

READING: THE KEY TO AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Edwiges Conceição de Souza FERNANDES¹

FAZ – Faculdade de Tecnologia da Amazônia

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting part of a research on applied linguistics about the teaching of reading, held with undergraduate students of EAP. Some of the procedures used in our action-research are shared here with the purpose of fostering regular reading practices in the academic context. Researches have shown that by reading extensively, and by learning efficient reading strategies, students will gradually become more fluent readers, which in turn will lead to autonomous learning.

Key-words: Reading; EAP; action-research; autonomy.

1. Introduction

*We cannot teach another person directly;
we can only facilitate his[or her] learning.*
(CARL ROGERS, 1969)

Reading is a complex psycholinguistic cognitive interactive process, but also an important means by which new language skills are acquired and a common way of gaining information or expanding knowledge. Reading in English is very useful for academic studies, for business relations, for professional success or personal development, in many countries around the world² nowadays. As an English teacher, with current experience in ESP / EAP³, we do agree with Hutchinson & Waters (1987: 129) when saying that “language learning is not just a matter of linguistic knowledge. The most fundamental problem of second language learning is the mismatch between the learners’ conceptual/cognitive capacities and the learners’ linguistic level”. Therefore there are many other factors that affect the reader’s performance in reading a foreign language. This paper aims at presenting part of major studies that we have been conducting for some years and intends to show the importance of fostering

¹ Professora de inglês da Faculdade de Tecnologia da Amazônia (FAZ); Mestre em Lingüística pela UFPA, e Especialista em Lingüística Aplicada ao Ensino do Inglês como LE, pela UNAMA. edwigesfernandes@hotmail.com

² English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language – in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil – and in most of these countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing another language in the process. (CRYSTAL, 2003: 5).

³ ESP – English for Specific Purposes; EAP – English for Academic Purposes.

reading practices in the academic contest, thus they may lead to more independent and autonomous learning.

As we are concerned with providing students with opportunities to learn and improve their reading skills in English, it is important to note, when talking about the role of the teacher and student, that:

If the student is being persuaded to take more responsibility for learning, then the teacher needs to facilitate this responsibility transfer, becoming a guide, counselor, resource manager and negotiator. (TAYLOR, 2002: 10)

By promoting interesting and motivating reading activities on a regular basis, in and out of class, as well as by offering students opportunities to choose which exercises to do, which questions within an exercise to answer, how long to spend on each topic, who work with, and asking them to read critically a text the teacher will certainly be helping students improve their reading skills.

A lot has been said about the teaching of reading and all the complexity involving the reading process. In this article we want to show that reading in English can be enjoyable. That is why we agree that, at least in the beginning, texts should be lexically and structurally easy enough for students to understand. We want to highlight that comprehension is achieved through the interaction between text and reader and also by the use of a lot of strategies like associations, inferences, prediction, building hypothesis, observation of the non-verbal elements in the text, etc. We intend to share some ideas on how learners can develop and improve reading skills and on how teachers can guide students' learning. The paper opens with a brief view of the nature of reading and the models of reading. Then, we discuss the reading habits of Brazilians and the implications of such habits. We then present some ideas related to autonomy and learning. Next, we share some of the procedures used with our students that have helped them become more fluent readers and more autonomous learners. The article concludes with our views of the importance of promoting reading practices not

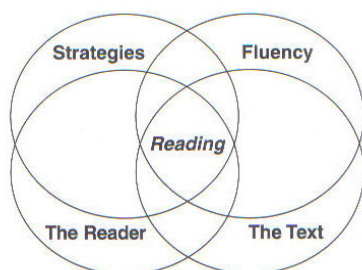
only by language teachers but by all educators involved in the teaching-learning process. We hope that our work help change the sad view that Brazil is considered a ‘nation of non-readers’, especially because we know that this fact can bring negative consequences to all the other areas of the human activity, since the lack of information and of cultural knowledge may lead to social-economical and educational problems.

2. The nature of reading

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.
(CHINESE PROVERB, s.d.)*

Among the various definitions of reading we decided to choose the one that says that “reading is a fluent process of readers combining information from a text and their background knowledge to build meaning. The text, the reader, fluency, and strategies combined together define the act of reading” (ANDERSON, 2003: 68). The illustration below shows how the reading process happens:

Ilustração 1



It surely is a process of recognition, interpretation and perception of letters, words, phrases and clauses, as well as of the non-verbal elements in the text. It also involves comprehension of meaning and use of strategies that lead to understanding. Some factors that affect the process of reading comprehension are: the reader’s background and cultural knowledge, motivation, purpose and intention for reading. Understanding the process of reading is very important, although it is a difficult thing to do, as it is normally a “silent,

internal, private process. The process is likely to be dynamic, variable, and different for the same reader on the same text at a different time or with a different purpose in reading.” (ALDERSON, 2000: 3-4).

Concerning the levels of reading, Gray (1960, *apud* ALDERSON, 2000) define, in a clear and easy way, the three basic levels: the first level of reading refers to **literal meaning** of text (reading the lines); the second refers to **inferred meaning** (reading between the lines) and the third, which is called reading beyond the lines, refers to the **critical evaluation** of text. It is often asserted that the levels are ordered, as “readers first learn how to understand texts literally, then to infer meanings from text, and only later they learn how to approach text critically, to evaluate text and so on” (*ibid*: 8). In turn, Stanovich (1980: 34) states that “a pattern is synthesized based on information provided simultaneously from several knowledge sources”, what may reinforce the idea that the reader combines the printed information, the previous experiences and prior knowledge to achieve the main goal of reading that is achieving comprehension.

As we are working with learners who have supposedly acquired reading skills in their first language, the idea is to incentive these learners increase and improve their reading habits, to teach them how to transfer skills that they ‘have already learned’ in their native language to the new context (academic) in a new language (English), and also to make them become fluent readers, that is to have “the ability to read at an appropriate rate with adequate comprehension” (ANDERSON, 2003: 68). This way, we are not just worried at how much or at what speed our students read, but at how much they can get from text. Meaning is what matters.

When talking about models of reading, they can be divided into three categories: **bottom-up model**, **top-down model** and **interactive model**. We will concentrate on the **interactive model** because it combines elements of the two previous ones and also for the fact

that it is the most comprehensive and accepted description of the reading process. This model is called **interactive** because it considers the interaction between the reader and the text and also relates to the interaction between bottom-up and top-down processes. Stanovich (1980: 35) says that in interactive models “processes at any level⁴ can compensate for deficiencies at any other level... Higher processes can actually compensate for deficiencies in lower-level process”.

Another important feature of this model is that it may include both interactive and extensive reading. As teachers, we ought to provide learners with experimenting different reading practices/procedures like **intensive reading** – when students are given short, easy texts, in order to read them carefully for an exact understanding of them, or **extensive reading** – reading for pleasure with emphasis on general understanding; and with reading ‘subskills’ such as **skimming** – quickly looking through text to get an idea of what the text concerns, and/or **scanning** – locating specific information in a text. Although all the four procedures/subskills are necessary and useful to be used in classroom activities, especially in an ESP/EAP approach, we must encourage learners to have extensive reading practices outside the classroom as well. Reading extensively means that learners read large quantities of material in the target language. They read for information and enjoyment, with the primary goal of achieving a general, overall understanding of the reading material. By selecting their own reading material, learners become better readers, make improvements in other aspects of language skills, and get accustomed to the autonomy accorded by such practice.

⁴ Lower-level reading process consists of word recognition, association of words to their semantic representations, identification of basic syntactic structures, among others. Higher-level reading process is concerned with linking words with their co-referents, generating and updating a schema or representation of the text as a whole, integrating textual information with prior knowledge, etc. (SEGALOWITZ, POULSEN & KOMODA, 1991, *apud* ANDERSON, 1999:2-3)

3. Reading in Brazil

*Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.*⁵
(RICHARD STEELE, 1710)

Reading has been the skill most emphasized in traditional FL teaching. It is also one of the most important competences to be worked with students, especially if we consider the results of recent surveys showing that reading is among the main deficiencies faced by Brazilian students. According to a report entitled “Brazil’s disregard for books – a nation of non-readers. A strange and costly disregard for books”, published by “The Economist” (March, 2006), we can have a sadly view about the Brazilians reading habits:

MANY Brazilians cannot read. In 2000, a quarter of those aged 15 and older were functionally illiterate. Many simply do not want to. Only one literate adult in three reads books. The average Brazilian reads 1.8 non-academic books a year-less than half the figure in Europe and the United States. In a recent survey of reading habits, Brazilians came 27th out of 30 countries, spending 5.2 hours a week with a book. Argentines, their neighbors, ranked 18th.

Even if we did not have any statistics to prove this worrying fact, what we can feel in the classroom is that a lot of students have difficulties in reading, and consequently in oral and written communication. There is no use in complaining and blaming the students, the government, or the educational politics though. The best thing to do is to show students that by acquiring good reading habits they will certainly feel more self-confident speakers and writers and will get better opportunities for educational, personal and professional development.

We could point out a series of consequences of the ‘poor’ reading habits. The one that is more directly related to the academic context is that learners will have difficulty in articulating coherent ideas. In the 1980s, many researchers came out to the conclusion that “reading and writing form important relations with each other: as skills, as cognitive

⁵ Tradução: A leitura é para a mente o que o exercício é para o corpo. In: The Tatler nº147.

processes, as ways of learning” (GRABE, 1991: 392). There are many arguments assuming that reading and writing interactively influence each other, and we have noticed, in our teaching practices, that it is very hard to find a good reader who has difficulty in expressing his ideas in a comprehensive, coherent way. We think that both skills must be trained/taught together, thus one may reinforce the other.

4. Autonomy in learning

Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.
(CONFUCIUS, s.d.)

Authors like Holec (1981) and Benson (2001) share similar ideas about autonomy, considering that autonomy is “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”, or “the capacity to control one’s own learning”. In a tentative to relate these concepts to our teaching practices, we think that one of the main roles of the ESP/EAP teacher is to show learners ways of complementing and deepening their knowledge outside the classroom.

The idea of autonomy first came into language in the late 1960s, through the adult education movement in Europe and North America, and for many years it continued to be associated with adult learners who had left formal education (BENSON, 2001: 291). An important project called CRAPEL (*Centre de Recherches et d’Applications em Langues*) aimed at promoting autonomy through the self-directed learning outside the classroom. The Project emphasized learning by experimenting with self-access materials and the help of language learning counselors. Other projects came up, following the same objectives of CRAPEL, that is to promote the access of printed, audio and video materials, in order to help the participants of the project improve their learning skills.

Some students are used to see the teacher as the main source of knowledge and the one responsible for their good or bad results. That is why we need to help our students become aware of their roles in the learning process. The ability of being responsible for one own’s

learning is not always inborn, but it can be fostered by formal learning. We usually use to say that our job as teachers is to guide and provide the students with resources. The students have to be encouraged to go further. It is important that they start making decisions concerning the aspects of learning that include determining their objectives and choosing techniques to be used. Evaluating their progressions may be part of their planning too. Such attitudes will not only improve their reading/learning skills in the foreign language, but in all the other subjects at college.

5. How to help students read

*I hear and I forget. I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.
(CHINESE PROVERB, s.d.)*

Reading must be an enjoyable activity, so teachers must find creative ways of making students find pleasure while performing reading activities in class. Even if the text is long and difficult, there is always a creative way of making students prepared for the text. Soares (1993: 8) discusses this issue saying that reading is one of the most important means to teaching access and that not only language teachers are responsible for the students' readings, but educators in general:

Parece haver unanimidade em relação ao fato de ser a escola a principal instituição responsável pelo ensino da língua escrita e a leitura uma das principais vias de acesso deste ensino. O livro, ou melhor, o material escrito é quase sempre colocado como condição necessária para qualquer experiência em sala de aula, não somente na aula de português, como também na das demais disciplinas. E, embora os professores, que não os de língua portuguesa, não se sintam responsáveis pela leitura, tudo passa por ela: "a leitura está no programa de todas as disciplinas". (CHARMEAUX, 1985: 12).

There are certainly many ways of coping with difficulties in reading. What we will show next is a list of hints, based on the procedures already tested in class, that may help students and teachers overcome such difficulties:

To teachers	To learners
1. Prepare your students for reading, by using pre-reading activities. Ask questions that help activate students' previous knowledge about the topic.	1. Before reading the text, try to activate your previous knowledge about the subject-matter and establish a relation between your knowledge and the text.
2. Use the title and some visual stimuli to arouse students' curiosity about the text. They will be willing to read the rest of the text and find it easier. It's better to help students build hypothesis than simply ask them to read the text without any preparation for it.	2. Start by reading the title, the subheadings, watch the layout of the text, pay attention to the non-verbal elements and the topic sentences in each paragraph. Make associations and your ideas will be confirmed and deepen while you read the text.
3. Not all the first hypothesis built by students are in accordance with the information in the text. Do not reject or correct them immediately, instead, trust in the students' ability to review and change their first ideas while reading.	3. Learn how to formulate hypothesis and do not give up if your first ideas do not match the information in the text. Get a chance to learn new things. It's by confronting the prior knowledge and the information in the text that we reconstruct meaning and get to comprehension.
4. Motivate your students to get to the second level of reading, that is to read 'between the lines'. This can be done in groups and the teacher can help students by asking questions that may lead to this phase.	4. Do not feel satisfied just to get the literal meaning of the text. Try to get further, look for to what is implicit. This level of reading, which refers to inferred meaning, can be achieved while exchanging ideas with peers in class.

The purposes for reading must be taken into consideration in the process. According to Grabe & Stoller (2001: 187) "an EAP reading curriculum must account for how students learn to read for multiple purposes, including at least the purposes of: reading to search for information; reading for general comprehension; reading to learn new information; reading to synthesize and evaluate information".

The reader's purpose for reading will influence in the choice of the skills to be used, as well as on the combination of them.

6. Final considerations

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.
(CHINESE PROVERB, s.d.)*

We do believe that reading is one of the most important means of getting updated, achieving knowledge and becoming academically and professionally competent. **Pre-**, **during-**, and **post-reading** instructions are relevant for practical applications. Reading tasks

must be motivating and enjoyable and the purposes of reading must be clear. **Pre-reading** activities serve to activate students' background knowledge that can facilitate subsequent reading, they also provide specific information and stimulate students' interests. **During-** or **while-reading** activities guide students through the text; at this phase, students usually ask for clarification, check if their first ideas are confirmed and make sense of the complexity of the language. In the **post-reading** phase the students have opportunities to extend their ideas about a topic, and the information from the text can serve as basis to other tasks, including writing.

If students are trained to perform such activities in class regularly, they might want to extend these practices out of class, with other purposes. Giving students the chance to share and recommend reading material to classmates and offering very positive remarks on their writings are also good ways of motivating them.

By thinking about ways of helping students read fluently in a foreign language and trying to motivate them to keep on their studies in a broader way, that may include the practice of the other skills such as listening and speaking, we decided to use ways of making students get to comprehension by the use of intelligence, previous knowledge, and all the other features of the text that include illustrations and pictures, graphs, page layout, typographical clues and effects. The teacher's role in the teaching-learning process is to guide students in the discovery of new worlds and help them reach personal and professional development. The learner must know that the teacher can serve as a guide who provides resources and tools that may facilitate the process of learning, the teacher can show the ways to get to knowledge but can not make them learn if they do not wish to.

REFERENCES

ALDERSON, J. C. *The nature of reading*. In: ALDERSON J. C. **Assessing Reading**. (ALDERSON, J. C. & BACHMAN, L. F. Series Editors). The United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 1-31.

ANDERSON, N. *Exploring Second Language Reading: Issues and Strategies. A Teacher-Source Book* (Donald Freeman Series Editor). Canada: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1999.

_____. *Reading*. In: NUNAN, David. (ed.). **Practical English Language Teaching**. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2003, p. 67-86.

BENSON, P. *Learner autonomy in the classroom*. In: NUNAN, D. (ed.) **Practical English Language Teaching**. New York, N.Y.: MacGraw Hill, 2003, p. 289-308.

CRYSTAL, D. **English as a Global Language**. (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: 2003.

FERNANDES, Edwiges. C. de S. **As Estratégias de Leitura da Língua Portuguesa como Desenvolvimento e Aprimoramento da Leitura em ESP**. Monografia (Especialização em Lingüística Aplicada ao Ensino-Aprendizagem do Inglês como Língua Estrangeira) - Universidade da Amazônia, Belém, 2004.

_____. **Os componentes visuais no ensino-aprendizagem da leitura em inglês**: estudo dos aspectos semiótico-discursivos em manuais de informática, no contexto do ensino superior. Dissertação (Mestrado em Lingüística) - Centro de Letras e Artes, Universidade Federal do Pará, Belém, 2006.

GRABE, W. *Current developments in second language reading research*. In: **TESOL QUARTERLY**, vol. 25, n^o, Autumn, 1991, p.375-406.

GRABE, W. & STOLLER, F.L. *Reading for Academic Purposes: guidelines for the ESL/EFL Teacher*. In: MARIANNE CELCE-MURCIA (editor). **Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language**. 3rd edition. Boston; Heinle & Heinle – Thomson Learning, 2001, p.187-203.

HOLEC, H. **Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning**. Oxford, U.K.: 1981.

HUTCHINSON, T. & WATERS, A. **English for Specific Purposes: a learning-centred approach**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

ITALIE, H. *Report Shows Big Drop in Reading in US*. In: **Common Dreams NEWS CENTER – Breaking News & Views for the Progressive Community**. Published on Thursday, July 8, 2004 by the Associated Press. Disponível em <<http://www.commondreams.org>>.

SOARES, Izabel. C. R. **O Ensino-Aprendizagem da Leitura: uma abordagem interativa**. Dissertação (Mestrado em Lingüística) - Centro de Letras e Artes, Universidade Federal do Pará, Belém, 1993.

STANOVICH, K. E. *Toward an interactive-compensatory model of individual differences in the development of reading fluency*. In: **Reading Research Quarterly**.16,1980. p. 32-71.

TAYLOR, Jon. *The Road to Autonomy*. In: **English Teaching professional**, issue Twenty-four, July, 2002.

http://www.economist.com/world/la/displaystory.cfm?story_id=5636369