

PRE-READING STRATEGIES

(or 'Yew two Khan sea four wad awe threw ugh glace derkely')

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What is prediction? The answer to the question is no mystery. We could not live without it; for example:

Priest: Will you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?

Answer:

We can easily predict the next word... The same is true of the blank in the following:

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and..."

Television advertisements rely on predictability:

'KOLYNOS.....'

What other explanation is there for the success of Janete Clair? Why do children enjoy the same story X times? They can predict. John Holmes' excellent article, Project Working Papers n^o 5, São Paulo, 1982, treats the subject extensively.

Now we know what prediction is let us ask another question. What is reading? It's the US\$ 50.000 question, rather like Pontius Pilatus, 'What is truth?'. The following model may serve to give some indication of the intricate ways in which reading strategies are formulated. The components included are part of a complex art; there is considerable overlap among the different categories and the cyclical progression illustrated should not be seen as a smooth development from one stage to another. However, by working from a visual overview of this sort relationships may be seen between the various component parts.

At the first stage of processing the reader skims in order to recognize symbols (words, graphs, figures) and convert them into meanings. As he surveys prose he will process his notional understanding of lexical and grammatical elements at the clause level. At the organisation stage the reader will revise, evaluate and expand the tentative impressions gained at the notional stage. He will identify the illocutionary force of individual communicative functions at the sentence level, helped by his understanding of the significance of cohesive elements. He will examine the hypotheses and arguments presented by various functional categories in a sequence at the third level. The fourth stage is the level of critical reading where the reader asks questions, assesses the validity of the overall argument, applies his previous experience and locates the overall message.

Reading might therefore be seen as an amalgam of these many elements, as a dynamic interaction between conceptual meaningfulness expressed through the medium of certain linguistic devices, producing acts of communication. This is neat sounding but of course cannot adequately describe the various types of reading which occur separately according to the purpose and which will determine the entry point in the model. A reader can, for example, confirm a 'macro' view of writer argument or attitude from linguistic and semantic cues, processing at a conceptual level at all four stages. He will survey, backtrack and skim for reinforcement of this view, using redundancy to predict at all levels. Alternatively, a reader can begin by processing at the micro level or recognition of phrase, establish an initial statement and go on to extract from a variety of cues at all levels, in developing an overview of the information presented.

Effective readers can thus begin by reading at various stages or levels. Therefore our learners will need to see

the value of varied approaches to text in selecting from the informational content. This overview of reading processes also illustrates the interplay of various elements within reading. Thus reading programmes which are biased towards one area e.g. 'syntax', 'topic', 'concept' or 'discourse' can be rejected as utopic. The ideal of an ESP reading programme would be to train learners to read effectively to enable them to understand, interpret and achieve an intelligent grasp of a variety of texts written in their specialist field; and this without the help of a teacher. I would suggest that a number of these learning needs might be realized through a process of guided reading which encourages efficient use of reference and prediction and which involves training in:

- (i) scanning, skimming and surveying strategies for identification of important ideas, the overall purpose, and the attitude behind the writer's implicit discourse message. These strategies will include recognition of the main part of important information through topic sentences in paragraphs of both inductive and deductive organisation; distinguishing the main idea from supporting details, extracting salient points to summarize; reducing the text to essentials, scanning for specific information; skimming to obtain the gist of a text.
- (ii) reflective reading on the implications of the overall purpose, argument(s) and attitude;
- (iii) identifying the implicit rhetorical plan which develops the purpose, argument(s) and attitude of the writer. This can be achieved by training in inference, understanding the conceptual meaning, especially of cause-and-result, purpose, reason, condition, and contrast; understanding the function of sentences without explicit indicators; exophoric reference.

The learner will require training in the adoption of these three macro comprehension strategies, characteristic of efficient reading in the first language. Although Mage (1978: 165) has suggested that there are universals of reading strategies among advanced students dealing with specialist prose it cannot be assumed that these strategies will be automatically adopted when students read in the foreign language. Nor will the task of training be an easy one. The student of English in Brazil is at a disadvantage despite his maturity, status and experience within the area of specialist study. When reading in Portuguese he is aware of the purpose of his reading, bringing his professional knowledge and interests to the scientific concepts involved. In his foreign language study, however, the learner will have rarely been trained in coping with difficult texts by selecting the salient clues from a wealth of linguistic information, or in using his knowledge of the concepts involved to reconstruct the argument. Lacking self-assurance the learner will fall back on intensive linear reading strategies, relying on visual input alone, relying on what is probably the least of his strengths (i.e. his knowledge of English) as the one key to reading success. Unfamiliar language items will cause hesitancy thus making any form of prediction and decoding at a higher level of meaning difficult.

Clearly this approach to reading is in direct opposition to the strategies of the fluent reader who draws inferences from a minimum linguistic input by focusing on the meaning organisation of discourse. (A possible illustration of this can be seen in a comprehension testing experiment. I gave Cambridge First Certificate comprehension test papers to 13 year-old language students in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Shepherd, 1974). The same papers were later given to English-speaking school-children in Edinburgh, of a similar age and socio-economic background. Although the Brazilian subjects scored significantly higher in answering the de-

tailed intensive multiple choice questions and on the linguistic content of the text; the native speakers proved significantly more successful in identifying the overall purpose, the topic sentences of paragraphs and in selecting appropriate summaries from multiple choices; they also completed their tasks within a quarter of the allotted time.)

Clearly since information in linear text is signalled linguistically, the foreign reader is clearly dependent on the correct decoding of linguistic clues. Therefore, focus on selected elements of language is essential if the reader is to crack the linguistic code.

Recent research findings would support the more traditional view that the teaching of reading ought to emphasize exercising in grammar and vocabulary: "the results of these Spanish-speaking adults' reading in English underscore the importance of language skills for effective reading" (Clarke, 1979: 139, my underlining).

However, Straker-Cook (1977: 44) has warned us of the potential dangers of language oriented approach in asserting that "specialist students suffer from the same sense of vulnerability and insecurity in a language learning situation... both are mistrustful of tasks which threaten to expose personal ignorance or inadequacy". The student's self-confidence must be built up so that he can become an independent reader not overconcerned with unknown words. I would like to proceed, therefore, to suggest ways in which this self-confidence can be developed by dealing with each of the three areas of training necessary.

Rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic difficulties an appeal can be made to the learner's intelligence and experience by making him aware of the ways in which he can simplify a text by using what he already possesses (i.e.

knowledge of the subject matter, key lexical items and the various non-verbal supports to linear texts) and using the same to guess and induce meaning. This can be achieved by pre-reading tasks which explicitly emphasize the attitudinal aspect of previous knowledge. The students can be given a series of statements (in the L1) relating to the topic to be read. Students might be asked to either choose between a choice of statements or express their view of the truth or falsity of statements before skimming to compare the writer's standpoint. In this way the learner can be encouraged to focus on writer strategies rather than the linguistic content. Pre-reading tasks of this kind also "ensure that the message of the text is already alive in some form in the mind of the reader so that when a reader identifies words he does so within a context that has already been given" (Morris, 1973: 190). The positive effect of the pre-reading tasks on learning and recall has also been demonstrated by Ausubel (1960). Pre-text orientation can often activate a foreign reader's expectancies and predictive ability. By providing background information regarding the author and the place and date of publication, the learner can bring his knowledge of the field of study into play. He can be asked to predict the concepts which the author might consider significant and the argument which the same author may use to justify hypotheses. By demonstrating that he can answer certain questions about the concepts under discussion within a text before he actually reads it we may help to create a more confident approach to his reading in English. Eskey (1972:80) in discussing the importance of developing confidence, believes that it comes from reading at the conceptual level. To encourage this "the reader must have minimum access to the writer's underlying assumptions about his subject... what he questions... what he takes for granted".

Successful pre-text approaches have used expectancy tasks (Greenhall, 1978) successfully setting up hypotheses before

reading and ensuring an interaction of meaning between text and reader, e.g.

- (a) "Write down fifteen words which you might find in a text about..."
- (b) "With which of the following words do you associate (concept)?"
- (c) "Which of the three following definitions describe most precisely...?"
- (d) "Why?"

Using these expectancy exercises the student should become an active participant rather than a passive recipient. The expectancy exercise on definitions (c above) might be followed by providing the title, a sub-title and/or the first sentence of the text. Students can be encouraged to use logical thinking to predict outcomes, decide whether a hypothesis should be rejected, upheld or amended by providing a pre-reading framework (in L1) to complete:

HYPOTHESIS	INFORMATION	PREDICTION	OUTCOME	HYPOTHESIS
formulate		most likely		modified
hold		consequence		amended
test		or		rejected
		outcome		

This will help to formulate in the readers' minds questions such as 'Is this fact or opinion?', 'Is the argument justified?', the bases of reflective reading.

Pugh (1974:35) has found that "a course which emphasizes the identification of reading purpose and the selection of the appropriate reading strategy to achieve the purpose can help students to become more accurate in their use of books for locating information". De Leuw (1963:29) has also argued for varied approaches according to the texts and purpose.

Given that the student's motivation is adequate and that

the material is written within his conceptual range, invariably the case with students at the level of this research, comprehension is inhibited or enhanced by the reading strategy adopted. By determining precisely the student's task in tackling a text, by establishing well-defined, relevant purposes the learner may be encouraged to see the wisdom of adopting different approaches according to different purposes. A possible approach at the initial stages of a course would be to provide students with selected key words in Portuguese. Students could then scan the text for the English equivalent. The list obtained would, in turn, provide an informational framework of a paragraph. An approach of this sort might help to show the learner that he is able to comprehend the whole without a necessarily through understanding of all the parts; that texts are only important as a tool for understanding according to our needs and that therefore we do not require all the parts, nor do we need to know all the answers. The learner will see total understanding as an unrealistic objective and see his comprehension not as linguistic problem solving based on grammatical focii but as task oriented learning.

In conclusion let us examine a number of types of pre-reading exercises. Clearly, I would not normally introduce quite so many pre-reading exercises. The important thing in any reading lesson is to read.

PRE-READING EXERCISES

- A. 1) Give the name of the author, the title, date and source.
2) Ask students to write down four important factors related to the topic
3) Display the first two sentences on OHP or board.
4) Students read text to check their hypotheses.
- B. 1) Give the author, the title, date and source.
2) Predict (write) 10 key words or expressions in the text
3) Students read the text (timed at speed) to check their hypotheses
4) Compare their correct predictions with neighbour or in pairs/groups.
- C. 1) Give the name, the title, the date and source.
2) Display a set of statements based on the overall text message. Students must mark TRUE or FALSE; YES or NO according to their view of what the author/text will say
3) Timed reading of text to check their predictions. (Ex. C)
4) Discuss results in pairs.
- D. Matching exercise of key expressions or words in English and Portuguese. Students read to confirm.
- E. Preparatory Exercise
Remember that, when you begin to read a new text you bring and apply to it three things:
(a) Your previous knowledge of the subject matter of the text
(b) Your expectancies about what the writer will say
(c) Your previous knowledge of English.
The following exercises will help you to use these three things to get the most information possible from the

text you will read.

SIMULATED LESSON
(Pre-reading strategies)

1. Write down ten words you might find in a text about reading comprehension. Compare your list with your neighbour's afterwards.

2. Vocabulary extension

NOUNS	VERBS	ADJECTIVES
comprehension	_____	_____
_____	_____	uncertain
_____	understand	_____
_____	reason	_____
relativity	_____	_____
_____	summarise	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
memorization	_____	_____
_____	predict	_____
challenge	_____	_____
_____	contend	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

3. Tuning-in exercise

How many of the following questions can you answer (satisfactorily) before reading the text?

- (a) What skills or strategies does a reader use in attempting to comprehend a text?
- (b) Is there an easy way of describing the process(es) of comprehension?
- (c) How can you test comprehension?

4. Attitudinal Exercise

Reading comprehension might be described as a state or process of:

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| (a) reception | (b) uncertainty | (c) memorization |
| (d) passivity | (e) individuality | (f) acquisition |
| (g) productivity | (h) analysis | (i) relativity |
| (j) ambiguity | (k) synthesis | (l) selection |
| (m) predictability | (n) mediation | (o) activity |

(p) assimilation (q) receptivity (r) inference
For you which four describe reading comprehension most precisely?

5. Prediction exercise

The title of the text you are about to read is:

"Comprehension: the basis of learning"

The sub-title is:

"The Relativity of Comprehension"

The first sentence is:

"Because comprehension is a state of zero uncertainty, there is, in the end, only one person who can say whether an individual comprehends something or not, and that is that particular individual".

For this author which three of the above descriptions (Ex. 4) do you think he would most probably choose to describe comprehension?

6. Skimming exercise

Read through the entire text in 3 minutes.

- (i) Were your predictions of what the author would say (Ex. 5) approximately correct? Compare with your neighbour.
- (ii) What 5 words would you choose to describe the author's theme in general terms? How many of these words did you include in Ex. 1? Which words were not chosen by your neighbour?
- (iii) Is the text (a) a statement of facts
(b) personal opinion
(c) a combination of (a) and (b)?