
**FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING IN THE US: MAKING
READING INSTRUCTION COMMUNICATIVE.**

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Foreign/L2 reading in the United States has evolved during the 1990s with the widespread acceptance of the interactive theory of reading. Nevertheless, the communicative language teaching approach often translates into a reduced role for reading in the classroom, and many traditional pedagogical materials are still used in language programs around the US. To foment communicative reading instruction, this paper provides an overview of some of the unique features presented in six currently used language methodology texts, providing a snapshot of how reading instruction is taught to future teachers. Finally, a framework for presenting reading through communicative activities is suggested, one which is both information- and task-based, allowing for easy adjustment to learners' needs.

Key words: foreign language reading, reading instruction, interactive reading theory, schema theory, teaching methodology

1. Introduction

A decade has passed since the publication of Elizabeth Bernhardt's awarding-winning volume *Reading Development in a Second Language* (1991), which provided clear indications about the progress of foreign/L2 reading in the 1980s. She discussed the theoretical underpinnings, teaching, and research of foreign/L2 reading from the interactive perspective. What

has happened in second language reading since the appearance of that volume? Here I examine not only the place of reading in the L2 classroom, but also teacher preparation courses at the university level in the US. Six methodology textbooks highlight the development of foreign/L2 reading over the past decade: Brown, 1994; Lee & Van Patten, 1995; Nunan, 1999; Omaggio, 1993; Shrum & Glisan, 2000; and Ur, 1996.

2. Foreign language/L2 reading theory

Since the 1980s, the interactive theory has been the predominant model in the US (Rumelhart, 1977; Bernhardt, 1991; Swaffar, Arens & Byrnes, 1991). The interactive model assumes that readers employ numerous mental processes simultaneously, or in concert, to allow them to make meaning with text. In this model, the meaning does not reside in the page, but rather the interaction between the knowledge the reader possesses, the original author's message, and the information gleaned from the text mingle to produce the reader's interpretation of the text. While we often share much of an interpretation of a reading, many variations are possible. The interactive theory builds on schema theory. Top down versus bottom up processing are often included in the descriptions found in methodology textbooks addressing L2 reading. Additionally, these processes are usually alluded to in language textbooks as well, when teaching learning strategies (e.g., What do you know about topic X?: activating prior knowledge). Such activities are incorporated into reading lessons to stimulate readers' background knowledge and to help them apply reading strategies to create meaning.

3. The teaching of reading in the US foreign language curriculum

How much has changed in the past decade? There are signs of change in numerous materials, changes that offer hope for improved instruction and learning. In US universities and high schools, with the communicative movement of the last twenty years, reading has often found itself relegated to a reduced role in many language programs. This means that in some schools

students are expected to practice reading either at home, alone, or perhaps not at all. The underlying theoretical belief here is that the reading ability will develop spontaneously after the student has learned enough of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language. Of course, many programs do have a more balanced, four-skill approach, placing more emphasis on the development of literacy skills. Still, reading may be given short shrift until students arrive in fourth-year high school courses where suddenly expected to read literary texts.

Typically, in the US students begin to study another language when they are around sixteen years old, in high school, or around the age of eighteen when they begin college. Some postpone or avoid language study altogether. In 1998, of 14,590,000 students enrolled in US universities, 1,151,283 were studying a foreign language. The numbers have increased 189% since 1960 (Bord & Welles, 2000: 25). In high schools, students take between one and four years of another language at a slow, thorough pace. Students who begin language study at the university level usually take two years--about 180 class hours. Then they move into content courses. Literature professors recognize that students are hesitant to begin literature courses because their reading skills remain weak. Sometimes alternate courses are available (e.g., Business German) for students who wish to build their language skills before tackling literature. The more motivated (and financially able) students often study abroad for a summer, semester, or year.

Teacher preparation also may affect the role reading takes in the classroom. According to VanPatten (1998), it seems that only 1% of the language professors at the university level in the US are applied linguists. In 1993, the number of foreign language professors in the US had surpassed 625,000 (Welles, 1999); most of them teach Spanish. It is worrisome that so few are applied linguists. This means that the faculty members training our future language teachers are specialists in other fields (e.g., literature, culture studies) or in the department of education. Sadly, few courses exist on the teaching of literature to train future professors either. Many simply do what their language teachers before them had done; others follow along the selected course book. It is certainly disconcerting that such a large number

of professors may be poorly prepared to practice their chosen profession. In addition, since few are reading specialists, the lack of preparation where foreign language reading instruction is concerned is of concern.

4. Reading and technology

With the great strides in technology, we are now witnessing marvelous improvements in CD-ROMS and Internet web sites that provide students with materials for reading, vocabulary, grammar and so forth. Students may check the meaning of a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph or dialogue with the click of a mouse. CD-ROMS include other options to meet learners' different learning styles. The dictionary may be the first, or last, resort according to the specific question. The flexibility offered by the technology is certainly one of the most attractive features. Reading passages can be accompanied by a native speaker reading the material as an audio feature. Activities focusing on structures can also be selected. CD-ROMs will not replace reading, to be sure, but they are becoming increasingly more useful. As they replace workbooks, students can now get instant feedback, alter the mode of delivery, and e-mail their work to their instructors in an instant. Chat rooms make it easy for students to discuss readings in class and beyond. And of course, the availability of texts in the language being studied has exploded with the Internet. Over the next few years, we shall see further availability of improved technology via the Internet and CD-ROM packages that even now are beginning to replace traditional workbooks and lab manuals.

5. Pedagogical texts

My analysis begins with six methodology textbooks that have been in use in the United States during the past ten years, some of which are now in their second or third edition. I should note that this analysis does not include texts devoted primarily to the teaching of reading because they are seldom used in foreign language programs in the US. In other words, a solitary methods course usually must use a broader, more general methodology book or set of

readings on varied topics. First I note which of the textbooks includes several key issues:

- 1) Discussion of reading theory/presentation of the author's theoretical perspective: Lee & VanPatten, Nunan, Brown, Ur, Omaggio, and implicitly in Shrum & Glisan.
- 2) Discussion of first versus second language reading: Nunan, Lee & VanPatten.
- 3) Recommendations for evaluating reading comprehension: Omaggio, Lee & VanPatten, and Ur, implicitly.
- 4) Teaching learning strategies: Brown, Omaggio, Nunan, Lee & VanPatten.

The following table summarizes the approximate percentage of pages, as well as pages per total length, dedicated to foreign/L2 reading in each methodology textbook:

<u>Author (Publisher)</u>	<u>Edition</u>	<u>% dedicated to reading</u>	<u>pages on reading per total page count</u>
Lee & VanPatten (McGraw-Hill)	1995	14.4%	42 / 291
Omaggio (Heinle & Heinle)	1993	9.5%	51 / 532
Brown (Prentice Hall)	1994	7.7%	36 / 467
Shrum & Glisan (Heinle & Heinle)	2000	7.0%	25 / 364
Nunan (Heinle & Heinle)	1999	6.6%	22 / 330
Ur (Cambridge)	1996	5.3%	20 / 375

Table 1

In the following section, rather than provide exhaustive descriptions of each text, I highlight some of their more distinctive features, since the commonalities are many; they are discussed in the order in which they appear in Table 1, that is, from most to least coverage of foreign/L2 reading. The Shrum & Glisan volume is difficult to compare with the others because it so highly integrated. Reading plays a key role in several sections of their texts (e.g., using authentic materials, drawing information from a text to use for a specific purpose). The same can be said for Lee & VanPatten who examine reading and writing together. Omaggio, on the other hand, discusses reading and listening comprehension together in one chapter, also combining assessment in a later unit. This integration of skills and processes is very understandable and both similarities and distinctions are discussed in these volumes.

In *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen* (1995) Lee & VanPatten begin with a definition of reading then move on to discuss the problematic nature of traditional comprehension questions. They then explain the difficulties associated with such questions: students may look for the same word(s) in the text, copy something down, and we never know if they really understood the text (e.g., the look-back-and-lift strategy). When we do use such questions, it is important to keep in mind some guidelines for the preparation of good items. From her review of the research literature Wolf (1993) compiled the following recommendations:

- 1) that all items be passage dependent;
- 2) that items test information from different levels of the passage, that is, main ideas as well as details;
- 3) that all distracters be plausible;
- 4) that items paraphrase information in the passage so that learners cannot match words and phrases from the item to the passage;
and

- 5) that test takers not be allowed to refer to the passage while performing the comprehension tasks, thereby discouraging surface reading of the passage (Wolf, 1993: 327).

Lee & VanPatten then discuss the interactive approach to reading, examining the various processes used to make meaning with text: semantics, syntax, word recognition, letter recognition, forms and shapes of letters, and combinations of letters simultaneously. Their discussion also includes schema theory and top-down versus bottom-up processing. Then examples are provided of four key processes that are important to readers' comprehension.

Readers disambiguate. We use our expectations and we examine contextual clues to figure out what a reading is about. Our prior knowledge affects how we view new information that we take in. Consider the following passages for a moment (Lee & VanPatten, 1995: 193):

1. When Jerry, Mike and Pat arrived, Karen was sitting in her living room writing some notes. She quickly gathered the cards and stood up to greet her friends at the door. They followed her into the living room but as usual, they couldn't agree on exactly what to play.
2. Rocky slowly got up from the mat, planning his escape...What bothered him most was being held, especially since the charge against him had been weak. He considered his present situation. The lock that held him was strong, but he thought he could break it.

What is your assessment of the two passages? In other words, did you disambiguate in favor of particular topics? Usually readers from a particular group offer different interpretations of these reading passages. Those with an orientation to music versus those who like to play cards react differently to the first text. Regarding the second passage, criminology students differ in their assessment from athletes, who assume it is about a wrestling match.

Readers elaborate. When students grasp the familiar or recognize portions of a story, they are able to elaborate and fill in gaps to both strengthen and hasten their comprehension (Lee & VanPatten, 1995: 194). Fairly tales are highly predictable, for example, adding to learners' expectations. They easily confirm certain types of information as they read the next fairy tale in the target language. For them it can be fun to find out that many stories come in slightly or greatly different versions in other languages.

Readers filter. Through our own knowledge and especially our cultural filters, we develop special meanings for passages. For example, if you are conservative, liberal or radical, your interpretation of today's news story about ETA or George W. Bush may vary widely from the interpretations of other readers.

Readers compensate. If readers are weak with recognition of words and letters or have limited vocabularies they use other information to help them understand texts. Readers may understand that a story is about an upcoming event based on several clues (e.g., going to, will, next week, upcoming) even though they may not recognize all of the clues as marking futurity. Of course, problems can arise if students misinterpret key information from a text (e.g., feud vs. feudal, Lee & VanPatten, 1995: 195). Obviously by including passages that are rather transparent, learners have a better chance of applying their knowledge and strategies to reach better interpretations than if a text were opaque, vague, incoherent or poorly developed.

Omaggio (*Teaching Language in Context*, 1993) describes the interactive theory in her chapter on listening and reading comprehension, as she discusses similarities and differences between the two. Furthermore, she includes Pearson and Tierney's Composing Model in which the reader develops his own mental (interior) interpretation of the passage. In addition, she recognizes the importance of readers' use of simultaneous mental processes. She presents a wide variety of model activities for learners at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels, referring to the roles fulfilled according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, including in particular: objectives, pre-reading activities, student tasks, and sample passages.

In *Teaching by Principles* (1994), Brown also supports the interactive approach. He discusses text types and text characteristics, and offers a list of fourteen skills and activities that the successful reader should be able to control. Then he considers reading strategies and dedicates several pages to the development of interactive reading tasks, along with class plans for two reading lessons, one basic and another more advanced. His emphasis on learning strategies parallels the call for more and better learning strategy use in the professional literature. Good learning-strategy instruction should include at least the following phases:

- 1) Preparation. Prepare for strategy instructions by doing a needs assessment with learners. identify strategies students currently use. (Employing retrospective interviews, think alouds, etc.) Compare strategies with others. Assess the merits of the strategies.
- 2) Presentation/Modeling. Describe and demonstrate the use of the different strategies.
- 3) Practice. Work with strategies in an on-going fashion.
- 4) Evaluation. Students should evaluate the efficacy of the strategies used periodically since strategy use and needs may change over time. Adjustments may be needed. (Summarized in Chandler, 1999).

Shrum & Glisan (*Teacher's Handbook*, 2000) do not present a chapter devoted entirely to reading because the content of their entire book is highly integrated, using learning and teaching scenarios to lead new teachers through practical issues. Their book focuses on the five Cs developed in the ACTFL Standards project (communication, community, culture, connections, and comparisons). This format makes it difficult to compare with the rest of the methodology textbooks. One scenario, for example, discusses the use of the portfolio in which a variety of reading- and writing-related "products" or entries can be included.

In *Second Language Teaching & Learning* (1999), Nunan first considers the importance of goals--Why are we reading?--and then the strategies readers use. After pointing out the shift from the "phonics only" model, leading to the psycholinguistic model *a la* Goodman, he posits the interactive approach. He addresses the influence of the first language as well. For beginners he notes that confusion, mistakes, and mental blocks

hamper reading due a general low-level of language ability and knowledge. For Nunan the objectives carefully guide the organization of the reading tasks leading to successful reading classes. For example, the good reading activity should include authentic materials, present information about the rhetorical and thematic context, and require students to interact with the text. Citing Davies (1995), Nunan recommends that the teaching of reading in a second language be based on the use of strategies *a la* Grellet (1981). He closes his discussion with suggestions for designing reading courses.

Ur (1996) begins with a question to demystify some common beliefs about reading: How do we read? She asks her readers to reflect on the kinds of processes we use automatically. She then considers reading for beginners and the types of appropriate activities. Her examples illustrate Wolf's (1991) recommendations for the appropriate development of comprehension questions. Then she offers eleven ideas for good reading tasks:

- 1) A general question is given before reading, asking the learners to find out a piece of information central to the understanding of the text.
- 2) Learners compose and answer their own questions.
- 3) Learners suggest a title if none was given originally; or an alternative, if there was.
- 4) Learners summarize the content in a sentence or two. This may also be done in the mother tongue.
- 5) If the text is a story, learners suggest what might happen next.
- 6) If the text is a story, learners suggest what might have happened before.
- 7) Towards the end of the passage, leave four or five gaps that can only be completed if the text has been understood. (Different from usual cloze procedure.)
- 8) Again towards the end, the passage includes a fixed number of errors that the students must identify and perhaps correct (e.g., three wrong words; two superfluous words).
- 9) There are two texts on a similar topic and learners note similarities and differences.
- 10) If the text is a letter or a provocative article, the learners may discuss how they would respond.
- 11) If the text is informational or tells a story, the learners may represent its content through a different medium, such as drawing, colouring, marking a map, listing events, creating a diagram or even acting out a couple of key scenes or moments. (Adapted from Ur, 1996: 146.)

Ur also provides a helpful list of descriptors about efficient versus inefficient reading before offering the following practical recommendations:

1) make sure students get a lot of successful reading experience; 2) make sure that most of the vocabulary in the reading texts is familiar and that unknown words can be guessed or safely ignored; 3) give interesting tasks so students will have a clear purpose and motivating challenge; 4) make sure tasks encourage selective, intelligent reading for main meaning and do not just test understanding of trivial details (e.g., find a number, date or name); 5) help students manage without understanding every word by using scanning tasks to help them focus on limited items of information; 6) provide a variety of texts and tasks to give learners practice in different kinds of reading. (Adapted from Ur, 1996: 149).

In the communicative classroom, reading should not be reduced to a list of comprehension questions, no matter how carefully they may have been developed. Students of all ages can participate in social, interactive tasks (e.g., reading circles: see Harste, Short and Burke, 1988). Also, reading is not necessarily linear. What do you do when you pick up the newspaper? We tend not to read a newspaper, telephone book, or dictionary word-for-word. We may go back and read more carefully if something catches our eye or if we decide we are interested in reconsidering a point made by the author. We reread literature for enjoyment, or to examine further ideas from the text. With each reading, our students will learn more, and multiple readings help them to read better, so they learn more vocabulary, discourse features, structures and so forth. We need to ask learners to read--and reread--for various purposes. The additional practice enriches the whole experience and adds to the knowledge of the reader.

6. Making reading communicative: interactive practice

Learners develop various competencies (e.g., linguistic, pragmatic) as they become successful language users. By making foreign language reading instruction as communicative as possible, we hope to enhance students' overall competence in the language. To provide communicative reading instruction, I present recommendations for foreign/L2 reading that are not only task-based and information-based, but also communicative in nature. The procedures are from an intermediate Spanish textbook used widely in the US (Lee, Young, Wolf & Chandler, 2000). These communicative tasks

avoid the manipulation of forms, translation formats, and the typical list of comprehension questions. By building learning strategies into the reading tasks, readers become more engaged in their own learning. And the benefits of sharing the learning processes are multiple.

The first phase, now quite common in language textbooks, is the pre-reading phase. In these activities, the themes and vocabulary of the reading lesson are worked with as learners' background knowledge is stimulated in a set of interactive tasks. An important set of guided reading activities is then completed in class. This is the active reading phase. These tasks have learners work together during class to slowly uncover more and more meaning from the text. They do not necessarily read the entire passage in class. They do examine, however, portions of the passage to discover or learn key ideas. One can think of the analogy of peeling an onion or an artichoke, constantly revealing further layers of meaning during various parts of the reading event (Musumeci, 1990).

To encourage closer reading, as well as repeated readings, we then include carefully designed homework assignments that encourage students to go back and read for further important information. An important third phase of reading tasks sets these procedures apart from other foreign language texts in the US. These tasks, also completed in class, personalize, place in context, or otherwise help students apply themes and information from the reading to their own lives. Once students have completed a variety of activities that work with a reading passage, the moral of the story, or the main ideas can be related to their own lives, greatly enhancing the communicative nature of the classroom reading lesson.

7. Conclusion

In closing, I share the following acronym from Anderson (1999), which reminds us of the objectives we should keep in mind as we plan reading instruction: ACTIVE. The letters stand for: A = Activate prior knowledge; C = Cultivate vocabulary; T = Teach for comprehension; I = Increase reading rate; V = Verify reading strategies; E = Evaluate progress. These

objectives are useful for working with reading in the foreign/L2 language classroom as they clearly complement the suggestions from the other pedagogical texts examined above. A brief glance at foreign/L2 reading materials currently used in the US, reveals that a growing number of language textbooks include authentic materials (i.e., literature and journalistic pieces) and that multiple or recycled learning strategies are becoming more common.

Pedagogical textbooks also reflect an awareness of the need to apply in the classroom, and in materials, what we believe about the interactive nature of reading. They also promote the inclusion of reading strategies in the language classroom, as well as ways of familiarizing new teachers with learning strategy instruction in teacher preparation courses. Importantly, students' reading abilities should be assessed using activities in testing situations that parallel those used in both classroom and homework activities (Lee & VanPatten, 1995). Beginners appear to benefit most from the incorporation of learning strategies in the classroom (Bernhardt, 1991), since intermediate and advanced learners are better able to employ strategies and monitor their own needs (e.g., Are my current strategies meeting my needs?). This seems to be due primarily to their increasingly greater control of the target language. In other words, their increased fluency leads to more automatic processing of information and decreases the cognitive overload encountered by beginners.

Through the recommendations cited, we see the importance of going beyond the simple comprehension question. Reading in a foreign/L2 should be communicative, allowing students to share meaning, learning strategies, doubts, interpretations, and so forth. Reading need not be a solitary event (Lee, 1998). On the contrary, it can be quite social, just as first language reading is for children in elementary school programs (see Harste, Short & Burke, 1988, for a variety of examples.) The suggested phases for reading instruction along with the inclusion of interesting reading texts--often chosen by the students themselves--plus integrated and personalized activities, lead to the optimal result: students will read.

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