, we develop their confidence, since we assume that one should grade exercises rather than texts. In order to become an efficient reader, one must be taught how to approach and consider each text, keeping in mind what, how and why we read. This is the reason why reading activities should be flexible and varied, with clearly defined objectives and with a clear distinction between teaching (developing skills) and testing (accuracy type exercises) (GRELLET, 1981: 3-9).

Based on needs analysis, ESP courses in UFRGS, as well as all over the country, aim at reading comprehension of academic texts. The target situation we have to keep

in mind is that our students will have to read scientific literature for further studies and profession. The gap between both analyses - needs analysis and analysis of the target situation - is bridged by the syllabus. The syllabus is the route towards the aim. In order to set up the directions for this route we devise instructional objectives - this is the first step in the construction of any syllabus or course (WILKINS, 1979: 55).
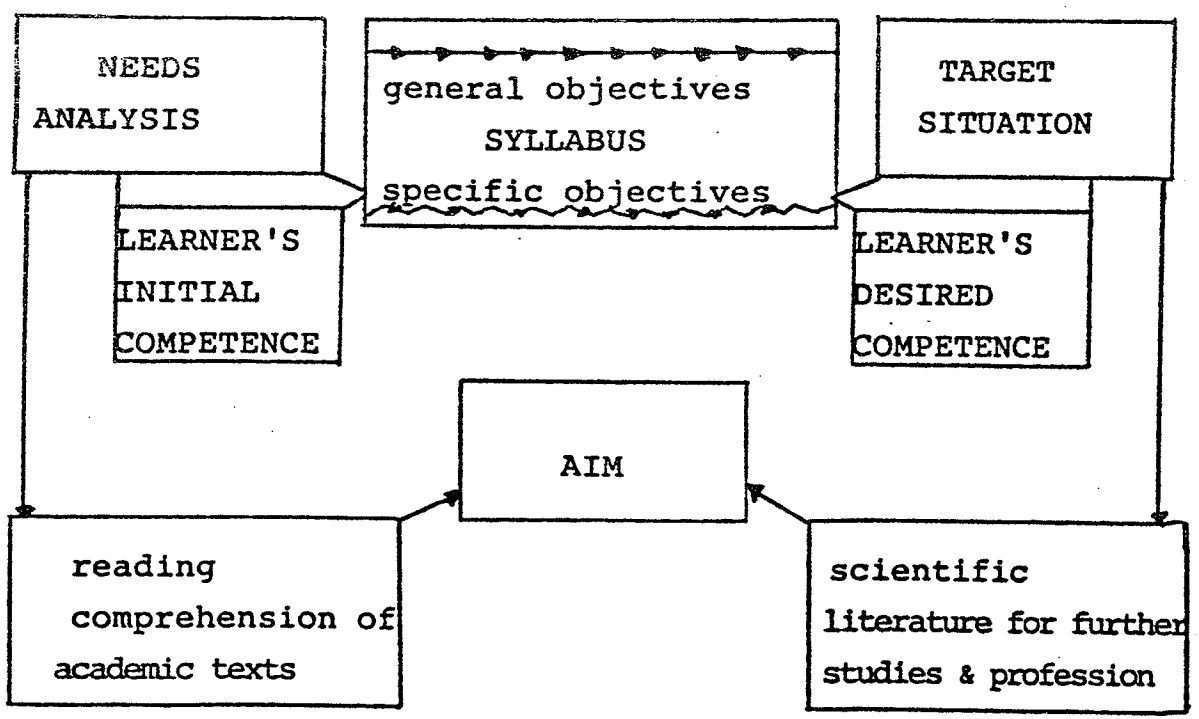
At this point it is important to keep in mind that the concept of instruction implies change in behaviour and the desirable changes in the learner are established by objectives. Needs analysis, analysis of the target situation and formulation of objectives provide the basis for an appropriate set of choices to be made concerning any specific course, particular learners and actual situation.

If learning is aimed at the production of changes in behaviour potential, the desired result of a learning process is to be defined in terms of ability to behave in certain ways, in other words, it is to be defined in oper ational terms (VAN EK, 1980: 92-3). Thus, following WILKINS's directions for his Notional Syllabuses (1979: 1), an attempt should be made to give an operacional definition to the objectives of language learning and to plan courses accordingly.

Objectives can be divided into two groups: general and specific. We may say that the former draw a straight line from the learner's initial competence to his desired competence, whereas the latter state the turning points of this line.

Let us elaborate a little more on these three

concepts: aims, general and specific objectives. An aim is generally too far away as far as the course itself is concerned, due to time and resources constraints. It implies an idea of future accomplishment. This is the long-term aim of our programme (BELL, 1981: 164-5). Just because we have to provide the learner with means to pursue this aim by himself after he has taken the course , objectives have to be devised.

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┌─────────────┐   ┌───────────────────────┐   ┌─────────────┐
│ NEEDS       │   │ general objectives    │   │ TARGET      │
│ ANALYSIS    │   │     SYLLABUS          │   │ SITUATION   │
│             │   │ specific objectives   │   │             │
│  ┌──────────┤   └───────────────────────┘   ├──────────┐  │
│  │ LEARNER'S│                               │ LEARNER'S│  │
│  │ INITIAL  │                               │ DESIRED  │  │
│  │ COMPETENCE                               │ COMPETENCE  │
└──┤          │        ┌──────────┐           │          ├──┘
   └──────────┘        │   AIM    │           └──────────┘
                       │          │
   ┌──────────┐        └──────────┘         ┌──────────────┐
   │ reading  │                             │ scientific   │
   │ comprehension of                       │ literature for further
   │ academic texts                         │ studies & profession
   └──────────┘                             └──────────────┘
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General objectives state the performance of the learner at the end of the course. They are medium-term goals which are more specific than the aim and which make its attainment possible (BELL, 1981: 165). Specific objectives give details concerning his knowledge skills and strategies. They represent our individual short-term tactics, the activities which constitute the programme (BELL, 1981: 165).

Notice that all of them - aims, general and specific objectives - describe what the learner rather than the teacher is supposed to do. All the process of needs analysis, formulation of objectives and the consequent specification of teaching points is learner-oriented.

Both general and specific objectives should be expressed in operational terms, so that anyone who approaches the syllabus can clearly follow them. As MAGER(apud VAN EK, 1980: 93) puts it: an objective is meaningful to the extent it conveys to others a picture (of what a learner will be like) identical to the picture the writer has in mind.

Objectives stated in operational terms are translated into language acts and learning acts, so that they are observable, replicable and measurable. Each important outcome should deserve a separate statement. There are many ways of writing objectives, but no one format has yet been shown to be better than any other. Yet, objectives must be written in the most explicit, behavioural form possible. According to MAGER's theory, their format includes three characteristics - performance, conditions and criterion - that help make an objective communicate an intent. These characteristics answer three questions:

(1) what should the learner be able to do?
(2) under what conditions do you want the learner to be able to do it?
(3) how well must it be done? (MAGER, 1975: 21)

VAN EK(1980: 11,93) points out that in order to be sufficiently specific, the definition of a learning

objective should specify:
- the content of that which is to be learned;
- the behaviour which the successful learner will
  be expected to be able to exhibit;
- the circumstances in which the behaviour will
  have to be exhibited;
- the criteria of acceptable performance.

Since an objective is a description of a per-
formance you want learners to be able to exhibit before
you consider them competent, it is useful to present your
objectives to your students so that they know where they
are going and have a better chance of getting there
(MAGER, 1975: 5-6). This results in a considerable in-
crease of efficiency, because explicit definitions of
language learning objectives gives all those involved in
the teaching/learning process, including the learners
themselves, a clear view of just what is expected of them
(VAN EK et alii, 1980: 2-3).

According to MAGER(1975: 6), objectives are useful:
(1) for the selection or designing of instructional
    content and procedures;
(2) for evaluating or assessing the success of the
    instruction;
(3) for organizing the students' own efforts and activi-
    ties for the accomplishment of the important ins-
    tructional intents.

It has to be emphasized that we can only define a
language learning objective if we have some insight into
what may be expected to be the communication needs of the
learners. Then, selection can be made on the basis of:
- a general characterization of the type of language

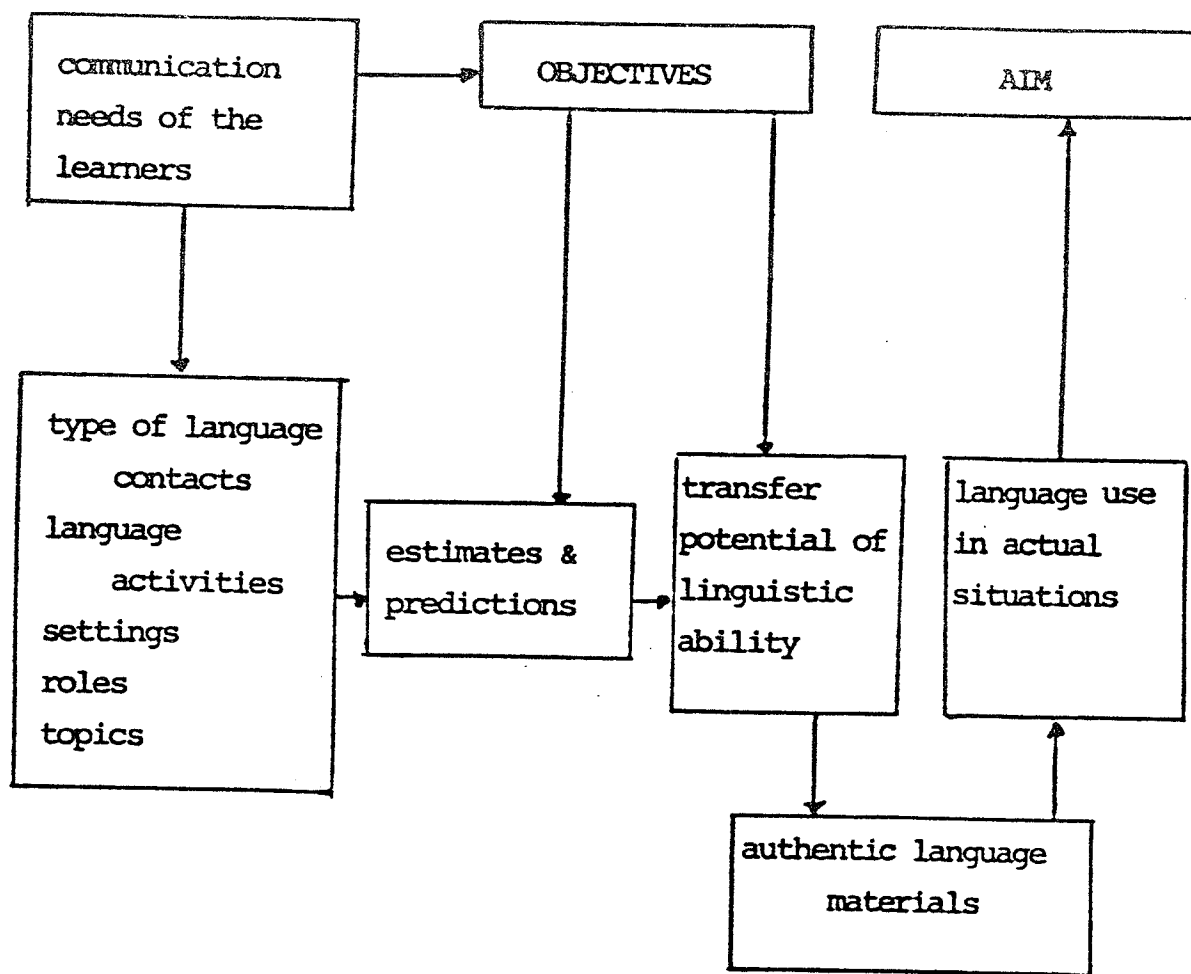contacts which, as members of a certain target
group they will engage in;
- the language activities they will engage in;
- the settings in which they will use the foreign
language;
- the roles (social and psychological) they will
play;
- the topics they will deal with;
- what they will be expected to do with regard to
each topic (VAN EK et alii, 1980: 4).

These features enable us to make useful estimates
and predictions. Moreover, such is the transfer po-
tential of linguistic ability, once the learner has been
successfully prepared for certain foreign language
contacts he will find that he can also cope more or less
adequately in numerous other foreign language situations
(VAN EK et alii, 1980: 4).

ALEXANDER(1977: 162) points out that transfer is
singly the most important factor in the language learning
process, for the learner's success is measured according
to the extent he can use language in actual situations.
Developing this ability, the learner is able to pursue
the aim proposed by the needs analysis and the analysis of
the target situation, even after the end of the course.
This is one of the main reasons why we concentrate on
using authentic language materials: such materials will
be the means by which the learner can bridge the gap
between classroom knowledge and an effective capacity to
participate in real language events (WILKINS, 1979: 79).

Although it is not our purpose to focus on evalu-
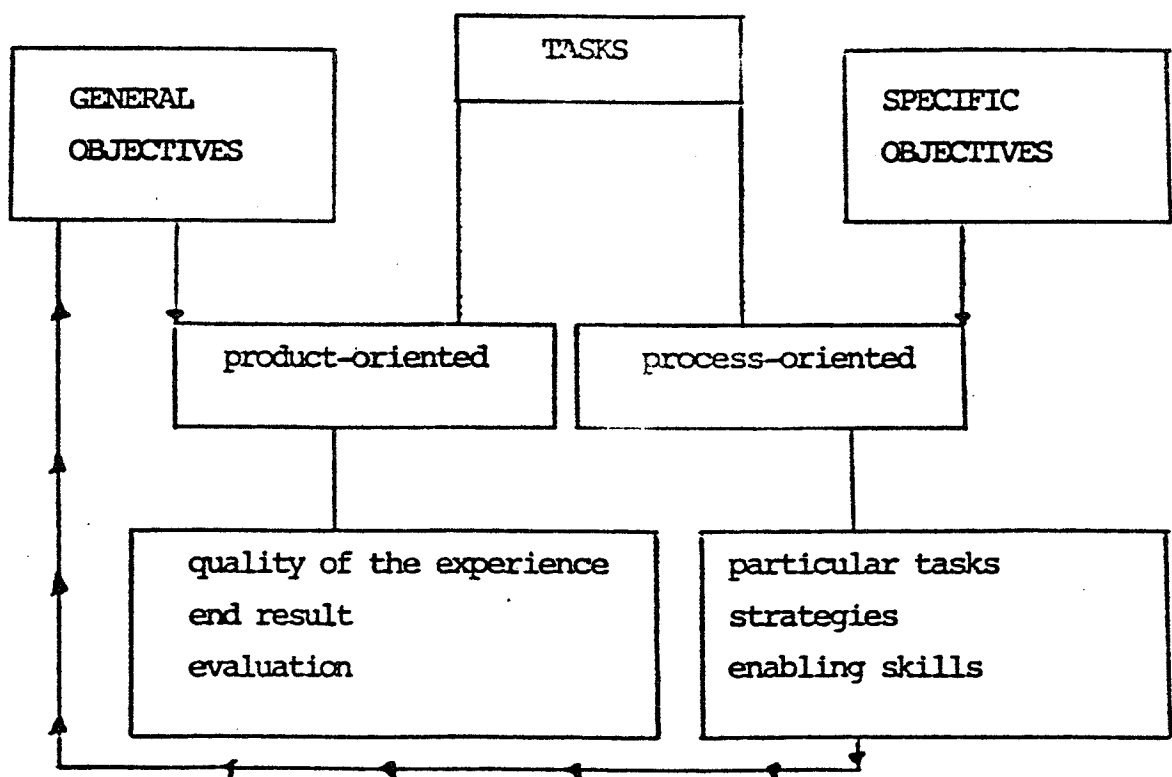ation, it has to be pointed out that besides their effect

on the instruction procedures, meaningfully stated objectives also help shape and guide the evaluation process (BLOOM et alii, 1971: 21).

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┌─────────────────┐        ┌─────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐
│ communication   │───────▶│ OBJECTIVES  │        │     AIM      │
│ needs of the    │        └─────────────┘        └──────────────┘
│ learners        │              │                       ▲
└─────────────────┘              │                       │
         │                       │                       │
         ▼                       │                       │
┌─────────────────┐              │        ┌───────────┐  │  ┌──────────────┐
│ type of language│              ▼        │ transfer  │  │  │ language use │
│     contacts    │  ┌────────────┐       │ potential │  │  │ in actual    │
│ language        │  │ estimates &│──────▶│ of        │──┘  │ situations   │
│     activities  │  │ predictions│       │ linguistic│     │              │
│ settings        │  └────────────┘       │ ability   │     │              │
│ roles           │                       └───────────┘     └──────────────┘
│ topics          │                             │                  ▲
└─────────────────┘                             ▼                  │
                                        ┌──────────────────┐       │
                                        │ authentic language│──────┘
                                        │     materials     │
                                        └──────────────────┘
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This brings to bear on the distinction between product- and process-oriented tasks. The former are devised from general objectives whereas the latter are derived from specific objectives. General objectives show the product of instruction and are concerned with both the quality of the experience as well as with its end result (DAVIES, 1976: 121). Specific objectives describe the particular tasks, the strategies and the enabling skills the learner has to perform and develop when pursuing the general objectives. They are said to

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be process-oriented because they are concerned with the actions of the student during the process of instruction. The teaching points that are listed on your syllabus are derived from specific objectives, according to the kind of skills, strategies and knowledge detected.

In terms of the evaluation process, attention has to be paid to general objectives, since specific objectives provide the set of strategies from which each learner chooses which are more suitable and appropriate for his/her own situation.

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                         ┌──────────────┐
                         │    TASKS      │
 ┌──────────────┐        │               │        ┌──────────────┐
 │  GENERAL      │        │               │        │  SPECIFIC     │
 │  OBJECTIVES   │        │               │        │  OBJECTIVES   │
 └──────────────┘        └──────────────┘        └──────────────┘
        │                                                 │
     ┌──────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐
     │  product-oriented │        │  process-oriented │
     └──────────────────┘        └──────────────────┘
              │                            │
   ┌────────────────────────┐   ┌────────────────────────┐
   │  quality of the experience │   │  particular tasks       │
   │  end result             │   │  strategies             │
   │  evaluation             │   │  enabling skills        │
   └────────────────────────┘   └────────────────────────┘
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Special purpose language courses are those in which the learners' objectives are unusually well defined (MUNBY, 1981; WILKINS, 1979). As far as the situation at UFRGS is concerned, the ideal outcome of the ESP courses should be to enable the students to use the most recent publications in their field of specialization. Due to

the constraints of the actual ongoing situation, a compro‍mise policy has to be adopted and the aim is narrowed: "to be able to extract some relevant information from specialist texts in English".

The overall aim is then broken down into five general objectives, which are stated in operational terms:

BEHAVIOUR AND CONDITIONS	CRITERIA
1. The learner will show general comprehension by writing one paragraph which expresses the topic of any text, either expository or argumentative, taken from reference books, articles, abstracts, reviews, advertisements, from textbooks, or other books. 2. The learner will show the ability to scan by answering questions searching for information in any kind of text. 3. The learner will show the ability to extract main points by completing a guided outline concerning an academic text. 4. The learner will show detailed comprehension by completing a guided diagram on an abstract or other academic text. 5. The learner will show a personal reaction by expressing and justifying agreement/ disagreement and possible applications in terms of any kind of text.	Time allowed: 150% a competent model's time. Minimum score: 70% right questions.

(MACIEL et alii, 1983:22)

Our courses follow MUNBY's model (1981) from which we have selected the skills related to reading (HARBICH, 1981: 62-6):   numbers 19, 19.1, 19.1.1, 19.1.2, 19.1.3, 19.1.4, 19.2, 20, 22, 22.1, 24, 24.1, 24.2, 24.3, 24.4, 24.5, 24.7, 26, 26.1, 26.2, 28, 28.1, 28.3, 28.4, 30, 30.7, 32, 32.1, 32.2, 32.3, 32.5, 32.6, 34, 34.3, 35, 35.1, 35.2, 35.3, 35.4, 35.5, 35.6, 37, 37.4, 37.4.1, 37.4.2, 39, 39.1, 39.2, 39.3,

39.5, 39.6, 39.7, 40, 40.1, 40.2, 40.3, 41, 41.2, 44,
44.1, 44.2, 44.3, 44.4, 45, 45.1, 45.2, 46, 46.1,
46.2, 46.3, 46.4, 46.5, 52, 52.1, 52.2.

These enabling skills are the tasks the learners
actually perform during the process of instruction. It
is assumed that theses tasks provide the students with
the skills and strategies they will apply whenever they
read in English, a process which will continue even after
the course, helping them pursue the ideal aim detected.

We are not going into detail here, listing all the
specific objectives and the teaching points linked to
them (see MACIEL et alii, 1983). Instead, we are going
to see a simplified taxonomy of these enabling skills and
an attempt is made to classify them as more suitable for
product - or process-oriented application.

TAXONOMY OF READING COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES

A. GENERAL COMPREHENSION
1. matching pictures to sentences
2. matching titles to texts
3. selecting from several texts the one concerning a
   given subject
4. recognizing graphic presentation by identifying
   clippings
5. predicting the content of a passage
6. determining a reading purpose
7. identifying the subject

B. SCANNING

1. answering compreension questions in Portuguese (includ ing "not stated")

C. MAIN POINTS

1. completing guided diagrams
2. ordering jumbled paragraphs or sentences
3. identifying the main ideas of each paragraph
4. identifying the main idea of a text

D. DETAILED COMPREHENSION

1. crossing out non-sense sentences or words in a text
2. completing a table or chart of information
3. completing cloze exercises(in Portuguese, multiple choice or fill in the blanks)
4. following instructions
5. ordering instructions
6. matching the columns providing the appropriate sequence of a sentence
7. stating the reference of the pronouns underlined in a passage
8. transferring information

E. CRITICAL READING

1. recognizing the author's intention and attitude, the kind of text and the intended audience
2. integrating data in the text with own experience or

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

PRODUCT-ORIENTED TASKS

A.7 identfying the subject

Demonstre que você entendeu de que trata o texto "Ecology", escrevendo um parágrado de 40 a 60 palavras que expresse a sua idéia geral. (6 pontos)

B.1 answering compreension questions in Portuguese (including "not stated")

Verifique se as respostas das perguntas abaixo se encontram explícita ou implicitamente no texto "Dehydration of Freeze-damaged Oranges". Caso afirmativo, escreva-as nas linhas pontilhadas; caso contrário, escreva "não está no texto". (10 pontos)

1. Qual o objetivo geral da pesquisa?
2. Que frutas foram observadas?
3. Em que região foi realizada a pesquisa?
4. Em que data?
5. Quem foi o responsável?
6. Quem o ajudou?
7. Quantas árvores foram selecionadas para a pesquisa?

C.3 identifying the main ideas of each paragraph

Demonstre que você identificou as idéias centrais de cada parágrafo do texto "Patterns of communication: gestures and language", Especificando-as abaixo. (12 pontos)

D.8 transferring information

Demonstre que você entendeu detalhadamente o texto "Degrees of Saturation in Solution", respondendo às seguintes perguntas: (14 pontos)

1. Quando se diz que uma solução é saturada?
2. O que acontece numa solução saturada?

3. Como uma solução saturada é afetada pela temperatura?

4. Quando se formam cristais?

5. Qual o processo que ocorre quando se tem uma solução super-saturada?

E.2 integrating data in the text with own experience or knowledge of the world

Demonstre sua apreciação crítica do texto "Wider reaches of sex in culture", escrevendo dois parágrafos de 30 a 40 palavras cada um. No primeiro, expresse a posição do autor. No segundo, revele a sua opinião pessoal em relação à mesma. (10 pontos)

PROCESS-ORIENTED TASKS

A.7 identifying the subject

Faça uma leitura rápida dos textos A,B,C,D,E; p.2 e escreva de maneira breve e clara o assunto de cada um, no quadro abaixo, em português.

TEXTO	ASSUNTO
A	
B	
C	
D	
E	

B.1 answering comprehension questions in Portuguese(including "not stated")

Demonstre sua habilidade de retirar informações especí

ficas de um texto, completando os dados solicitados da
p.897 da Enciclopédia Britânica.

   1. População da Inglaterra em 1971.

   2. Volume e página onde encontrar informação sobre o
desenvolvimento da engenharia civil

   3. Cargo ocupado por Napoleão em 1804

   4. Data do começo do Cristianismo na Grã-Bretanha.

C.4 identifying the main idea of a text

   Leia o texto rapidamente uma vez. Observe o título e
escreva, em INGLÊS, a que se referem as palavras:

GIANT	→	
LITTLE GUYS	→	
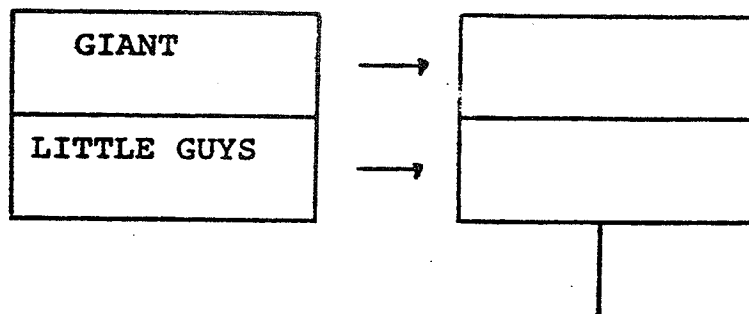
A partir desses elementos, es-
creva a idéia central do texto,
em PORTUGUÊS

D.1 crossing out non-sense sentences or words in a text

   Sublinhe a palavra adequada ao sentido das frases no
texto abaixo:

   Most of our knowledge, acquired from parents, friends,
schools, newspapers, books, conversation, speeches and TV
is received verbally. All our knowledge of history,
BECAUSE/FOR EXAMPLE/SINCE, comes to us only in words.

**E.1 recognizing the author's intention and attitude, the
kind of the text and the intended audience**

   Complete o quadro abaixo, escolhendo, dos títulos que

seguem, os mais adequados às finalidades de leitura propostas.

TÍTULOS: O aborto deve ser legalizado?/ Mad Magazine/ Jornal do Brasil/ Método de Leitura Dinâmica/ Encyclopaedia Britannica

WHY you read	WHAT you read
entertainment	
general information	
practical application	
specific information	
critical evaluation	

It has been our purpose in this paper to show that the task of preparing reading comprehension exercises can be simplified and it indeed turns out to be more efficient if clearly stated objectives are devised previously. All the other components of course design - material writing, teaching points, methodology, techniques, classroom management, evaluation process - follow naturally from operationally formulated objectives.

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