Approaches to Reading. Background Knowledge and Textual Information

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Abstract: For many students, reading is by far the most important of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in a second language, particularly in English as a second or foreign language. Certainly, if we consider the study of English as a foreign language around the world - the situation in which most English learners find themselves - reading is the main reason why students learn the language. In addition, at advanced proficiency levels in a second language, the ability to read the written language at a reasonable rate and with good comprehension has long been recognized to be as important as oral skills, if not more important. In second language teaching - learning situations for academic purposes, especially in higher education in English - medium universities or other programs that make extensive use of academic materials written in English, reading is paramount.
Key words: comprehension, competence, reading skills, approach, scanning, skimming.

1. Reading as process and product

Reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with the meaning, which the reader constructs. There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought.

Further, proficient readers are both efficient and effective. They are effective in constructing a meaning that they can assimilate or accommodate and which bears some level of agreement with the original meaning of the author. And readers are efficient in using the least amount of effort to achieve effectiveness. To accomplish this efficiency readers maintain constant focus on constructing the meaning throughout the process, always seeking the most direct path to meaning, always using strategies for reducing uncertainty, always being selective about the use of the cues available and drawing deeply on prior conceptual and linguistic competence. Efficient readers minimize dependence on visual detail. Any reader's proficiency is variable depending on the semantic background brought by the reader to any given reading task.

1.1. Reading as an interactive process

In the last ten years, the accepted theory of ESL reading has changed dramatically, from a serial (or bottom - up) model, to "reading as an interactive process". Widdowson (1979) has discussed reading in this light as the process of combining textual information with the information a reader brings to a text. In this view the reading process is not simply a matter of extracting information from the text. Rather, it is one in which the reading activates a range of knowledge in the reader's mind that he or she uses, and that, in turn, may be refined and extended by the new information supplied by the text. Reading is thus viewed as a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), reviewing the state of ESL reading, similarly concluded that our understanding of reading is best considered as the interaction that occurs between the reader and the text, an interpretive process. "Reading undeniably and incontrovertibly involves two necessary elements: a reader and a text. A third element is often important and influential, namely the writer […]. Texts are processed by

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readers in an interaction of, incontestably, the reader and the text and, equally plausibly, the reader and the writer." (Alderson and Urquhart, 1995: XVI)

1.2. Speed and comprehension

There is no doubt that reading speed and comprehension are closely linked. A very slow reader is likely to read with poor understanding, if only because his memory is taxed: the beginning of a paragraph - or even of a sentence - may have been forgotten by the time he has struggled to the end of it. "But it is not clear which is cause and which effect: do people read quickly because they understand easily, or do they understand easily because of the speed with which they read?" (Nuttall, C., 1982: 33)

1.3. Total Reading Competence

According to Early, Margaret, Cooper, Elisabeth and Santeusanio, Nancy, Total Reading Competence concentrates on five major areas of development:

- word service / decoding, i.e. to develop competence in identifying printed words
- comprehension, i.e. to develop competence in deriving meaning from written language
- language skills, i.e. to develop competence in all aspects of language related to the reading process
- study skills, i.e. to develop competence in using reading as a means of learning, study and research
- literary appreciation, i.e. to develop interest and competence in reading literature for pleasure and enrichment.

2. Why/How do we read?

2.1. Reading purpose

Reading for survival

We might call some kinds of reading in response to our environment 'reading for survival'. Indeed some reading is almost literally a matter of life and death - for example a 'stop' sign for a motorist. Survival reading serves immediate needs or wishes. "Obvious examples are 'ladies', 'gentlemen', and 'exit'. Less obvious examples given to me by students recently arrived in Britain are 'off peak' (indicating that a travel ticket can only be used outside the rush / hour) and 'way out 'rather than the more familiar 'exit'." (Wallace, C., 1992:6)

Reading for learning

As well as a means of finding out information on a strictly utilitarian basis- reading for survival -reading serves the wider role of extending our general knowledge of the world. Moreover we may want not so much to learn something new as to remind ourselves about half - known facts or vaguely formulated opinions.

Reading for pleasure

While reading for survival involves an immediate response to a situation and reading for learning is also goal oriented, albeit in a rather different way, reading for pleasure is done for its own sake - we don't have to do it. An important by - product of reading for pleasure in any language is fluency. This can create a vicious circle. Unless a reader gains fluency, that is speed and ease of reading, the reading of any material for whatever purpose is likely to be tedious. This, in turn, decreases motivation to read anything other than essential 'survival' material – the minimum required to function in school or the work-place - and fluency never gets a chance to develop.

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2.2. Types of reading behaviour

Together the Lunzer and Gardner and Harri - Augstein and Thomas studies provide a basis for a categorization of the types of reading behaviour that can be used by both the classroom teacher and the teacher / researcher as follows:

- receptive reading, which characterizes the smooth, fluent, apparently unconscious ('escapist') reading of a narrative, and which, according to Lunzer and Gardner, is 'the most familiar and approximates to listener behaviour." The 'style of reading appears to be analogous to the type of reading identified by Harri-Augstein and Thomas as a 'smooth' read.
- reflective reading, as defined by Lunzer and Gardner, "is reading which is frequently interrupted by moments of reflection" and which is seen by Lunzer et al.(1984) and Davis and Greene (1984) to be an essential prerequisite for study reading and reading for learning. This style of reading appears to be analogous to two types of 'read' identified by Harri- Augstein and Thomas as the 'search read' and the 'thinking read'.

2.3. Scanning and skimming

- By scanning we mean glancing rapidly trough a text either to search for a specific piece of information (e.g. a name, a date) or to get an initial impression of whether the text is suitable for a given purpose (e.g. whether a book on gardening deals with the cultivation of a particular vegetable).
- By skimming, on the other hand, we mean glancing rapidly through a text to determine its gist, for example in order to decide whether a research paper is relevant to our own work (not just to determine its field, which we can find out by scanning), or in order to keep ourselves superficially informed about matters that are not of great importance to us.

The distinction between the two is not particularly important. In both, the reader is not reading in the normal sense of the word, but is forcing his eye over the print at a rate which permits him to take in only, perhaps, the beginnings and ends of paragraphs (where information is often summarized), chapter headings, subtitles and so on.

Skimming and scanning are useful skills. They do not remove the need for careful reading, but they enable the reader to select the texts, or the portions of a text, that are worth spending time on.

3. Language competence and reading skills

a) There is a difference between language competence and reading skills. Many L1spekers, presumably by definition competent in the spoken language, are at best only marginally literate. If one transfers this to the FL situation, then it seems reasonable to claim that there *could* be a distinction between learning English and learning to read in English.

b) It seems unlikely that a poor L1 reader, however this term is defined, can, without tuition, move from this inadequate base to become a good FL reader. In other words, commonsense might lead us believe that someone who is a poor reader in the L1 will also be a poor reader in the FL.

c) It is difficult to believe that a competent L1 reader will not in any circumstances be able to transfer his skills to the FL. "Competence in reading is, of

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course, difficult to define, but one would wish to include in such a definition a predilection to treat a written text as carrying information, and a tendency to try to make sense of it by relating the information to background knowledge. More specifically, competence might include the ability to move about in a text, relating different parts, illustrations, captions, etc. It seems unlikely (although possible) that a fluent English reader will not attempt to do this when reading, say, French" (Alderson, J. and Urquhart, C., 1995: 26).

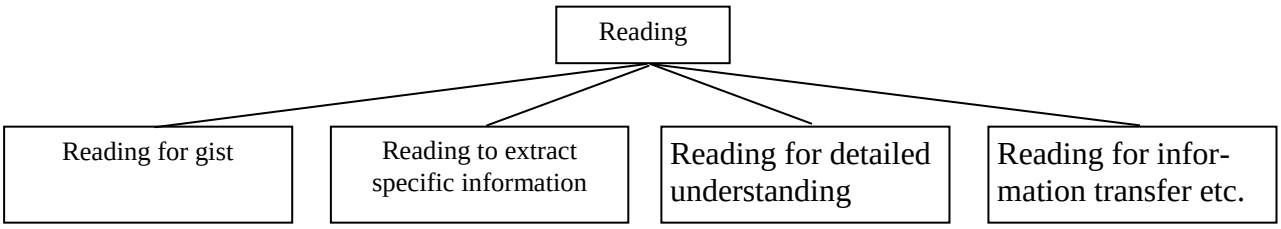
d) It seems obvious that the skilled L1 reader will, except in exceptional circumstances, require *some* knowledge of the FL before he can read in it with any facility.

4. Reading skills and sub – skills

In order use language skills competent users of a language need a number of sub - skills for processing the language that they use and are faced with.

If we look at the receptive skills (reading and listening) we can see that there are many sub – skills which we can call upon. The way we listen for general understanding will be difficult from the way we listen in order to extract specific bits of information. The same is true for reading. Sometimes we read in order to interpret, sometimes we read in order to transfer the information to another medium, e.g. a chart.

People who use language skills and the sub- skills that go with them are able to select those sub-skills that are most appropriate to their task. If they read a text for the purposes of literary criticism they will select different sub – skills from those they would select if they were 'reading' a dictionary to look for a word. It is because they have these sub – skills that they are able to process the language that they use and receive. We can summarize the difference between skills (sometimes called 'macro skills') and sub – skills (sometimes called 'micro skills') in the following way:



(Harmer 1999:18)

4.1. Prediction

The ability to predict what the writer is likely to say next is both an aid to understanding and a sign of it. If you understand a text, you can say with a fair chance of success what is likely to come next and what is not: you can predict *because* you understand. How far it is possible to use the skill of prediction in order to understand is not clear, but it is a principle of learning that new information is more easily assimilated if it can be fitted into an existing framework of ideas in the learner's mind. In the same way, if you can frame the thoughts the writer is likely to put forward next, it will help you to understand what he does in fact say, even if you predicted wrongly, provided you are prepared for that.

Prediction begins from the moment you read the title and from expectations of what the book is likely to contain. Even if the expectations are contradicted, they are useful because they have started you thinking about the topic and made you actively involved.

5. Skill deficiencies

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Two different but potentially related types of skill deficiencies may cause the inefficient interaction of text - based and knowledge - based processing in ESL reading: (1) linguistic deficiencies and (2) reading skill deficiencies. The important role of language competence in English for successful ESL reading is obvious here. As far as text - based processing is concerned, it cannot take place at all without appropriate skill levels in decoding the syntactic structures, and possibly more important, the content vocabulary of a text. More significant in this regard, Clarke's (1979< 1980) research on native Spanish and ESL reading showed that second language proficiency may limit the transference of good L1 reading skills to reading in the second language. Thus, we must recognize the crucial role of English language skills in text – based processing. Without these skills, efficient interaction between text - based and knowledge – based processing can often compensate for lower proficiency levels in language.

Given the role of linguistic deficiencies, how might reading skills in the second language and the way these reading skills are manifested in a reading comprehension style affect efficient bidiretional interaction with text? Spiro (1978) argues for a two - level approach to this question. The first level concerns the various component skills of reading comprehension and deficiencies among these component skills; the second level concerns how reading skill deficiencies manifest themselves in a reading comprehension "style". Spiro argues that there is no determinate effect of the first level on the second; that is, different skill deficiencies may result in the same comprehension style, or one skill deficiency may result in differing comprehension styles. At the first level, reading problems may involve skills that are either predominantly text - based (e.g., decoding) or knowledge – based (e.g., pragmatic inferencing). Spiro reasons that two options are open to readers confronted with a skill problem of one of these two types: They may persevere in the problem area (with detrimental effects on the other process), or they may escape from the problem by shifting processing resources in an effort to compensate for the problem. For example, consider readers who are laborious, effortful decoders. They may persevere with their decoding efforts. However, given the limitations of information - processing capacity and short-term memory, this behaviour soon produces a long - jam in the system - the reader attempts to store too many separate pieces of information without any higher - order relationship among them. In this style, higher -order knowledge - based processes are neglected. On the other hand, readers who are effortful decoders may seek (not necessarily consciously) to avoid the unpleasant decoding task. One way to do that would be to rely on prior knowledge to infer or guess what is likely to be in the text rather than actually sampling or processing much of the text. In this style, text – based processing is neglected in favour of wild guessing about the text's content. Thus, the same skill deficiency (effortful decoding) may lead to either one of two totally different comprehension styles - text - biased or knowledge - biased - depending on what the reader does in either persevering in the problem area or trying to escape from it. What this means is that the manifestation of a unidirectional reading comprehension style (text - biased or knowledge - biased) may be caused by two diametrically apposite reading skill deficiencies. The manifestation does not equal the cause.

6. The student's role as reader

The student's role as reader demands that he should make sense of the text for himself. In his reading lessons, he is supposed to learn how to do this: doing it for him will not teach him this. From the beginning, he must do for himself everything that he is capable of doing. This requires encouragement, especially the encouragement that comes from success; and success in turn comes from texts that are suitable and tasks that are well devised. These are things the teacher can influence and ways in which he can help.

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The most basic thing the reader has to do is associate the printed marks on the page with the spoken language he knows. If the teacher reads the text aloud before starting work on it, then this task is his, not the student's. He has already done one of the student's jobs for him.

The reader has to make sense of the text. So if the teacher begins by explaining or summarizing it, he is defeating the object of the lesson: he is telling the student something a reader ought to find out for himself. If, as the lesson proceeds, the student encounters problems and the teacher at once explains or translates, again this is the wrong kind of help: the student only has to understand his teacher, not the text.

All these activities are valid for some purposes and in some circumstances, but they are not useful for training students in the independent skills of silent reading. Exposed to methods of this kind, the student will see the reader's role as a passive one, for he has had most of the work done for him. The teacher's well – meant help has undetermined the purpose for which he is teaching.

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