

## **Reconsidering the Reading Comprehension Skill for Advanced Learners**

A Communicative Teaching Approach

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Investigations in some Algerian universities, in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, show that most of the teachers do not consider the reading skill when compared to the other three teaching skills: listening, speaking, and writing. Most of the time they assign texts or whole works to their learners and ask them to read and comprehend them and sometimes even to analyse or evaluate them assuming that students know how to read, thus reading comprehension is taken for granted. Investigations in the field, however, show that most of the learners and an immense majority of teachers cannot read appropriately. That is practically due to a total ignorance of the basic principles of the reading process and the key notions of the reading skill.*

*In this article, we suggest a consistent definition of the reading process and explore the major points in the skill of reading comprehension for advanced learners.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the last few years the reading skill attracted the attention of a large number of applied linguists and psycholinguists each of which has approached the process from a different perspective. Though there are many definitions to reading process could be considered, most theorists in the area agree that reading is a complex skill requiring thinking, understanding and critical processes to construct meaning from all sorts of written texts.

This paper establishes a working definition of the reading process and explores the main issues in reading comprehension skill. Also, it surveys some basic approaches and principles proper to reading skill for advanced learners.

### | DEFINITION OF READING

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Whenever dealing with reading, one thing has to be stressed. It is to distinguish between reading as a process and as a comprehension skill which distinguishes it from the other language skills: listening, speaking and writing. Broughton (1977:89) states that the reading process consists of three sub-skills. The term sub-skill is used here to denote the major components of the reading process.

Reading is a complex skill, that is to say that it involves a whole series of lesser skills\* First of these is the ability to recognize stylised shapes... moreover it is not only a matter of recognising the shape as such but recognising them as same or different.

Reading is conceived as the ability for a learner to recognize shapes, spots and figures drawn on paper this also involves the ability to recognize differences between shapes like in the case of capital and small letters: A/a, B/b, D/d. This definition, however, considers reading from its initial stage as a low level of learning where learners are illiterate or early beginners of a new language that they can read Broughton (1977:99) adds that:

The second of the skills involved in the complex is the ability of correlate the black marks on the paper, the patterned shape, with language. It is impossible to learn to read without at least the capacity to acquire language.

Here Broughton (ibid) asserts the strong connection between the ability of recognizing the shapes, low level of reading, and elements of languages as a system. The elements might be the complex group of sounds, words, sentences and paragraphs.

If learners do not correlate the shapes with the elements of language, reading will be just a phonic or oral practice, Broughton ((ibid)) called it "look and say" (1977:89). At

this medium stage of reading, the learner should be aware of the purpose of reading aloud the sounds that represent the shapes and the formal linguistic elements in order to read more complex elements like words, phrases, etc.

Broughton (ibid: 89) also affirms that the two above skills are correlated in a way that should result in an ultimate skill:

A third skill which is involved in the total skill of reading is essentially an intellectual skill; this is the ability to correlate the black marks on the paper by way of the formal elements of language, let us say the words as sounds, with the meanings which those words symbolize.

This total skill confirms the essence of the process of reading. It is the understanding of shapes and language elements that they stand for. On the whole, if the process of reading is not meant to result in getting the meanings of language it will resemble making noises or verbal sounds; let us use Broughton's term "barking at print".

Many applied linguists, however assert that meaning does not come from the printed letters alone. It involves an interaction between thought and language. Reading thus is viewed as the process of combining textual information with all sorts of information a reader brings to text. Grabe (1988:56) considers the process as:

... The reading process is not simply a matter of extracting information from the text. Rather, it is one of in which the reading activities arrange 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.

This emphasizes that reading is a kind of dialogue or interaction between the reader and the text and readers select the fewest cues from the text that are necessary to produce guesses then confirm them. Reading is therefore not the passive reception of meaning from the text. It is an active and interpretive process which makes use of the interaction between the reader's knowledge and the text.

## **REASONS FOR READING**

It is quite clear that when we read articles, a sign, a warning or ads, our motives and aims are different in a way or another from when we read a piece of poem, a short story or a piece of prose. Harmer (2001:200) points out that:

...one type of reading and listening, in other words, takes place because we have some kind of utilitarian or instrumental purpose in mind... Another kind of reading and listening takes place largely for pleasure.

Harmer (2001) considers two main reasons for reading, a) instrumental, and b) pleasurable.

Instrumental reasons imply a reading with a clear aim in the mind of the reader. We generally read a notice to get the time of the departure of a bus, to know how to carry out a procedure; we read a sign to know to get to a place. We may also read a ticket machine to know how to operate it or set it on and off. This kind of reading happens when we have a utilitarian or instrumental purpose in mind.

Pleasurable reasons, on the other hand imply a reading for entertainment or pleasure. People usually read magazine puzzles, stories, poetry, and illustrated cartoons just for leisure and distraction. It is, however, worth signalling that there is crossover between the two categories. That is, pleasurable reading can be instrumental too, specifically in educational and academic situations. In other words, teachers usually assign pleasurable texts not just for the sake of pleasure, but for utilitarian purposes such as getting linguistic or cultural insights of a community, studying rhetorical devices or discussing figurative knowledge

### **READING COMPREHENSION**

White (1985:22) affirms that the process of reading involves two separate stages. The initial stage, decoding and the second stage, comprehension. "There are two separate stages involved in reading. There is the initial stage of decoding [...] the second stage is that of comprehension"

The initial stage, in fact, is no more than recognizing the relationship between the print on the page, letters and shapes and the sounds of the language. In this stage, students are asked to read aloud to demonstrate their ability to connect printed symbol and verbal sounds.

It is quite possible, however, to read aloud a piece of writing without understanding what the printed words mean at all. Reading in this way is a merely decoding process. Comprehension, on the other hand, implies recognizing the significance and the meaning of what we read and the intentions of the writer. Reading comprehension is thus the ability to find out the hidden abstract implications of those printed shapes and letters.

### **THE READING TEXT**

Mei-Yun (1993) considers reading as an interactive process of communication. The reading text thus stands as a medium between the writer and the reader. It is by decoding the text that the reader can get meaning of the words and the message communicated by the writer. According to Halliday (1976: 12) a text is:

...a semantic unit: a unit not of a form but of meaning ... A text may be spoken or written, prose or verse, dialogue or monologue. It may be anything from a single proverb to a whole play, from a momentary cry for help to an all-day discussion on a committee

Halliday defines the text as a unit of meaningful form that encodes a message whatever its form is. Thus, a text can be a dialogue, a piece of prose, a piece of drama, a proverb, a long debate or a daily discussion.

Though this definition seems a very ideal and perfect for a communicative class still most of foreign language teachers assume that a text is merely an article, a prose passage or an extract from a reader or novel. All the other reading genres, mainly literary, receive a slight importance if no importance at all

## READING MODELS

Models of reading process are models of an ideal reader reading a text. They can tell us and give us insights about how such a reader does through the process. Knowing how good readers do when reading actually can help teachers develop a clearer concept of the needs and requirements in class. In the last twenty years, the term top-down, bottom-up and interactive have been suggested to describe the different models of the reading process.

### BOTTOM-UP MODEL

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In this model the reader is expected to process the writer's message in a serial way\* from letters to words then to Meaning. This means that the reader decodes separate linguistic units, phonemes, graphemes, and words then building textual meaning & Alderson (2000:14) points out that:

Bottom-up approaches are serial models, where the reader begins with the printed word, recognizes graphic stimuli, decodes the phonemes and recognizes words and decodes meanings.

Here, the reader's attention focuses on individual phonemes, and understanding is achieved by relating these detailed elements to build up a whole. In respect of phonics, the reader needs to begin by recognizing the letter names (associating the letter names with their sounds) then blend these sounds together into words. It is implied that graphic information enters through the visual system and is transferred at the character level from the character to a sound that is from graphic representation to a phonemic representation, then the phonemic representation is converted into words at

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...If top-down probability since the reader or listener gets a general view of the reading or listening passage by, in some way, absorbing the overall picture through the overall help of the reader or listener's schemata allow them to have appropriate expectations of what they are going to come across.

! In Top-Down model, the reader interacts with the text and constructing meaning of the text by combining information developed from the text and his knowledge of the world. Harmer emphasizes the importance of prior knowledge or schema which accounts for the acquisition of knowledge about the interpretation of text through the activation of information stored in the brain of the reader. Thus, the more these schemata are relevant to the reading text (the more likely understanding and reading are successful).

It is suggested here that the flow of information proceeds from the top so that the process of word identification is dependent upon language first. The higher level processes stem from past experience, and the reader's knowledge of the language pattern (syntax) interacts with and controls the flow of information. Stovach (1980)\* On the whole, theorists like Foodman and Ptahnhch point out two opposing models in the reading process. One theory envisions reading as a bottom-up and the constructivist theory views reading as a top-down process. Rumelhart (1936) however claims that neither the bottom-up nor the top-down model of reading process is actually a complete model for what occurs during the reading process and he proposes an interactive model.

### THE INTERACTIVE MODEL

Many theorists in the field claim that the process of reading is an interactive process involving both top-down and bottom-up processes. Alderson (2000:18) states that:

'In fact (however, neither the bottom-up nor the top-down approach is an adequate characterization of the reading process and more adequate models are if we view interactive models, in which every component in the reading process is actually interacting with any other component, be it higher-up or higher down.'

It is clear that without a good understanding of all details gained from bottom-up processes, the reader is unable to get clear general picture of what the text is about. In this model, a final hypothesis about the text is actually synthesized resulting from continuous and simultaneous interaction among multiple knowledge sources of the model.

After surveying the reading models, it is clear that the most successful reader is both skilful « bottom-up » processor of texts; he can convert the language on the page into information it represents both rapidly and accurately and skilful “top-down” processor; he can relate new information to the relevant knowledge he already has to construct a reasonable meaning of the text. Recent research, however, shows that a proficient successful reader does these two skills. He simultaneously decodes and interprets as he reads.

### **AUTHENTIC TEXT**

Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching in the early 1970's, many applied linguists have called for the authenticizing of language instruction. This entails the use of real language for real purposes. It was suggested that students have to read texts written by and for native speakers. Simplified texts for language learners lack the features of authentic texts and were considered inefficient for students learning to read in the real world. Accordingly, the use of authentic materials has become increasingly popular in learning situations. Swaffar (1985:17) points out that:

An authentic text ... is one whose primary intent is to communicate meaning. In other words, such a text can be one which is written for native speakers of a language to be read by other native speakers...or it may be a text intended for a language learner group.

Swaffar called for utility of authentic texts in foreign language classrooms. This came as a reaction against the artificiality noted in texts that have been simplified or especially written for language learners. Thus, the use of authentic materials has proved very efficient in situations where communication and interaction are sought since they are instances of real communication of native writers and readers.

In sum, authentic texts may provide learners with real grammatical lexical patterns that would allow them to communicate appropriately in the target language. McCarthy and Carter (1995: 216) point out that material containing authentic language may also avoid the possibility of producing speakers of English who can only speak like a book. Authentic material in the classroom may prepare learners to cope successfully with conversations and situations outside the classroom and may also increase motivation and eagerness to communicate in the target language.

Conversely, to reinforce the efficiency of authentic text, Johns (1994:294) rejected simplified texts and he demonstrated that simplification is liable to destroy the original features of the text.

Martinez, (2002) cited some advantages of authentic material in the classroom, here are some:

- a- Students are exposed to real discourse.
- b- Authentic materials keep students informed about what is happening in the world, so they have an intrinsic educational value.
- c- Textbooks often do not include incidental or improper English.
- d- They contain a wide variety of text types, language styles not easily found in conventional teaching materials.
- e- They encourage reading for pleasure, because they are likely to contain topics of interest to learners.

Martinez (ibid) also states the commonest sources for authentic materials that are used in today's classroom. In brief, they are: newspapers, TV programmes, menus, brochures, comics and literature, novels, poems and short stories.

Communicative Language Teaching has actually shown an increasing tendency to use authentic materials in the classroom. Hedge (2000: 67) states that:

With communicative language teaching has come pressure to use authentic materials, in other words, materials which have not been designed especially for language learners and which therefore do not have contrived or simplified language. The argument is quite simply that if the goal of teaching is to equip students to deal ultimately with authentic language of the real world, they should be given opportunities to cope with this in classroom.

This clearly shows that simplified or contrived texts do not have the characteristics of the texts in real use of language. If the learners deal solely with contrived texts in the classroom, they will not be able to deal with authentic spoken or written language in the real world. Authentic texts thus should be introduced in learning classroom in order to expose the learners to authentic natural language used by the native speakers in order to prepare them to real communication situations.

#### READING AND SCHEMA THEORY

The traditional view of reading assumed that the meaning resides in the text to be comprehended, not in the reader doing the comprehending. If a reader could not understand a text, it was assumed to be a deficiency in his / her understanding of words, and grammatical units in the text. Goodman (1967) however claims that the reader does not need to use all the textual cues, but he makes predictions and checks them against the text. Thus, the better a reader makes correct predictions, the less he will check the text. Therefore background information, which allows the reader to make more correct predictions, is certainly a very essential and important factor in reading comprehension. The role that background information plays in comprehension has been formalized in schema theory. Cook (1989:69) points out that: "The mind, stimulated by key words or phrases in the text or by the context, activates a knowledge schema." Cook (ibid) thus



emphasizes the characteristics of schema which allow us to relate incoming information to already stored and known information. Carter (1993:62) points out that:

... human memory stores sets of stereotypical situations or experiences which enable us to make predictions about what we might expect to experience in a given context.

Hence, in order to comprehend a text, a reader has to use a pre-existing knowledge stored in his brain. This involves mental representations of some situations that we come across, i.e. the knowledge of the world. Anderson *et al*, (1977:369), see that 'Every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well.' It seems that when readers process a text, they do not rely only on the printed words and grammatical cues to comprehend a text but also on what they already know about the content. Carrell (1983) however distinguishes two types of knowledge or schemata; formal schemata and context schemata. Formal schemata entail linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of language, how texts are organized and the features of particular genres. Content schemata include the knowledge of the world and the texts subject matter. Content schemata are divided into two types. Background knowledge, i.e., any sort of knowledge about the text whether relevant or irrelevant to the content of the reading text. And subject-matter which is directly relevant to the text. Thus, it is clear enough that shared schemata or preexistent knowledge makes the task of communication more efficient. Students who do not share the same schemata knowledge with the writer of the text would find it difficult or impossible to comprehend what the text means and the message behind the printed pages.

#### A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING READING

Language teaching has been continuously changing for many centuries also reasons for learning foreign languages have been different in different periods.

In some years, languages were mainly taught for the purpose of reading, in others, however, they were taught mainly for the purpose of communication and interaction. These differences actually influenced how language has to be taught in various periods.

In the 1840's until the 1940's the purpose of learning to read a language has been to have access to the literature written in that language. Thus, the grammar-translation method was the most dominant foreign language teaching method. Richards (1991:3) points out that:

The goal of foreign language study is to learn a language in order to read its literature or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign language study. Grammar translation is a way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules.

It is clearly stated that the purpose of learning in the 1840's and 1940's was exclusively to have access to the literature written in the target language and the culture of

its native speakers. The reading materials were almost chosen from literary texts that represent higher forms and standards of culture. This method, in general, assumes that students learn to read a language merely by studying its vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure.

In the years following W W II, enormous change took place in the world, some of which clearly influenced language teaching and learning. More and more opportunities for international travel and business and social cultural exchanges increased the need for foreign language learning. This eventually resulted in the emergence of the audio lingual method.

In the 1970's, educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the grammar translation method and audio-lingual methods proclaimed that students were not learning enough realistic language. They also did not know how to communicate using appropriate social expressions and language. Thus, they called for more authentic and realistic language use and classroom exchanges where students should be engaged in real communication. This eventually led to the development of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching. Hymes (1976:3) states that:

The language teacher's emphasis on mastery of structure is then, paralleled by a similar emphasis within linguistics. And in both fields a parallel reaction has taken place. It is a reaction against the view of language as a set of structures, a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part. In language teaching this reaction is crystallizing itself into the communicative approach.

Richards J (1991:82) also states that:

In recent years, applied linguistics has been revitalized by attempts to describe how language reflects its communicative uses and by demonstrating of how syllabus design and methodology can respond to the need for communicative uses of language in classrooms and teaching materials.

The communicative approach to language teaching focuses on the communicative practice of language in order to develop communicative language ability. As for reading, this approach sets a shift from the grammatical to the communicative properties of language. Widdowson (1972:117) states that:

Efficient reading involves understanding how language operates in communication, and it is precisely this understanding which students appear not to acquire during their years of learning English.

Widdowson (ibid) points out that foreign language students who have been learning English for several years, actually remain deficient in the ability to use the language and to understand its use in normal communication in the spoken or written form.

Research in the field demonstrated that the difficulties the students encounter do not arise so much from a lack of knowledge of the system of English language, but from unfamiliarity with English use. Their needs thus could be met by developing knowledge of

how language is used in real communicative situations. This could be achieved through involving the learners in authentic situations. Accordingly, too much focus should be on the use of authentic listening and reading materials rather than contrived texts which are designed to illustrate grammatical forms and vocabulary items.

On the whole, the communicative approach seeks to use authentic resources in foreign language classroom, since they serve as partial substitute for the community of native speakers. Thus, newspapers, magazine articles, manuals, recipes, videos, plays, poems and stories all can be exploited in a variety of ways to enhance the communicative competence of the foreign language learners.

## CONCLUSION

As a matter of fact, reading is the most emphasized skill in EFL classes and the mainstay of any scientific, cultural or literary course. In most cases, university teachers come to class with the idea that learners know how to read; thus they select a passage or sometimes a whole work then ask their students to read it. But they never question whether students know how to read. Investigations in the field show that most of students as well as teachers actually do not know how to read appropriately. This is due to a total ignorance of the fundamental principles and notions of the reading skill.

In this article, we have tried to provide teachers as well as students with some key notions and concepts for the reading skill and shed light on the widely recognized reading approach and models in order to help them read well and comprehend a text at an advanced level.

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