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A STRATEGIC, PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH FOR AN ESP READING COURSE IN THE HUMANITIES

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This paper aims at describing pedagogical materials especially designed for an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course for undergraduate students in the Humanities and Social Sciences (mainly majoring in Education, History, and Geography) at a national public university in Argentina. It expands on the rationale behind the methodology and its practical application. The lessons in the manual seek to transfer to practical application theories based on the latest findings in reading, cognitive psychology and educational psychology. The contribution of the learner's systemic knowledge, exploited in cross-reference with their schematic knowledge, plus the application of metacognitive and monitoring strategies have been our guidelines for the design of the activities. Since our main aim is to facilitate the learners' interpretation of texts while simultaneously improving their language skills, we base our approach on systemic functional grammar. Each lesson we teach addresses questions aimed at unveiling the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings of the reading texts that we use as didactic units.

Key words: ESP, reading comprehension, strategies, pedagogical materials, autonomy.

1. Introduction

For over fifteen years now we have been teaching an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course for undergraduate students in the Humanities and Social Sciences (mainly majoring in Education, History, and Geography) at a national public university in Argentina. This course is a requirement for the students to get their degree. An ESP course is designed to meet specific needs of the learners: its content is related to a particular discipline, occupation or activity; it is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to those activities; it is generally restricted to one language skill, during a limited period of time, and mainly taught to adults in homogeneous classes in terms of work, studies or specialization (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

The aim of our ESP courses at an Argentine university, as in many other Latin American and European universities, is basically the development of reading skills. Due to the ever increasing educational, academic and professional demands for new knowledge, our students have an urgent need to read –and comprehend- updated material in their areas of study (mainly journals, scientific papers and research articles) which is usually written in English. This requires from the students active and effective reading skills which they do not always possess. And even when their motivation is strong, especially for those students who plan to continue with graduate studies and be a part of academia as teaching assistants or research assistants, they are frequently frustrated by their limitations in accessing materials written in English.

At the university level we generally assume that our students have already mastered their reading and learning skills in L1. That is why in our ESP classes we encourage our students to make positive transfer of those L1 skills to their L2 reading to facilitate learning. However, it should not be assumed that, because their L1 reading skills are good, they will always make positive transfer. Students sometimes need to be guided in this process, and even so, they may fail to do it successfully, especially when their linguistic competence in L2 is limited. Our students in ESP courses at the

university usually have a very limited knowledge of English because it is only recently that EFL has been given prominence in the Argentine educational system. Another limitation of ESP courses at the university is that they usually have a very limited instructional load, generally a maximum of 120 hours in the whole program.

Thus, in an attempt to compensate for these limitations while having to meet our learners' need to develop language skills to access the written text, we use an interactive, process-oriented approach to reading comprehension. Because reading is the one skill that best meets our learners' needs, we believe that the most effective way to use our classtime is to focus on a methodology that helps them learn *how* to read, i.e., a methodology that focuses on the learners' processes of comprehension. We believe that the learners' reading skills can be activated and enhanced through the development of effective reading comprehension strategies that make them independent readers and promote learning autonomy. In this paper we attempt to (a) describe the rationale behind the methodology, (b) demonstrate how this methodology applies in our ESP course and in our course materials, and (c) offer examples of the pedagogical materials we have especially designed for the course.

2. Rationale

Educational psychology and constructivist theories focus on how to learn, rather than on what to learn; rather than content and subject matter, the focus is on learning processes that can enhance lifelong learning. Teaching is learner-centered, and the learning process must be meaningful for the learner and have value to his/her life (Williams & Burden, 1997). These theories suggest that learners can "construct" their own meanings based on their knowledge when properly guided in the process. In such learning environments, the teacher becomes a "tutor" or "facilitator" who helps the learners to learn, guides them to take decisions on what to learn and how, provides them with the necessary tools to construct their own meanings, and prepares them to move from being teacher-dependent to becoming independent learners. Coll (1990) calls this learning process: "progressive

transfer of responsibility and control", which refers to the controlled assistance that the teacher offers the learner in order to accompany him/her during the process of learning. Closely related to this is Bruner's concept of "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1985) which explains that learning takes place progressively.

A very important aspect in this learner-centered education and teacher-learner interaction is the concept of *autonomy* (Benson & Voller, 1997, Gardner & Miller, 1999). Gardner & Miller define independent learning as

> one stage in a process in which learners [...] pursue their personal language learning goals, [...] accept responsibility for decision-making [...], learn about the importance of reflection on their learning and how it can help them to redefine their goals to make them constantly relevant to their needs and wants (Gardner & Miller 1999:13).

Autonomous learners are aware of their own needs to become more independent, to choose what to learn and how, to develop the ability to control their own learning, at their own pace, so that they can use this knowledge in any learning situation they may encounter at any stage in their life.

This process of learning is also greatly determined by the learners' own motivation, learning styles and capacity to be responsible for their own learning, together with the development of effective *learning strategies*. The importance of the development of learning strategies to promote independent learning has been widely upheld by research in the areas of second language acquisition (SLA) and second/foreign language teaching methodology. Research done in these areas shows that most learners do not spontaneously use language learning strategies and fail to see the real value of their use, and that instruction on learning strategies is beneficial to students learning a second/foreign language (see Bedell & Oxford, 1996, for a comprehensive review of relevant studies). *Language learning strategies* have been defined as "tools for active self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence" (Oxford 1990:1). *Direct strategies*

are those which involve direct learning and use of the target language and require mental processing (e.g. memory, cognitive and compensation strategies). *Indirect strategies* are those which support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language (e.g. metacognitive, affective and social strategies). These two major classes support each other and are equally important in the learning process (Oxford, 1990).

Regarding the skill of reading in particular, it is now widely agreed that reading is an active process in which the reader simultaneously activates his/her *systemic knowledge* (i.e. knowledge of the language system) and his/her *schematic knowledge* (i.e. knowledge of the world, background knowledge of the content, discipline). Given the particular situation of ESP learners, who are highly literate in their specific disciplines but are not proficient in their L2 language skills, our ESP course focuses on the learners' processes of language development and reading comprehension of the text, which is realized through the contribution of their systemic knowledge and their schematic knowledge. These processes are enhanced through the application of learning strategies, mainly for reading comprehension (cognitive, metacognitive and monitoring strategies), that promote independent reading. With this in mind, we have designed the activities in our teaching materials.

3. Our ESP course and course materials

Our ESP course consists of aproximately 120 teaching hours; we meet our students twice a week, in two-hour lessons, for an academic year. Our approach is interactive and learner-centered, and our class methodology centers on strategy instruction. Learners are trained in the use of strategies that aim at developing the language skills needed to promote effective reading comprehension. Awareness of strategy use (i.e. why, when, how to use those strategies which best help them in the process) is particularly emphasized. Controlled teacher assistance is realized by verbalizing the processes needed to perform the tasks (Longhini, Chiappello & Valsecchi, 2002). Teacher assistance is gradually reduced, as learners monitor and direct their own learning, and are encouraged to apply this knowledge to new

situations. The ultimate aim of our course is to develop reading comprehension strategies that promote independent reading and learning autonomy.

Strategy instruction is continuously done in tandem with language, grammar and vocabulary development. Because our learners do not usually have a threshold of linguistic competence in L2 on which to develop their reading skills, we need to train them in *lower-level skills*, i.e., those that relate to the understanding of the language system –lexical and grammatical forms- simultaneously with *higher-level skills*, i.e., those that require top-down processes of reasoning and thinking. We believe that the effective use of strategies can enhance this development. For this purpose, in our classes we use basically two classifications of strategies: Oxford's classification (Oxford, 1990) of direct and indirect strategies, and Gissi Sarig's classification of reading comprehension strategies (in Cohen, 1986) which includes four main reading move types (technical-aid, clarification and simplification, coherence-detecting, and monitoring moves). These two classifications serve as rationale for the design of our class material.

In order to facilitate the learners' interpretation of texts while simultaneously improving their language skills we chose to base our approach on systemic functional grammar. We find that the way this model of language explains the different kinds of meanings a text encodes (Halliday & Hasan, 1976,1990) suits the needs of our ESP course. Each lesson we teach addresses questions aimed at unveiling the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings of the reading texts that we use as didactic units. This is reflected in the variety of activities that propose problem-solving tasks related to the identification of grammatical and lexical forms, as well as text cohesion and coherence, and genre awareness. However, for the sake of simplifying our communication with the students, we have avoided, in general, the use of systemic functional grammar terminology. We believe that grammar is a necessary tool to access the text, but it is not the ultimate aim in our classes.

Another important element that characterizes our ESP course is the use of L1 in the classroom. The students read authentic texts written in English, but the worksheets for the exploitation of the texts are presented in Spanish, and classroom discourse (basically the students' and teacher's verbalization of the processes of comprehension) is also done in Spanish. Our approach makes the use of the bilingual dictionary essential; thus, we train our students in how to use the bilingual dictionary strategically and effectively.

For the purpose of developing reading skills together with language skills, we work with a reading manual, "*Process-oriented Approach for an ESP Reading Course in the Humanities*" (Longhini & Placci, 2002), and a glossary of key grammatical elements for skillful moves in reading comprehension (Martinez & Longhini, 1997), especially designed for our ESP course. The manual and the glossary are used together and they support each other. These materials follow the lines of a constructivist didactic strategy that we have been using and adapting for over fifteen years (Longhini & Placci, 1998, 1988, 1985), and they seek to transfer to practical application an approach that reflects the contributions based on the latest findings in L2 reading research, cognitive psychology and educational psychology.

The reading manual consists of a compilation of original texts that are representative of various discourse genres in the academic field (mainly scientific papers, reports, and reaseach articles taken mostly from specialized and scientific journals written in English, or multimedia encyclopedias), and the corresponding worksheets for the exploitation of the texts. These worksheets present a wide range of activities that aim at developing lower-level skills and higher-level skills simultaneously, and they foster systematic application of comprehension strategies. This is done through the following devices: the application of reading strategies and awareness of strategy use; grammar sections that include explanations, examples, grammar rules and tips for rule memorization; sections for special language difficulties; sections with morphological analysis and a list of affixes; the application of memory

strategies for specific vocabulary; cross-references that aim at articulating and recycling the activities.

In order to exemplify our methodology and course materials, the following section focuses on some of the activities from the manual and how they are exploited in class.

4. Sample Activities

One activity designed mainly to develop lower-level skills is the recognition of grammar words (*close-group*) and content words (*open-group*). This activity aims at raising learners' awareness of the existance of these two groups of words and their main differences, and the importance of learning the functions of grammar words to access the text more quickly and smoothly. Students are trained in the use of: (a) the glossary of key grammatical elements, how and why to use it, (b) the bilingual dictionary mainly for content words, and (c) the list of affixes in the manual as an aid to do morphological analysis.

Sample activity taken from "*Práctico Nº I*" in the manual, pages 5-9.

1) Lea el siguiente texto: ¿Lo entiende? ¿Puede decir de qué se trata?

JUNGLE _____ RAIN FOREST

Jungle _____ rain forest _____ terms _____ _____ often used synonymously _____ _____ little precision. _____ _____ meaningful _____ restrictive _____ _____ terms _____ rain forest, _____ refers _____ _____ climax _____ primary forest _____ regions _____ high rainfall (greater _____ 1.8 m/70 _____ per year), chiefly _____ _____ exclusively found _____ _____ tropics. Rain forests _____ significant _____ _____ valuable timber resources, _____ _____ _____ tropics _____ afford sites _____ commercial crops _____ _____ rubber, tea, coffee, bananas, _____ sugarcane. _____ _____ include _____ _____ _____ last remaining areas _____ _____ Earth _____ _____ _____ unexploited economically _____ inadequately known scientifically. (continues)

Palabras ausentes: also / and (6) / are (4) / as / both / but (2) / for (2) / in (4) / is / more / not / of (3) / or / some / such / than / that (2) / the (6) / their / these / they (2) / to / which / with (2)

2) Estudie la lista de palabras ausentes: ¿Conoce sus significados? ¿Qué tipo de palabras son? ¿Cree que su significado es importante para la comprensión global del texto? ¿Por qué si/ porqué no? Explique y comente con sus compañeros y profesora.

3) Intente colocar las palabras ausentes en el texto: ¿Cómo lo hace?

4) Lea el siguiente texto: ¿Lo entiende? ¿Puede decir de qué se trata?

_____ and _____ _____

Throughout _____, _____ have _____ed on _____ _____ for _____ _____, _____, and _____ _____. In _____ _____ of _____ _____ _____, the _____ of "_____ _____ " has _____ed _____ of the _____ _____. In this _____ of _____, ____ are _____ed in _____ _____ that are _____ed for _____ or _____ _____ and then _____ed; if the _____ are _____ed before _____ _____ has _____ed itself, a _____ _____ of the _____ _____. On the _____ of _____, the _____ _____ _____ has been almost _____ly _____ed and _____ed with _____ _____ or _____ _____ such as _____.   (continues)

Palabras ausentes: abandon / agriculture / agricultural purposes / cause / crop / cultivate / deterioration / encroach / establish / forest / history / humans (2) / island / Java / kill / living space / lowland primary forest / plantation crops / plots / practice / primary forest / primary vegetation / progressive deterioration / rain forests (2) / remove / replace / result / rice fields / rubber / seasons / shifting cultivation / small plots / system / three / timber / total / trees / two / upland tropical forests / vast portions /

5) Estudie la lista de palabras ausentes: ¿Conoce sus significados? ¿Qué tipo de palabras son?

6) Analice los sufijos con ayuda del *Indice de Afijos* de este Manual: ¿le ayuda a reconocer la función gramatical de estas palabras?

¿Cree que su significado es importante para la comprensión global del texto? ¿Por qué si/ por qué no? Explique.

¿Puede colocar las palabras ausentes en este texto? ¿Puede anticipar la categoría gramatical de las palabras que allí irían?

7) Compare los dos textos:

¿En cuál de los dos textos logró mayor comprensión?

¿Por qué es casi imposible saber de qué se trata el segundo texto?

Las palabras presentes en cada uno de los dos textos, ¿tienen el mismo valor informativo?

PARA TENER EN CUENTA

Las palabras presentes en el primer texto son llamadas *palabras lexicales*:

✓ Llevan la carga de significado, tienen gran valor informativo.

✓ Su número es infinito: siempre se pueden crear nuevas palabras.

Las palabras presentes en el segundo texto son llamadas *palabras gramaticales:*
✓ Estructuran el texto.

✓ Su número es limitado: no se crean nuevas palabras de este tipo.

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8) Reflexione: ¿Qué tipo de palabras son más importantes en la comprensión global del texto? ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué puede ser importante conocer las palabras gramaticales?

Si usted no conoce el significado de una palabra lexical, ¿dónde lo busca?

Si usted no conoce el significado de una palabra gramatical, ¿dónde lo busca?

Ayudándose con el *Glosario de Elementos Gramaticales*, corrobore sus predicciones sobre las categorías gramaticales de las palabras ausentes en cada texto.

9) Compare los dos textos con el original:

¿En cuál de los dos textos logró mayor aproximación al texto original?

Explique con sus palabras lo que entendió del texto "*Jungle and Rain Forest*".

Another activity that aims at developing lower-level skills is the identification of units of meanings. Through this activity students are trained in the strategy of "chunking" (or slanting), which makes them aware of the importance of "cutting" the text in meaningful parts, rather than seeing the text word-by-word. For this, they are trained in how to make intelligent and logical pauses, and are encouraged to learn these rules (e.g., the presence of certain grammar words, or punctuation marks). As students gradually automatize the process, they can identify larger units to make the reading pace more smooth, and eventually increase their reading comprehension.

Sample activity taken from "*Práctico Nº 5*" in the manual, pages 53-55.

1. Identifique en el texto *unidades de sentido*:

Cuando usted está leyendo el texto, necesita hacer "pausas" en la lectura para su mejor comprensión: ¿dónde hace esas pausas? ¿Por qué?

¿Qué elementos, o la presencia de qué palabras, ayudan a hacer pausas?

PARA RECORDAR

No desciframos un texto palabra por palabra, sino que vamos entendiendo grupos de palabras. Las pausas siempre deben marcar "unidades de sentido". Esa unidad de sentido podrá ser corta o larga – depende de cuánto dominamos el idioma, o cuán grande sea nuestra falta de comprensión.

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2. Consulte el *Glosario de Elementos Gramaticales* para memorizar el tipo de palabras (determinantes, auxiliares, modales, preposiciones) que señalan el inicio de frases nominales, verbales, preposicionales y adverbiales.

3. Ayudándose con barras, separe las oraciones en unidades de sentido.

    Nota: Si usted entiende el texto con facilidad, puede separar el texto en unidades más largas.

Ejemplo:

The history of blacks in North America / began in August 1619 / when a small Dutch warship / sailed up / the James River / to the young English colonony of Jamestown / Virginia. / The Dutch ship / had captured / ......

One activity that aims at developing both higher-level and lower-level skills is the prediction of content on the basis of discursive elements. The learners are trained in the recognition of anaphoric and cataphoric elements, as well as other discursive elements such as logical connectors, as an aid to predict content. They are made aware of the importance of understanding discursive elements to facilitate the top-down processes of thinking and reasoning involved in their reading comprehension.

Sample activity taken from "*Práctico Nº 2*" in the manual, pages 28-29.

1) El siguiente es parte del esqueleto de un texto. Interprete la información que se brinda. ¿Hay algo que puede predecir a la luz de esta información?:

INTRODUCTION

     In recent years, news coming out of Latin America has generally been bad ....

.... Finally, ...

     Despite all these setbacks and failures, the Latin American people did not seem discourage ....

....

     These themes dominate the discussion of Latin America offered in this volume. ....

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2) Comente sobre la fuerza de los sustantivos anafóricos "*setback*" y "*failures*" en la línea 1 del segundo párrafo, y compare con el sustantivo anafórico "*themes*" en la línea 1 del tercer párrafo.

3) Lea la última oración del primer párrafo: ¿Por qué está introducida por "*Finally*"? ¿Qué cree Ud. que el autor listó en este párrafo? Justifique su respuesta.

4) Lea todo el párrafo rápidamente:

¿Puede confirmar lo inferido por Ud. en los puntos anteriores?

Subraye palabras que Ud. considera "claves" para confirmar dichas inferencias. ¿Qué tienen en común estas palabras claves en cuanto a su significado?

5) Lea la primera línea del segundo párrafo: Observe la palabra introductoria "*Despite*". Comente sobre su significado, y la función que tiene dentro de la oración.

6) Lea todo el párrafo:

¿Puede confirmar lo inferido por Ud. en relación al contenido de este párrafo?

¿Por qué sí, o por qué no?

Subraye palabras que Ud. considera "claves" para confirmar sus inferencias. ¿Qué tienen en común estas palabras claves?

7) Lea la primera línea del tercer párrafo: ¿Cuáles son, según el autor, *"these themes"*? ¿Puede resumirlos?

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to describe a strategic, process-oriented approach for an ESP course for university students. Our experience in L2 teaching has demonstrated that L2 readers have specific characteristics that need to be especially addressed in our ESP courses focusing on the development of the reading skill. As the students do not always possess a threshold of L2 competence, language development needs to be done together with the development of the reading skills.

Traditional top-down models for reading comprehension that emphasize higher-level skills such as predicting meanings adapt effectively to fluent readers, but fail to develop lower-level skills such as the identification of grammatical and lexical forms needed before the learner can engage in effective reading comprehension (Eskey, 1986; Grabe, 1986; Longhini, Chiappello & Valsecchi, 2002). Teaching materials combining top-down and bottom-up models that may particularly suit learners' needs in the Humanities have, to our knowledge, not been designed and published. Ours is an integrative approach that aims at developing the learners' higher level skills involved in the processes of reading comprehension, while simultaneously teaching the language skills. This approach, though not empirically tested, is soundly supported by theories in ELT/ TEFL (which we have tried to reflect in our course materials), and has proved to be effective in our particular teaching situation. Nevertheless, we aknowledge the need for further research and encourage others to use this approach in similar teaching enviroments. Results could offer a great contribution for improving the materials and validating the effectiveness of the approach. We believe that both our approach and our teaching materials need to be open to modifications to meet our learners' particular needs and language situations,

as well as to incorporate contributions in the light of new findings and research in L2 teaching.

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