

Interactive Approaches to Second/Foreign Language Reading and Their Implications

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Introduction

Reading is an important activity in both first language (L1) and second/foreign language (SL/FL) classrooms. Yet, conscious research into the process of reading is a recent activity. This research has brought about a significant change in our knowledge of what reading is. It tells us that there are three kinds of reading processes: (1) reading as decoding what the writer has coded, a bottom-up language-driven process; (2) reading as a top-down, concept-driven process; and (3) reading as an interactive compensatory process.

Interactive Approaches

According to interactive approaches to reading in SL/FL, reading is neither a top-down process nor a bottom-up one; it is an interactive compensatory process. In other words, reading is both a reading problem (as a set of reading strategies) and a language problem. Effective readers possess a set of reading skills and strategies for top-down process, and linguistic competence for bottom-up process and engage in an interactive compensatory process according to texts and situations while reading. Researchers and scholars such as Carrell (1988a), working in the area of reading believe that skilled readers constantly shift their mode of processing in order to accommodate the demands of the text and the reading situation (p. 101).

Factors that Prevent/Facilitate Reading for Meaning

Researchers have often tried to identify the factors that prevent learners from engaging in interactive compensatory process. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983/1988, p. 73), following schema theory, posit that background knowledge plays the most important part in the top-down process employed by effective readers in making meaning, lack of which becomes a big obstacle in reading.

Besides background knowledge, trained readers also invoke relevant content and formal schema. Content schema refers to background knowledge about the content area of the text. Therefore, relevant content schema must not only *exist* but must also be *activated* while processing a text. The absence of content schema that involves culture-specific knowledge could lead to a 'short circuit' if the SL/FL reader does not possess this knowledge. In addition, context as well as general knowledge of the world enhances reading comprehension. Formal schema refers to formal, rhetorical organisational structures of different types of texts and genres as, for example, stories, poems, scientific texts, newspaper articles, expository and argumentative texts, and so on. Writers organise their topics in different ways using different types of text organisation and rhetorical organisation. Lack of formal schematic knowledge retards reading comprehension. We will examine this aspect in detail in the following pages while talking about cohesion and coherence in English texts.

Another factor that can prove to be an obstacle in reading is the SL readers' perception of what reading is and what other skills and strategies are needed for effective reading for meaning. Many SL readers think that reading means reading aloud with the correct stress and pronunciation. This may be required in some cases, but reading for comprehension is a silent activity. It has also been found that, unlike effective readers, when SL learners read, they show an excessive veneration for each word and are unwilling to guess the meanings of unknown words. Again, they read word by word instead of reading in meaningful chunks. Some other factors which, though applicable not specifically to SL readers but to L1 readers as well, have a strong bearing on reading for comprehension. Among these are reader's intent, interest and motivation, anxiety, and so on. Reader's intent and purpose can affect the nature and quantity of information that is acquired from the text. Similarly, anxiety, interest and motivation or rather *type* of motivation—extrinsic or intrinsic—would also be important factors to consider in learning to read for meaning.

Reading Problems in SL Classrooms

We have described the factors and strategies that facilitate reading for meaning. But this does not mean that focus on language can be ignored. As Alderson (1984, p. 24) suggests, "it is a language problem, for low levels of foreign language competence, than a reading problem." Many other SL reading researchers have emphasized that language is the major problem for SL students and it interferes with their attempt to make use of interactive approaches to reading.

Researchers have also pointed out that for SL students, we cannot assume that a large vocabulary or basic syntactic structures are already available. Eskey (1973, 1986), Clarke

(1979) and Alderson (1984) characterize these limitations as a language ceiling, or threshold which SL students must surpass if they are to develop fluent reading abilities. They believe that what is important is not just 'decoding' but 'speed and accuracy' and 'automaticity' of decoding skills rather than resorting to top-down process. According to Eskey (1988, p. 94):

It is precisely this 'automaticity' that frees up the minds of fluent readers of a language to think about and interpret what they are reading – that is to employ higher-level, top-down strategies like the use of schemata and other kinds of background knowledge... Good decoding skills are therefore one of the causes, and not merely a result, of fluent reading.

The views expressed by so many researchers on language being a major problem in reading comprehension in SL/FL naturally have serious implications for SL/FL teachers and material producers and hence stake-holders need to consider what these 'language' problems of SL/FL learners are and how they can help learners to overcome them.

Language Problems of SL Learners

It has been found that SL readers of English, whose level of linguistic proficiency is low, face problems in reading comprehension if the text contains a high density of unfamiliar words. Nuttall (1987, p. 65) prefers to call them new lexical items rather than new words. A lexical item is not always a word and neither is it always a content word. It may include new words or phrases, new uses of familiar words, or new idiomatic combinations (such as phrasal verbs), linking devices, and discourse markers. In other words, a lexical item is a word or group of words with a meaning that needs to be learnt as a whole. Words with several meanings, sub-technical vocabulary, super-ordinates, hyponyms, idioms, metonyms are some of the features of language that have been found to

pose problems to SL readers. Significant among these are grammatical and lexical cohesion (reference, substitution, ellipsis, repetition, synonymy, and hyponymy); inter-sentential connections (matching, contrast and logical sequence) and syntactic features (tense, aspect, modality, non-finite clauses and conditional clauses) (Cooper, 1984, 122ff; Williams and Dallas, 1984; Cohen et. al., 1988). Berman (1984) found that non-native speakers find it difficult to process inter-related components of sentence structure (such as constituent structures, structural items, and dependencies) because of 'heaviness' or 'opacity'. By 'heaviness', Berman means the constructions which extend the basic (Noun-Verb (Noun)) structure so that one or more of the sentence constituents is 'heavy' as it contains many sub-parts of embedding or modifications. Heaviness may also occur where the basic NV(N) or 'kernel' structure is violated. 'Opacity' refers to the problems created by certain kinds of cohesive devices such as deletion – by means of gapping, lack of relative pronouns in English relative clauses, etc., and substitution – use of 'one' or verbal 'do' as grammatical substitutes for repeated lexical material as well as of lexical substitution.

While cohesion and syntactic features have been found to pose reading difficulties to SL learners and must be taught, many researchers attribute the language problem to the structure of writing we have referred to above. In other words, realizing text coherence—the logical development of what the writer says what he wants to say—poses a big problem and must be taught.

Writers use various ways to achieve logical development in their writings. Recognizing how a text is organised aids reading comprehension. Researchers identify five different types of rhetorical organisation for expository texts: (1) collection – listing or collection types; (2) causation – cause and effect type;

(3) response – problem-to-solution type; (4) comparison – comparison and contrast type; and (5) description – attribution (Meyer and Freedle, 1984). Some texts are time-ordered; some are space-ordered; others may be uniquely interactive using focal and support sentences to achieve logical development. Awareness of the nature of written discourse also helps readers achieve comprehension. Written discourse, it is said, is interactive but it is not always explicitly interactive; often it may be only implicitly interactive. Recognizing this implicit interaction enables readers to enter into a kind of dialogue with the writer via the printed text and adds to making meaning.

Implications

Several approaches and methods for facilitating reading through activation of background knowledge have been proposed. Besides these, a number of instructional strategies have evolved recently to help make the reader aware of text organisation and rhetorical structure of texts. Many techniques have also been suggested for previewing texts.

Carrell (1988b, p. 248) tries to bring out the common features of these methods. According to her, all these methods train the learner to do a specific activity before reading the text in order to activate appropriate background knowledge. In addition, all these methods have the reader read the text against the background of the activated knowledge. Finally, they all have the reader do another activity after reading to synthesize the new information gained from the text with their prior knowledge. These are popularly called pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities.

Pre-reading Tasks and Activities

The aim of pre-reading tasks and activities is to motivate the learner, to give a purpose for reading and to give or activate background

knowledge (linguistic, conceptual, subject and topic knowledge and socio-cultural knowledge). Pre-reading tasks and activities can be of several types, but they all aim to achieve the same purpose.

While-reading Tasks and Activities

The purpose of these tasks is to guide the learner through the reading of the text, giving him/her practice in imbibing the skills of a practiced reader. These are meant to:

- ensure that the purpose of reading is clear and that this purpose is given before the learner starts reading the text;
- help learners make predictions and employ interactive compensatory process (to switch over from top down to bottom up and vice versa according to the difficulty level of the topic and the text);
- infuse the right perceptions about reading for comprehension (read silently; read in sense groups; read and interpret words and phrases in the context of background knowledge; guess meanings of unknown words and phrases from their shapes, context and other clues);
- encourage learners to vary speed of reading according to the purpose of reading (reading for gist or for details);
- help learners understand cohesion (how sentences have been linked together to achieve logical development);
- allow learners to recognize how paragraphs are linked together to achieve coherence and the type of text organization, i.e. how the writer says what he says (rhetorical organization can be listing type, problem to solution, comparison and contrast, hypothesis to proof, general to specific or vice versa and so on);
- train learners to make use of non-text/non-verbal information, if any, to make meaning;
- teach learners to make inferences as no amount of linguistic text can ever be complete in itself;

- develop sensitivity to language paying attention to words, phrases and discourse markers.

Post-reading Tasks

Once readers have successfully made sense of the text before them, they can be given post-reading activities and tasks. The purpose of these activities is to:

- help the learners extend their schema - assimilate and accommodate the new information received;
- extend active vocabulary;
- provide knowledge of grammar particularly the sort of language errors second and foreign language learners make;
- raise awareness about orthographic practices followed in written texts (such as capital letters, italics, quotations and so on);
- help practice in spoken language, pronunciation, stress and intonation particularly in areas which are likely to prove problematical to the second foreign language learner.

Conclusion

Reading and writing are two sides of the same coin; practice in reading can also be used for giving training in writing. The learner can be given writing assignments based on the reading text to which he/she has been exposed. These writing assignments may include paragraph-writing, essays, notes and instructions, notices, dialogues, speeches, talks, lectures and other similar authentic writing tasks the learners may have to do in a real life situation.

These tasks and activities have given rise to what is called a holistic view of language teaching and learning. Although it is true, as some say, that one learns to read by reading more and not by doing exercises yet it is also true that learners enjoy reading more when they are intrinsically motivated by making sense of what they read. Selection of and exposure to varied reading materials are important, no doubt,

but how these tasks and activities can be devised and used for helping learners in their reading comprehension should form an important component of teacher training and material writing workshops in SL/FL teaching situations.

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