

Teaching main ideas Are we really 'teaching'?'¹

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ABSTRACT: In this exploratory study the author discusses the instructions found in EFL/ESL textbooks in relation to the identification of main ideas in texts. Results show that, in general, the textbooks analyzed do not contain clear and established criteria for main idea identification, the instructions given are very general, circular and empty. The results obtained are analyzed from a cognitive psychology perspective, with the main argument that main idea identification/construction is a 'less-structured task' (Rosenshine & Meister, 1997), involving mainly 'procedural knowledge' (Anderson, 1995) which is intuitive and not easily verbalized.

RESUMO: A autora discute, neste estudo exploratório, as instruções encontradas em livros didáticos de inglês em relação ao ensino de idéias principais. Os resultados indicam que, em geral, essas instruções não são claras e não esclarecem o aluno em termos do como proceder para chegar a essas idéias. A análise é feita da perspectiva da psicologia cognitiva e traz o argumento principal de que a identificação de idéias principais faz parte de um tipo de tarefa 'menos-estruturada' (Rosenshine & Meister, 1997), que envolve principalmente o nosso conhecimento procedimental (Anderson, 1995), ou implícito, o qual é intuitivo e não facilmente verbalizado.

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KEYWORDS: reading; main ideas; instruction; procedural knowledge

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: leitura; idéias principais; ensino; conhecimento procedimental

INTRODUCTION

Being able to identify the ‘point’ or ‘the main points’ of any type of event, be it written or spoken, is part of human activity. At the end of a conversation, a film, an article, a book, etc., the receptor of the message has to have in memory a mental representation which includes the most important aspects of the interaction.

Researchers have suggested a number of mechanisms which guide the selection of propositions that will stay in working memory and lead to the formation of a macrostructure or mental representation of the text’s content. Importance is one central mechanism. Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) propose a model of language comprehension according to which only the most recent and most important propositions from preceding text remain activated in working memory, what they call the leading-edge strategy. Fletcher (1986) extends the work of Kintsch and van Dijk and proposes a number of ‘potential selection strategies’ which might determine the choice of the propositions which will remain activated during the course of comprehension. The leading-edge strategy, based on importance and recency, is included in the model.

There is a certain consensus in the area of reading research/instruction that a good reader, a strategic reader, should be able to read the text and identify the main points (Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980; Block, 1986; Williams, 1988; Hare, 1992) . For this reason, the topic: ‘main idea identification’, is part of any reading program. However, a quick look at EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) textbooks tells us that the criteria for actually teaching students how to identify main points are far from clear and, in general, do not give clear guidelines on how to proceed to get these main points.

The present study is exploratory in nature, part of a broader ongoing research on main idea identification, and has as its main objective to analyze and discuss the instructions given to students in EFL/ESL

textbooks, in terms of how to extract main ideas from texts. Results are discussed from a cognitive psychology perspective.

METHOD

Twelve EFL/ESL textbooks were analyzed in terms of the instructions given to students in relation to finding the main ideas in a passage. The criteria for selection were the following: first, the corpus should contain textbooks published in Brazil and also textbooks published abroad; second, they should have been published throughout the last ten years or so; and last, they should have been designed for teaching the reading ability only and not the four abilities (speaking, listening, reading and writing). From the twelve selected textbooks, nine were published abroad and three in Brazil. The books analyzed were the following:

- *Crossroads, USA*, by R. Hughes, National Textbook Company, 1998.
- *Choice Readings*, by M.A. Clarke, B.K. Dobson, and S. Silberstein, The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- *Para Compreender Textos em Inglês*, by A.N.M. da Gama et al, Editoria Central, Universidade Gama Filho, 1997, 2nd Ed.
- *Academic Encounters*, by B. Seal, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- *Reading Together*, by K. Krahnke, ST Martin's Press, 1996.
- *Inglês Instrumental: Reading Critically in English*, by Reinildes Dias, Editora UFMG, 1996.
- *Inglês Instrumental: Estratégias de Leitura*, by Socorro Evaristo et al, Halley S.A. Gráfica e Editora, 1996.
- *In the News: Mastering Reading and Language Skills with the Newspaper*, by E. Tiersky and M. Chernoff, National Textbook Company, 1996.
- *Reading Skills for the Social Sciences*, by L. Haarman, P. Leech and J. Murray, Oxford University Press, 1988.
- *Genuine Articles*, C. Walter, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

TEACHING MAIN IDEAS

- *Reading Power*, B.S. Mikulecky and L. Jeffries, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1986.
- *College Reading and Study Skills*, K.T. McWhorter, Little, Brown and Co. Limited, 1986.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As predicted in the beginning of the study, the instructions found in the 12 textbooks do not contain clear and established criteria for main idea identification. From the twelve textbooks analyzed, only four of them actually attempt to give explicit instructions. The other eight only include exercises ‘involving’ the main ideas in the text.

Among the four textbooks which attempt to give explicit instructions we find the following (emphasis added):

To find the main idea of a paragraph , first decide what the topic of the paragraph is. Then ask yourself these questions: What is the main idea? What is the author trying to say about the topic? Which sentence states the main idea? (McWhorter, 1986, p.103).

This set of ‘instructions’ is then followed by an example where the author brings a paragraph, asks the questions above and answers them.

In order to determine the main idea of a piece of writing, you should ask yourself what idea is common to most of the text. What is the idea that connects the parts to the whole? What opinion do all the parts support? What idea do they all explain or describe? (Clarke, 1996, p.24).

A idéia principal do parágrafo é expressa no Tópico Frasal (TOPIC SENTENCE). O tópico frasal é a frase que encerra, de um modo geral e conciso, a idéia central do parágrafo. ... normalmente, o tópico frasal aparece no início do parágrafo (processo indutivo). Mas, em alguns textos, ele poderá vir em outro lugar no parágrafo, como no meio ou no final. ... temos o processo indutivo. (Evaristo et al, 1996, p.77)

In Mikulecky and Jeffries (1986), a series of exercises is presented in a section called: “Main Ideas”, with the following instructions:

Read each paragraph. Ask yourself, ‘What is the topic? What is the writer’s idea about the topic?’ Then write the main idea sentence.(pp.97-100)

As can be seen from the extracts above, the instructions given are very general, and do not give clear guidelines for finding the main points in the text. By telling readers/students to ask themselves the questions: What is the main idea? What is the author trying to say about the topic? Which sentence states the main idea? What is the writer’s idea about the topic? ... write the main idea sentence, what is the idea that connects the parts to the whole? we are not giving ‘explicit criteria’ that can be followed for main idea identification, we are simply giving students a chance to ‘practice’ a skill they already have. In keeping to this procedure, what happens is that we are not actually ‘teaching’ those less proficient readers who do not possess the skill.

As mentioned before, eight out of the twelve textbooks analyzed do not actually give explicit instructions on how to extract the main ideas, but rather bring exercises involving the main ideas:

- In Hughes (1998), there’s a section called “Getting the Message” which includes exercises, usually multiple choice or true-false statements about the key points in the text.
- Walker (1988) presents in each unit a section called either ‘Summary skills’, ‘Do you have the main ideas?’ or ‘Getting the picture’, involving the main ideas in the text. Different types of exercises are presented: multiple choice questions, and evaluation and correction of facts in a given summary.
- Tiersky and Chernoff (1996) include in every unit a section called ‘Getting the message’ involving either multiple choice or true-false items focusing on the main ideas in the passage.
- Seal (1997) presents reading tasks such as multiple choice and labeling paragraphs, involving the main ideas in the text.

TEACHING MAIN IDEAS

- Dias (1996) brings various types of reading tasks involving the main ideas in the text: comprehension questions, true-false statements and asking for graphical representations.
- Gama et al (1997) brings comprehension questions and matching exercises involving the text's main ideas.
- Harmaan et al (1988) usually brings a table for completion with the main ideas.
- Krahnke (1996) lists direct questions asking for the main idea of the whole text, and one for each of the paragraphs: "What is the main idea of the whole reading? What is the main idea of the first paragraph? What is the main idea of the second paragraph?" And so on.

There is no doubt that by presenting our students with reading tasks 'involving' the main ideas in the text, we are giving them 'practice' in this skill, but, again, we are not actually giving procedures for those students who do not possess the skill. Furthermore, we are not giving students the necessary tools or procedures which can be used with other texts when working on their own.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Main idea identification is one of the most important skills in reading comprehension. In most reading situations we read for the writer's main points. One reason is for memory constraints: we cannot process every line in the text in the same fashion, if our working memory is overloaded with too much information, part of the information which is being held is displaced or 'forgotten' (Just & Carpenter, 1992; Tomitch, 1995; 1996).

The results found in this preliminary study are not surprising. Materials writers develop textbooks based on what is found in research. And unfortunately, research has not gone very far in terms of main idea identification (Williams, 1988). In general, studies on main idea identification fail to address what exactly is meant by 'importance', how exactly importance is determined. The definitions seem circular and empty in themselves, not clarifying and not enumerating the features of the concept of importance or main idea.

In fact, what research has shown is that proficient readers are able to identify or construct the main points of a text (Winograd, 1984; Williams, 1988), they agree on what is important. However, what exactly is meant by a main idea and the explicit criteria for identifying main ideas remain to be investigated.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, it is not difficult to see why the criteria for main idea identification remain unclear. This knowledge of importance seems to be intuitive, that is, it is procedural, not easily verbalizable, and not declarative. We are able to 'recognize' what is important in a text but we cannot easily explain 'why' this is so. According to Anderson (1993, 1995), declarative knowledge includes all our knowledge about facts in the world, our memory for images, whereas procedural knowledge includes our cognitive skill, our ability to perform various mental procedures, and our ability to perform motor skills. Declarative knowledge is "knowing that" and procedural knowledge is knowing "how to" (Ashcraft, 1994). Knowing that two plus two is four, or that a summary is made up of the main ideas in a text, are examples of declarative knowledge, whereas knowing how to ride a bicycle, or being able to extract the main ideas in a text and write a coherent summary, are examples of procedural knowledge.

According to Rosenshine and Meister (1997), academic tasks lie 'on a continuum from well-structured to less-structured tasks' (p.85). Well-structured tasks involve those 'that can be broken down into a fixed sequence of steps that consistently lead to the same goal' (p.85). Less-structured tasks, on the other hand, 'do not have the fixed sequence that is part of well-structured tasks' (p.85). Well-structured tasks are easily teachable, the only thing the teacher has to do is to give the students an algorithm with all the steps and ask them to follow the sub-tasks which will lead to the major task or goal. Unfortunately, main idea identification seems to be a less-structured task which involves procedural knowledge and where a detailed description of the sub-tasks has not, to this point, been fully determined yet. The closest we have got to the description is in terms of one criteria: text structure, that is, the rhetorical organization of the text signals to the reader what is important in a certain text (Williams, 1988). However, from the twelve textbooks analyzed, none of them explicitly told students to use text structure in order to determine the main ideas in the texts.

Why is it so important that we make this procedural knowledge become declarative (verbalizable), if what is needed for performing a task, in this case, main idea comprehension, seems to be procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1995)? For the simple reason that in order to 'teach' or help those poor readers that do not have the skill, we need these explicit criteria which will serve as guidelines to perform the task. Main idea identification is certainly an area where the results found in research will have direct pedagogical implications for the classroom and will give teachers tools to accomplish their task as mediators in the process of enabling students to become more independent, proficient and more critical readers.

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TEACHING MAIN IDEAS