

ASPECTS OF THE METHODOLOGY OF READING

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Resumen

Este artículo se centra en la metodología de la destreza lectora en alumnos universitarios de inglés, en particular en la lectura de textos académicos. Partiendo de los esquemas previos del lector, se proponen diferentes tipos de textos, tanto para fines académicos como específicos. Tras ofrecer propuestas para lectura intensiva y extensiva en el aula universitaria, sugerimos una amplia gama de subdestrezas o estrategias lectoras, algunas transferidas positivamente de la lengua materna. Se ofrece una secuenciación de actividades previas a la lectura, durante el proceso lector y como extensión del propio texto y se proponen materiales de lectura para alumnos universitarios. Se concluye con la idea de que en este contexto la práctica de la lectura ayuda a consolidar las destrezas lectoras y a profundizar en el conocimiento de las propias materias; en definitiva, a aprender.

Abstract

This article centres on the methodology of reading for university students, especially the reading of academic texts. Building on the existing reader schemas, the use of different texts, both academic and specific, are proposed. After considering both intensive and extensive reading proposals for university classrooms, some reading strategies and substrategies are suggested, some of which may be successfully transferred from the first language. A series of activities prior to reading, during reading and after reading are then suggested for university students. The conclusion reflects the idea that in this context reading helps to develop not only reading skills, but also a deeper understanding of the actual content: in actual fact, learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the two so-called receptive-interpretative skills, the other one being listening. In both a considerable amount of –hopefully comprehensible– *input* (Krashen, 1985) is given for the text to be understood and interpreted. Starting from this commonplace characterization, reading can no longer be considered passive; although the material is provided (not necessarily in all cases, as it is highly recommendable that the university student chooses the content of some of the readings), readers have to do their best to make sense of it, to extract meaning from it, to read between the lines, to interpret the writer's intention and to go beyond the text, using that information to do something else, to name but a few of the many things one is supposed to do with texts. This is particularly true in the case of teaching and practising reading in English at university, because the level of English university students allows them to exploit the text not only as far as meaning is concerned, which is paramount, but also from a linguistic or literary point of view; in addition, most of the information they need for their subject is obtained through set and suggested readings. This means that the importance of sufficient reading instruction and practice cannot be overlooked in this context.

2. READING REQUISITES

In order to face the reading text, the reader has to be familiar with some linguistic and non-linguistic elements, the first one being what Nunan (1989: 35), drawing on Brosnan, Brown and Hood (1984), calls *word attack skills*, whereby readers can identify the correspondences between pronunciation and spelling, and get to know words through their morphology (prefixes, stems, derivational and inflectional suffixes). In this vein sound knowledge of morphology is strongly recommended, especially at upper-intermediate and advanced levels; similarly, mastering Latin and Greek roots and affixes proves most helpful. We shall later tackle with the morphological exploitation of a reading text. Suffice it to say here that readers can recognise vocabulary on a morphological basis, especially in the case of cognates (Bueno, 1998: 23-27), and that the mastering of lexical items is an essential requisite for effective reading, as will be stated below.

Secondly, so as to come to grips with the structure of reading texts, readers need to know how words and phrases are put together to form sentences through different syntactic patterns. Indeed, knowledge of the syntactic and semantic roles of the elements in the sentence is an inevitable step in order to understand their combinations and, in the long run, to grasp the meaning of the text. Beyond the sentence, the reader has to deal with paragraph and text structure, which means being proficient at identifying logical connectors, discourse reference mechanisms (such as repetition, pro-forms and their referents), organization and division in paragraphs. Form and meaning are usually interwoven in any coherent and cohesive text.

It has been customary to compare grammatical issues to the *skeleton*, the *bones* of the language, vocabulary being the *vital organs*, the *flesh* (Harner, 1991: 153). Therefore, the third reading requisite has to do with vocabulary, in terms of quantity and variety. Vocabulary and reading comprehension interact in a reciprocal way: the more vocabulary one masters the easier and more fluent reading becomes and the more we read the more lexical items we acquire. Through reading, readers can activate passive vocabulary, recognize lexical collocations and guess unknown words on the basis of their own vocabulary stock. In addition, familiarization with sense relations (synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, hyperonymy, hyponymy, meronymy) considerably helps to understand the different lexical relationships in the text and to infer particular nuances.

It is taken for granted that readers do not start from zero when they read a text. When we face a text, we are equipped with the so-called *background knowledge* or *knowledge of the world*, i.e. our *schemas* or *schemata*.¹ This is what Bernhardt (1991: 94-97) calls *the nonvisible in reading* and associates the term to others such as *conceptually driven*, *implicit*, *internal*, *reader-based*, and *knowledge-based*: «All of them imply the existence of information critical to

1. For the concept of *schemas*, see Wallace (1992: 33-35), who draws on the definitions provided by Widdowson (1983: 34): «cognitive constructs which allow for the organization of information in long-term memory»; and Cook (1989: 69): «The mind, stimulated by key words or phrases in the text or by the context, activates a knowledge schema». Silberstein (1994: 7-9) distinguishes between *formal schemata* («[...] knowledge of rhetorical structures and conventions») and *content schemata* («[...] knowledge of the world beyond the text»).

the reading process that does not appear explicitly as part of a written text» (pp. 94-95). She refers to three types of knowledge: *local-level knowledge* (idiosyncratic), *domain-specific knowledge* (about some particular subject areas) and *culture-specific knowledge* (related to the reader's own culture).² This means that not only do we already have some information about the topic, but also that we bring our personal interpretation of it according to our way of thinking, culture and educational and family environment. This is particularly evident in the case of university students: they are adults and their *schemata* are relatively formed (in fact, they do hold strong ideas about particular topics); furthermore, they provide not only content knowledge but also linguistic and strategic knowledge in the sense that they are already familiar with language requisites and strategies for reading. It becomes evident that they can –and should– draw on their previous knowledge and experience.

Last but not least, readers have to become aware of the rhetorical function of texts and the writer's intention, which means the ability to recognize the writing genre (narrator description, exposition, argumentation, dialogue, monologue, letter writing, essay, etc.), the writer's purpose in different places of the text (defining, explaining, summarizing, exemplifying... even without explicit linguistic signals) and the writer's intention (being serious, ironical, humorous, persuasive, angry, etc.).³

3. THE KIND OF INPUT

Before we deal with the kind of reading input university students receive –or should receive– reference must be made to the classic distinction between *bottom-up* and *top-down* approaches to reading. In the case of *bottom-up* tasks (also termed *data-driven*), the text itself becomes the starting input and this involves paying special attention to what is offered both in relation to content and form; linguistic and literary analysis of texts at university are typically *bottom-up* activities, although this does not mean that students cannot make use of their previous training and the knowledge they have about the different linguistic or literary issues, but that the sequence is relevant: students begin by reading the text and exploiting it and then they relate the information and formal aspects present in the text to their previous knowledge; in sum, the text itself is the main input; most activities involving reading exploitation of texts in class take this format. On the contrary, in the *top-down* approach (*knowledge-based* or *conceptually-driven*; see Bernhardt above) students draw on their background knowledge (*schemas*, see endnote 1) and, later, they read the text for confirmation, refutation or exemplification; so, they are better equipped to face the reading task and the text itself is no longer the starting point but a sort of follow-up, contributing to the considerable amount of initial input students bring with them. Reading assignments intended to take the final format of a written project or paper to be handed in or reported orally and involving out-of-class work respond to the *top-down* approach, if

2. After presenting the three types of knowledge, Bernhardt (1991: 97-117) discusses an interesting study of knowledge use by Spanish beginners.

3. A useful discussion on *tone*, followed by activities and well-chosen reading selections, can be found in Langan (1993: 311-342).

instance studies involving use of corpora, where the examples are intended to provide evidence (or the opposite) to previous knowledge.

At university level, students should be exposed to a variety of reading input, texts in different formats (monologues, dialogues, articles, interviews, reports, poems, short stories, novels, plays), of different types (journalistic texts –from newspapers and magazines–, block language texts –headlines, telegrams, advertisements–, texts for academic –linguistic, literary– purposes, for specific purposes –scientific texts, business correspondence–), and texts of genres (narration, description, exposition, argumentation). The previous taxonomy is not intended to be complete; the idea is for students to become familiar with a variety of texts and special emphasis should be laid on particular conventions, formats and layouts. More often than not, identifying these elements helps to understand them better.

As far as the subject matter of the text is concerned, again variety has to be recommended. Topics associated to university subjects are undoubtedly relevant here, together with current issues and news which appear in newspapers magazines and specialized journals. In all cases, the reading text can become the necessary input for further discussion in class.

Authentic material –both for content and format– should be used. As we are dealing with university reading, the usual drawback linked to authentic texts with students at lower levels, namely that of difficulty, can probably be overlooked here. If difficulty persists, some notes or explanations in the form of glossary may be supplied. Likewise, unabridged material should be provided. Both recommendations provide an element of challenge necessary in university reading.

4. READING FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

We understand that most of the reading university students perform has an academic purpose, particularly in the case of English Philology and the Humanities in general, or a specific purpose, for Science and Technology courses. We will centre our attention here on academic reading, while reading for specific purposes will be dealt with in the following section.⁴

The general purpose in all kind of reading, also particularly evident in academic reading, is to obtain information. In our case, university students read articles, book chapters and monographs on topics related to the subjects they are doing, in the form of set, suggested or further readings. This completes the information delivered in class, on the one hand, and constitutes the basis for further discussion, analysis and activities, on the other.

A second academic purpose has to do with language awareness. From time to time, reading assignments should be given for students to recognise and become aware of particular

4. McWhorter (1998) constitutes an invaluable source for reading strategies and vocabulary skills in academic reading, with practical examples and exercises for the different academic disciplines. Other useful references are Dubin, Eskey and Grabe (1986), and Molina (2000). To deal with English for Academic Purposes in general, Jordan (1997) can be suggested, academic reading being treated in chapter 9.

language features, namely grammar and vocabulary issues, in the case of silent reading (or reading for meaning), and occasionally pronunciation matters –especially rhythm and intonation– in reading-aloud tasks (particularly relevant when reading poetry, where rhyme patterns are practised together with rhythm and intonation). This purpose becomes especially evident in subjects dealing with grammatical analysis and literary criticism.

Reading also helps students to improve their English. It goes without saying that the more readers read, especially in the case of a foreign language, the more proficient they become not only at reading skills but also in their mastery of the language. In fact, it might not be too risky to associate *learning to read* mainly with lower levels (since they need to acquire more reading strategies, which does not mean that they are not acquiring general language proficiency at the same time) and *reading to learn* especially with reading at university (where it can be assumed that students are already equipped with the basic mechanisms of reading, taken from the reading experience in their mother tongue and in the foreign language, and can profit from reading in order to know more about the language, both in terms of content and linguistic exploitation). In this sense, reading texts become invaluable *corpora* for structures, lexis, idiom and literary nuances. They are also useful to learn about topics and reading strategies (cf. Swaffar, Arens and Byrnes 1991: 57-72).

Sufficient reading practice also consolidates listening and speaking work. Lessons at university are frequently given in the form of lectures, with students listening to the teacher and taking notes, and hopefully this listening input is later discussed orally in class. Reading and writing help to fix ideas and to consolidate content. This can be done at least in three ways: by providing students with an outline or synopsis of the topic that they can follow while the teacher presents it, which allows them to pay more attention, since they do not have to write so much (usually do this at the presentation stage in the subjects of *English Language II: Morphology and The Methodology of Communicative Skills in English*); by asking them to re-read the outline and their own notes and integrate them in the form of an extended version of the topic; finally, by presenting set readings as useful follow-up to fix what has been said in class.

Reading is often presented –and rightly so– as a model for writing, since it provides useful input both for content and formal aspects. In the case of academic English this is particularly true for writing essays, papers, reports and exams.

In order for students to clearly see the communicative purpose of reading, they should also be presented with letters, postcards, e-mails and faxes to be answered and forms to be filled in; apart from their intrinsic academic value, becoming familiar with these common everyday formats can also prove useful later, both personally and professionally.

One important academic purpose of reading at university has to do with research, the literature review being one obligatory step in any research project, which has to take place at different times during the research process. Some practical advice should be given to students: when selecting, reading, summarizing and presenting the literature (in this respect, see Seliger and

Shohamy, 1989: chapter 4; Nunan, 1992: 216-218).⁵

Bearing in mind the different aptitudes and interests of our students, reading can also be used for creative purposes in the case of those who are vocational writers; reading extracts and works by recognized authors will undoubtedly provide them with aesthetic pleasure and serve as models for their own writing.

5. READING FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

I will only refer to reading for Science and Technology. Unfortunately, the subject of English is disappearing from the curriculum of many Technical and Science Courses at university, a situation which is particularly worrying because knowledge of English –and particularly the skill of reading– is absolutely essential in these subjects. This is the reason why, apart from providing some methodological suggestions in this respect, I want to begin by vindicating the inclusion or maintenance of English in this type of university studies. That English is nowadays the international language of Science and Technology is evident. A considerable amount of the literature is written in English, not to mention that it is the language of computers, the *lingua franca* for business exchanges and the main language for instructions of technical devices. Among other reasons, scientists need English to keep themselves up-to-date.

Having stated that English should have its place in scientific, technological and business studies, I would like to concentrate my attention on reading, since it constitutes the starting point for most scientists whose mother tongue is not English to keep informed in their discipline. Specific reading strategies have to be encouraged here, such as recognising particular language features (present simple, noun + noun constructions, passive voice, generic reference), for which subsequent language practice is necessary; becoming familiar with specific vocabulary (by creating lexical fields); recognising scientific discourse as more condensed than the literary one; skimming and scanning; associating written information with visual display (in the form of charts, diagrams, tables, etc.), to name just a few. Sufficient reading practice will serve as a model for writing scientific reports and practise oral skills, if necessary. Teachers will decide on the importance of each skill in class bearing in mind the kind of studies and the future prospects of their students, that is to say, what they are going to use English for. To insist on the necessary specificity of the materials to be used will be redundant here, since they have to suit the particular area of study.⁶

5. Strategies and exercises on reading research, reference and other assignments are offered by McWhorter (1998: 214-249). In the same vein Behrens and Rosen (2000: 175-228) provide information about how to present a research paper in academic disciplines, once the literature has been reviewed, with detailed information about writing a Thesis and citation conventions.

6. Some reading exercises and methodological comments on reading technical texts can be found in McWhorter (1998: 373-394).

6. INTENSIVE AND EXTENSIVE READING AT UNIVERSITY

Intensive reading involves using short texts, intended for accurate and detailed exploitation. They have to be carefully chosen so as to include sufficient and evident samples to illustrate the points at issue. In a way it can be termed as *teacher-fronted reading* (Bruton, 1996: 262), since it has to do with short extracts which are generally worked upon under the teacher's guidance, orientation or supervision.

On the one hand, reading texts can be exploited intensively in class in order to deal with *linguistic competence*, that is to say, recognition, presentation and exploitation of lexis, morphosyntactic analysis and, occasionally, pronunciation practice. In the first case, reading allows university students to turn passive vocabulary into active, to learn new semantic fields and, above all, to increase their lexical knowledge; incidentally, specific reading texts can be used for students to become familiar with vocabulary associated to particular subjects; activities related to definitions, sense relations, lexical families and collocation, together with recognition of literal and figurative meaning are also recommendable. As far as morphosyntactic analysis is concerned, intensive reading is linked to university subjects such as *English Morphology*, *English Syntax*, *Corpus Linguistics* and *Grammatical Analysis*. In this case, students read the text while looking for exemplification of particular grammar points; once the examples have been identified, special attention is paid to the grammatical context, and explanation is provided; the analysis takes the final format of an essay-like commentary based on the text itself and applying the theoretical and practical knowledge students have gathered about the topic; in this way, the text becomes the supporting evidence for the development of the essay. Occasional reading aloud can be used in class in order to recite poems or to practise specially difficult sound combinations, stress, rhythmical and intonation patterns; with the same purpose, short stories and extracts from plays and novels can be read aloud; in the case of drama, reading aloud is very useful for rehearsals.

On the other hand, with respect to literature subjects, intensive reading can be used for literary analysis, especially those involving the selection of particular poems and excerpts from novels and plays (*Selective Study: poetry / fiction / drama*). In this case, special attention is paid first of all to the particular conventions that make poetry, fiction and drama different literary genres and, additionally, other aspects are commented on, such as how content and form are related, how particular styles show through the language, the use of modifiers, literal and figurative meaning, literary devices (metaphor, simile, metonymy, alliteration, run-on-line, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, marked word order, etc.). All these facts have to be interpreted, for which critical reading is necessary. In the particular case of poetry, emphasis on rhythm and rhyme is made. Again, as has been said in the case of morphosyntactic analysis, the literary text becomes the basis on which to develop the students' previous literary knowledge and provides the practical material for literary appreciation (on further practical suggestions about reading literature see McWhorter, 1998: 296-329).

In some cases both linguistic and literary analysis are combined, which is desirable, since this allows a more complete and useful exploitation of intensive reading.

Extensive reading implies using longer texts (articles, book chapters, monograph poems, plays, novels), with the intention of extracting general meaning, and involving reading *more* and reading *for fluency*. It can be associated with *independent reading*, which does not take place under the teacher's strict guidance, and whose justifying reasons are «pleasure, information, cultural understanding and contact, independence and fluency» (Bruton, 1996: 263). This is the case of most reading assignments related to the different university subjects (either obligatory or suggested), the reading of complete works in literature subjects and, last but not least, reading for pleasure and intellectual enjoyment. All this is very close to Krashen's (1993) concept of *Free Voluntary Reading (FVR)*:

“FVR means reading because you want to. For school-age children, FVR means no book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR means putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time. [...]

Free voluntary reading (henceforth FVR) is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education, and, as I argue in this chapter, FVR is the missing ingredient in first language 'language arts' as well as in intermediate second and foreign language instruction. It will not, by itself, produce the highest levels of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached. When FVR is missing, these advanced levels are extremely difficult to attain. (p. x, 1)”

In this vein, Krashen (*op. cit.*) refers to the usefulness of *light reading* and provides concrete examples dealing with comic books (pp. 46-60) and the *teen romance* (pp. 60-63).

Whereas the dictionary—either monolingual or bilingual—may become an indispensable tool in intensive reading, this is not the case when reading extensively: students have to be encouraged to read fluently and the use of the dictionary should be reduced to a minimum. Interestingly enough, sufficient extensive reading can create sound reading habits in our students.

7. READING SUBSKILLS

In this section we shall deal with some of the reading subskills or strategies university students need to practise and be encouraged to use. As can be seen, some of them may be considered general, in the sense that they can be applied to all levels and kinds of reading, while others are specific to university, mainly academic, reading.

- *Skimming*: or the ability to locate the general idea or gist, which is essential both in intensive and extensive reading, and particularly in the latter case. University students have to be trained to develop the skill of locating the core of the matter when reading a text, disregarding unimportant information. When dealing with set readings involving long chapters, articles or monographs, this particular subskill proves indispensable, indeed.

7. Day and Bramford (1998) discuss the dimensions of extensive reading and provide materials and practice for it. The book can be considered a seminal one on this topic.

- *Scanning*: the skill to spot specific information, especially useful in texts which contain a considerable number of data and facts followed by comprehension questions and in the case of detailed linguistic and / or literary analysis.

- *Locating topic and comment*: a subskill which allows students to perceive the formal and semantic structure of sentences and paragraphs and, consequently, the different degrees of importance and ranking of ideas in the text. In addition, this allows them to read faster:

“There are no easy tricks to becoming a faster reader; textbook reading must always be relatively slow and deliberate. However, if you can learn to locate what is important and then find essential supporting details, your reading will be smoother and faster. You will find, too, that you will learn more as you read, which will enable you to accomplish more as you study and review. The key to success when you are faced with large amounts of reading, then, is selectivity: sorting out what is important and focusing your attention on it.”

(McWhorter, 1998³: 34)

By encouraging the location of the *topic* (the main idea) and the supporting *comments*, students can understand how *theme* and *rheme* are connected, how *given* information is supported by *new* details. Support ideas or comments usually provide cause and reason justification, examples or additional information and, in this way, they constitute the development of the topic idea. Recognizing topics in the different paragraphs is essential to summarize a text.⁸

- *Identifying key words and phrases*: this is a subskill which helps memory considerably, especially in the case of long texts, and it is usually associated with marking those key terms graphically (underlining, double underlining, circling, using different colour marking, etc.).

- *Disregarding unimportant information*: good readers know how to skip over secondary information in order to retain central ideas and relieve their minds of additional extra effort. This ability is closely related to skimming and to the skill of identifying topics and comments.

- *Deducing meaning from context*: although the ability to guess the meaning of unknown items through the context can be questioned, it remains true that both the situational and the grammatical context can help the reader, if not to get to know new words, at least to deduce plausible meanings in general terms (e.g. positive or negative orientation) or in terms of hyperonyms (for example, the reader deduces the unknown item must be a type of house, plant, bird or anything). McWhorter (1998³: 88-93) offers useful advice on how to use context clues.

- *Reading between the lines (inferring)*: the starting point is the relationship which is

8. Useful practice material on locating topic and comment is presented in McWhorter (1998: 34-44) and Langan (1999: 41-118).

established between writer and reader:

“In a general sense, reading is what happens when people look at a text and assign meaning to the written symbols in that text. The text and the reader are the two physical entities necessary for the reading process to begin. It is, however, the interaction between the text and the reader that constitutes actual reading. Granted, the meaning the reader gets from the text may not be exactly the same as the meaning the writer of the text wished to convey. Likewise, the meaning that one reader gets from a text may be different from that of other readers reading the same text.”

(Aebersold and Field, 1997: 15, bold type in the original)

It is evident that sometimes the reader has to read between the lines to understand what the writer means, a subskill which becomes particularly evident in the case of advanced level texts: as is the case at university. Lower level texts tend to present straightforward information with unique interpretation; in the case of texts which have to be read for academic or other purposes the reader has to go beyond the text and interpret not only what the author literally says but also what s/he implies, that is to say, to make inferences (practical suggestions are given by Langa 1999³: 265-306). Conversational *implicature* is a commonplace in the case of oral skills and the same happens with written texts, since the relationship between writer and reader can be termed as a *written conversation*, implicature being one of its main components:

“As well as categorizing and positioning their readers, writers conduct an ongoing dialogue with them (Widdowson 1979). The assumption of shared political and social attitudes affects the nature of the dialogue in the sense that writers anticipate reader objection or agreement at particular points in their discourse. In other words, writers do not just imagine a particular kind of reader, they anticipate particular kinds of response to statements or claims they make in the course of constructing their texts.”

(Wallace, 1992: 44)

This also means that readers have to be critical with what they read, for which some training in critical reading strategies, of the type provided by McWhorter (1998³: 56-81), is necessary.

- *Identifying the different writing genres and their defining features*: starting from the classic distinction between writing genres or styles (narration, description, exposition, argumentation), the university student has to identify types of texts, sometimes associated with their origin (linguistic, literary, journalistic, legalistic, political, scientific, business, intended for propaganda, etc.) and, more importantly, to associate typical language features (concerning common structures, organization and specific vocabulary) with them, for which frequent exposition to varied reading input is necessary. Getting familiar with these features helps comprehension.

- *Understanding the relevance of format*: the idea is to make students aware of the relationship between such formal aspects as the type of sentences most frequently used (simple

compound or complex), length of sentences, use of asyndetic coordination, division in paragraphs, length of each paragraph, number of paragraphs, etc., and the meaning of the text and the message the writer has to transmit. More often than not, particular formal choices respond to specific intentions on the part of the author.

- *Locating discourse reference mechanisms*: spotting logical connectors and other linking elements, identifying the purpose of repetition and locating pro-forms and their referents allow the reader to comprehend the different nuances intended by the author, such as apposition, addition, enumeration, ellipsis, contrast (antithesis, reformulation, replacement), concession, consequence, cause and effect, result and inference.

- *Distinguishing literal and figurative / metaphorical meaning*: familiarity with this reading subskill is necessary to distinguish straightforward uses of the language from aesthetic or literary ones. At university, the latter uses can be identified and studied not only in literary texts (one of the areas for literary criticism has to do with literary devices, which additionally means detailed linguistic analysis in terms of literal and figurative terms, e.g. in the case of metaphor) but also in examples of everyday language present in newspapers and magazines. Literal meaning is to be found in purely informative texts and also in those dealing with science and technology. Frequent practice in both uses is recommended.

- *Spotting irony, puns and double meaning*: associated with reading between the lines, this ability has to be related to the subtleties underlying some texts, which are sometimes difficult to trace. This is the reason why this is only possible with advanced students who are fluent readers and imaginative thinkers. Once irony is located, this can be the source for humour and enjoyment of the reading text.

All these skills should be practised in class and students have to be trained in them and encouraged to make use of them.

8. TRANSFERRING READING STRATEGIES FROM THE MOTHER TONGUE

Since university students are already proficient at reading in their mother tongue, advantage can be taken of the reading strategies they already possess in their native language. The principle of *positive transfer* has to be invoked here: in this case the knowledge acquired in their mother tongue does not interfere at all but is an invaluable help. Most of the reading subskills we discussed in the previous section and other reading strategies can be transferred from the native to the foreign language, which makes things much easier. The first step is to make students aware of the fact that they can rely on the reading habits they already have and the comprehension facilitation mechanisms they already use.

Among the easily transferable reading strategies we can mention skimming and scanning (see above), going backwards and forwards in the reading text (a sign that we assimilate new information on the basis of the previous one, apart from being a mechanism to help memory), keeping previous information in mind and drawing on it, relying on discourse reference, reading

whole phrases and not word by word, the conviction that one does not need to understand –every word– every word to comprehend a text and the ability to skip over unimportant information. It becomes evident that when adult students read in a foreign language, they do not start from zero as far as reading strategies are concerned.⁹

9. SEQUENCING READING TASKS

It is customary to distinguish three stages in the reading lesson: *pre-reading*, *while-reading* and *after-reading*. Several methodological principles are implied in this three-fold division: some kind of lead-in or warm-up is necessary before students face the reading text, which helps them to think about the topic, be in the picture and get motivated (this can make them want to read); something must be done while reading (active reading); going beyond the text in the form of text-based follow-up helps to consolidate and expand on what has been read. Particularly, the pre- and post-reading stages allow the possibility of integrated skills.

9.1. Pre-reading

What can be done before reading? In general, the lead-in is intended to connect reading with previous classroom tasks, to orientate the readers towards the topic and make them think about it, to create expectations, to activate their background knowledge, to motivate them and to make them want to read. Additional information that can be provided at this stage may concern the purpose of the task, the reason for reading the text, some orientation about the kind of activities they are expected to do with the reading assignments and the presentation of key vocabulary:

“Once a text has been selected for use in class, teachers need to decide which vocabulary words to teach before students begin to read the text. In making this decision, they need to consider (1) what their students already know of the vocabulary in the text, (2) what vocabulary students need to recognize to make sense of the text, and (3) what vocabulary they will need to know to function in the L2/FL in the future –that is, the overall vocabulary goals of the course.”

(Aebersold and Field, 1997: 139)

Some useful suggestions at the pre-reading stage can be the use of guiding questions or statements, introducing the text, brainstorming the main ideas (which activates their previous knowledge and mental schemata), previous discussion or the use of before-questions (the *true/false* format is especially useful here) to be intuitively answered before reading the text and checked later to confirm or reject expectations.

9.2. The experience approach to the reading process: reading and doing

9. Getting familiar with the way in which we learn to read in our own language helps to identify useful strategies that can be transferred later to reading in a foreign language. Relevant information on this process can be found in Moustafa (1997) who provides a detailed account of how children learn to read.

I am convinced that the best way to stop considering reading a passive skill is by showing that reading means *doing*: we are doing several things at the time of reading (*the experience approach*: learning by doing). That this is so can be seen if we reflect on what we do while we read in our mother tongue. From this evidence, we teachers have to encourage students do at least some of the following things while reading (probably with the exception of reading for pleasure, although some of the suggestions are also applicable):

- *Getting the gist*: the first step to develop comprehension is to identify the main idea(s) of the text, which should be kept in mind up to the end of the text.

- *Taking down details*: this can take the form of brief notes, sometimes only understandable and meaningful to the readers / note-takers themselves.

- *Word recognition*: useful strategies to recognize words are similarity with mother tongue items (*cognates*), the morphological information the word provides (prefixes, stems, derivational and inflectional suffixes), collocation, synonymy, antonymy, the context and the reader's knowledge of the topic or the world.

- *Becoming aware of syntactic features*: the content of a reading text is highly dependent on syntactic structure, which means that the reader has to pay special attention to features such as the particular arrangements of words and phrases into sentences, the use of coordination and subordination, the syntactic and semantic roles the different elements play in the sentence, structures of pre- and post-modification, marked word order, among others. and this must all be done while reading.

Both word recognition and awareness of syntactic features refer to what Bernhardt (1991: 73-86) labels *the visible in reading*, where she includes words (word recognition and lexical entries), syntax (basically word order) and the structure of texts.

- *Recognising reference devices*: as these devices make the text coherent and cohesive, if readers want to extract the logical meaning of it, they have to identify aspects such as lexical devices (repetition, collocation, sense relations), connective devices (linkers), pro-forms and their referents, paragraph organization and topic-comment structure.

- *Retaining the meaning while reading*: the role of memory should not be overlooked in the case of reading, especially with long texts; a special memory effort has to be made, which can be helped by note-taking.

- *Reading aids*: by this we mean resorting to practical devices such as underlining, highlighting, double marking, different colours, marginal annotation, circling, drawing up a scheme, diagram or chart, which serve to differentiate important from secondary information, to isolate topics and supporting comments, and to scan the main ideas of the text. Doing this while reading also helps to keep ideas in mind and to locate useful information quickly when going backwards.

If we succeed in encouraging our students to do this while reading, this receptive interpretative skill can be really seen as an active process, in which the reader in a way re-create the written text by interpreting it either orally or in a written way.

9.3. The after reading stage

These are some of the tasks that can be performed after reading. Some of them can be applied to any level of English learners (evidently adapting the difficulty of both the text and the task) while others are more specifically suited to the university context.

- *Checking comprehension*: a variety of formats should be used here (*true / false / text doesn't say* statements, *yes / no* questions, *wh*-questions, multiple-choice formats, incomplete sentences, sentences to be reformulated according to the text, etc.), but special attention should be paid to the fact that at this level we do not expect our students to give short answers or answers copied literally from the text, but rather those which imply connecting ideas from the text, drawing conclusions, interpreting the writer's intention, disregarding unimportant information, contributing something personal, which often means long and reasoned statements. In sum, through their answers students have to show clearly that they have understood the text and are able to respond and react to it.

- *Oral / written discussion*: this is quite a common activity after reading English text at university; the ideas in the reading assignments are taken as the basis for the discussion, with the additional advantage of integrated skills. Students should be provided with some guideline: to orientate their reading and questions or statements to check comprehension; discussion in class is the logical rounding-off.

- *Reading aloud*: in the case of poems or excerpts from novels and plays, where aspects related to pronunciation of sounds and sound combinations and particularly rhythm, rhyme—in the case of poetry—and intonation are practised.

- *Performing sketches / situations / dialogues / plays*: this is an extension and logical exploitation of the script, oral skills being integrated here, together with the kinesic elements acting involves.

- *Integration with writing*: more often than not university students write reports or elaborate papers or projects to be handed to the teacher on the basis of reading assignments; this is particularly evident in the case of language and literature analysis subjects. They can also be asked to complete classroom notes with information from set readings and write an extended version of the topic. Other written suggestions include summaries (cf. McWhorter, 1998³: 183-184; Behrens and Rosen, 2000⁷: 2-28), critiques (cf. Behrens and Rosen, 2000⁷: 45-79) and syntheses (cf. Behrens and Rosen, 2000⁷: 99-174).

- *Text analysis*: according to the different university subjects, it can be morphological

syntactic, discursive, literary or combine all these facets.

- *Literary reading*: involving poems, drama and fiction in order to provide practical examples of literary movements, periods and authors; in this sense, extensive reading becomes an indispensable instrument for literature subjects and also for aesthetic enjoyment.¹⁰

- *Reading culturally-loaded texts*: the purpose is to widen knowledge of English-speaking people and cultures.

10. READING MATERIALS

Students at this level can read almost anything in English, so there exists a considerable variety of reading materials. To be somewhat more precise and relevant to our teaching scene, reading materials comprise the following: their own notes; set readings; articles and reports from newspapers; advertisements and interviews from magazines; articles and book reviews from specialized journals; linguistic texts, basically for morphosyntactic analysis; literary texts (short stories, novels, plays, poems) either for literary analysis or for pleasure; computerized *corpora* of examples, essentially for research; *block language* (headlines, telegrams, e-mails, advertising captions, small ads, leaflets, brochures); subheadings (connected with video viewing); sociocultural texts; scientific and business texts (reading for specific purposes), to name some common formats. In all these cases the use of the dictionary should be encouraged: the bilingual one should be progressively and whenever possible replaced by the monolingual one, and combined with specialized ones, such as dictionaries of idioms, collocations, or phrasal verbs.

11. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reading is one of the skills that can best be exploited at university level for different reasons. First of all, students can be assumed to be reasonably proficient not only in linguistic but also in strategic competence (their level of English is upper-intermediate or advanced and they already have useful reading strategies both in their mother tongue and in English), which facilitates matters. Secondly, reading can be perfectly suited to the different university subjects and provide sufficient practice for morpho-syntactic, literary, scientific and discursive purposes. In the third place, the so-common set readings at university, and particularly in the case of English Philology studies, provide a precious opportunity to develop reading strategies and to carry out tasks which can always be seen as purposeful and useful; last but not least, it becomes evident that, in this context and with sufficient reading practice, students do not only improve their reading ability by reading more and better, but also that they learn by reading, which is always encouraging and motivating for students and teachers alike.

10. Aebersold and Field (1997: 156-166) exploit some of the possibilities of literature reading, including aspects such as reasons for using literature, features of literary texts and criteria for selection.

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