CADERNOS DO

IL

UFRGS
Instituto de Letras

NÚMERO: 2

DATA: MARÇO/90

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REALITY OR UTOPIA?

Trabalho apresentado no
11th World Congress on Reading
London, England Julho 1986

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INTRODUCTION

My purpose in participating in the Congress is to ex
change ideas with teachers who are engaged in promoting reading
all over the world. I dare come here and put forward the experi
ence of a group of reading teachers in Brazil because I believe
our situation is not unique; in other countries, similar circum-
stances are to be found.

Illustrating how we are striving to cope with diffi-
culties and how unthought of but successful results are being
achieved might encourage other people as well as arouse discussion
and suggestions likely to enrich the project.

The paper considers the reality or utopia of teaching
reading in English in 60 hours to Brazilian students who arrive
at the university as false beginners. The work is divided into
three parts. The first one characterizes the situation, the se-
cond discusses the problem whereas the last one tries to present
a feasible solution.

In the first part, I start by outlining the situation
of the learners as to their working knowledge of English. Next,
I focus on their needs and wants in learning a foreign language

they will never have the chance either of practising or facing
in authentic realization but the written form. Finally, I consi
der the student's actual reading ability in his mother tongue.

In the second part, I discuss the question "is read-
ing in a foreign language a problem of language competence or a
problem of reading competence?" Mentioning the development of
reading research in Brazil, I report on a piece of research car
ried out with students of my own university. The research illus
trates the endeavour to find an answer to the question. Then, I
consider another research work which seems to go far beyond the
controversy.

In the last part of the work, I offer the main features
of a process-oriented approach devised to meet the demands of
the challenging situation: teaching reading in English to false
beginners in English with poor reading skills in the mother ton
gue. The task is to be achieved within the record time of two-
hour lessons a week during a term of fifteen weeks. Finally, I
report on how the teachers at the Federal University of Rio Gran
de do Sul, Brazil, strive to attain the utopic aim and how real
are the results achieved.

1 - THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND BRAZILIAN STUDENTS

1.1 - *Initial Competence*

English as a foreign language is a compulsory subject in Brazilian schools. By the end of secondary education, the learner should have attained a *"threshold level"* in the sense proposed by (VAN EK 1977). The minimum course is one hundred and twenty hour long, the minimum syllabus recommended is mainly based on grammar. Economical and educational factors such as crowded classrooms, overworked teachers, purposeless teaching and learning account for the general feeling of frustration and underachievement in most schools.

A written test in a foreign language, one out of five, namely English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, is a partial requirement for entering the university. A few grammar points concerning morphology (word formation, nominal and verbal paradigms), syntax (word order, sequence of tenses, thought connectors) constitute one third of the whole test, the remaining two thirds concentrate on reading comprehension product-type questions. The reading passages are short (maximum 60 word long) narrative and descriptive texts within a vocabulary range of 2000

words. The testee is asked to recognize the only correct answer in multiple-choice questions.

Passing the test means being acquainted with a number of lexical and grammar items or being familiar with a particular test-wiseness rather than achieving competence. Notwithstanding, a high percentage of candidates fail. Most score low and a few do not take English at all. In practice, therefore, newcomers to Brazilian universities are really false beginners of English.

1.2 - *Needs, Wants and Expectations*

Upon arriving at the university, the student realizes how helpful the English language might be in his present course of studies and in his future professional career as well. Whether actually needing to read texts that are not available in Portuguese or just aiming to widen the scope of their academic fields, the students ask for English courses. English for Specific Purposes - ESP - courses - are, therefore, offered.

The ESP student has high expectations, he hopes to be helped to cope with his readings the faster the better and without much time and effort. His schedule is overloaded, his courses are demanding and English is just an ancillary subject.

With no prerequisite other than having been accepted at the university, ESP students form heterogeneous groups sharing but the need or want to read in English. Their working knowledge

of English is uneven and their academic interests range from hu
manities to sciences.

1.3 - _Reading_ _Ability_ _in_ _the_ _Native_ _Language_

The concern with reading as a socio-psycholinguistic
process is recent in our country. According to KATO (1985:1),the
teaching of reading in a foreign language, namely English,   at
tertiary level in the so called ESP courses brought about the
rise of interest in reading in Brazil during this decade. Teachers
of English soon realized that most difficulties encountered by
learners when reading in the foreign language originated from
un olved problems of reading instruction in the native tongue.
The realization of the fact triggered research on reading itself
and on reading acquisition. Both foreign and native language
teachers united in a common task: promoting reading regardless
of the language involved.

Formal research evidencing current poor reading skills
in Portuguese at university level cannot be mentioned. To my
knowledge, no study has been undertaken so far. Notwithstanding
specialists on the area such as KATO (1985), CAVALCANTI (1984)
and KLEIMAN (1984) agree that the average Brazilian university
student cannot read. Of course, reading is here taken not only
as verbatim decoding of texts but personal interpreting   of
written messages.

It is consensus of teachers that, though literate,uni
versity students need remedial work in reading to make up for
previous poor reading instruction at .primary   and   secondary
levels. Lack of sound reading skills prevents the development of
reading habits and the promotion of reading.

2 - LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OR READING PROFICIENCY?

2.1 - Some Hypotheses

Should the issue be tackled as a problem of language or as a problem of reading? Various aspects of the question con sidered and various efforts do approach it attempted, no satis- factory answer could be found yet.In the one hand, students who are proficient in English and proficient in reading in the mother tongue can be helped to transfer the reading skills they already master and adapt their reading strategies to the foreign langua ge after a short period of adequate training. On the other hand, it seems that those who have a command of English that could be termed advanced might encounter as much reading difficulty as beginners when trying to extract meaning from an authentic text (SELINKER et al 1976:282). Conversely, learners whose English knowledge is poor cannot be expected to go beyond the level of general comprehension of an English text even though their rea- ding ability in the mother tongue is higher than average.

In a study by ALDERSON (1984:1-27) two main hypotheses are forwarded. The first correlates poor first language reading to poor foreign language reading on the grounds that the latter

results from faulty mastering of first language reading strate- gies. The second hypothesis states that when foreign language competence is lacking, first language reading strategies cannot be employed.

Though mentioning lack of empirical evidence to base either hypothesis, the author admits that some evidence suggests the second hypothesis as the most plausible one. Considerable support was found that some sort of threshold or language compet ence ceiling has to be attained before existing abilities in the first language can begin to transfer.

ALDERSON'S (1977) investigations are relevant for the present case because of the similarities that are to be found between his subjects, Spanish speaking university students from Mexico, and our own students in Brazil. In fact, Spanish and Portuguese stemming from Latin are close enough to share a number of structural and lexical features. Besides, Alderson's Mexican students seem to have the same English background instruction and the same reading purposes as our Brazilian learners.

2.2 - Foreign Language Reading Research in Brazil

By the end of the seventies, the newly set on English for Specific Purposes - ESP - National Project rekindled the al ready existing concern with the issue of foreign language reading instruction in Brazil. After an early phase mainly focussed on

language-oriented materials design, the reading teachers asso-
ciated to the Project started to view the topic from another
perspective. Moving away from a tendency to arrive at the pro-
duct of reading, they now aimed at the process of reading:a burst
of reading strategies-oriented materials flooded on. Closely pa
rallelling the enthusiasm an earnest drive towards research de-
veloped. The effort led ESP participant teachers to investigate
the reading process either in their M.A. or Ph.D. programmes or
in their voluntary patient daily research work. For futher data
on the subject, I refer to DEYES (1985).

2.2.1 - Research at the Federal University of Rio Gran de do Sul - UFRGS

Without overlooking their daily classroom work, ESP
teachers seek to keep up with the advances in the area both in
the country and abroad. Quoting CANDLIN (1985:xiii),I dare say
that, in our team, language teaching is no mere appendage to re
search but its "raison d'être". Research stems from the class-
room routine, conversely, the teaching-learning process developed
in the classroom derives from research undertaken by the teachers.
For further details on the work of the ESP team at UFRGS, I re-
fer to THIELEN (1985).

LEFFA (1984), one of our teachers, investigated the
combined and individual roles played by second language syntac
tic competence and the use of comprehension monitoring strategies

on second language reading comprehension. Studying the issue
from the perspective of the language teacher, the author applied
three measurement instruments to 99 students enrolled in ESP
courses at UFRGS. The tests were designed to assesss,first,the
subjects' ability to monitor their comprehension in Portuguese;
second, their syntactic and lexical knowledge of English;third,
their reading comprehension in English. A significant relation-
ship was expected to hold between comprehension monitoring, syn
tactic competence and reading comprehension. The scores in the
three tests were submitted to a multiple regression analysis.

The results indicated a strong relationship between
the use of the appropriate reading strategies in Portuguese,
foreign language syntactic competence and reading comprehension.
The role played by the knowledge of English, however, showed to
be significantly more important.

The author, therefore, favours the view that language
instruction should be the main priority in the teaching of
foreign language for reading purposes. Though Leffa admits that
only particular features relevant to the written manifestation
of the language should be emphasized, his findings tend to suggest
that specific instruction on reading strategies seems to have
little effect when compared to the role of language instruction.

To my mind, it should be remembered that a correlation
does not imply a cause-effect relationship. There are so many
uncontrolled variables involved in the issue that the predictive
role of syntactic competence cannot be taken for granted.In

other words, it cannot be anticipated that the learner who does well in an English language test will do equally well in comprehending a text in English. Conversely, as ALDERSON (1984) states, it should not be expected that improving the learner's knowledge of the language will necessarily entail his reading and understanding English texts.

2.2.2 - Beyond the Controversy

CAVALCANTI (1983) moved away from quantitative research on reading comprehension and from product-type probing. She focussed upon individuals and studied their reading protocols in detail. By analysing the reader-text interaction, she attempted to investigate the pragmatic role of key-lexical items as source for potential reading problem. She took into account two main approaches to comprehension, namely text-based and prior knowledge-based.

Developing a framework for identifying key lexical items, she applied it to a text used as data base. Having analysed it from her own point of view, she checked the areas of potential problem identified agaisnt the materials designer's point of view represented by two series of English for Academic Purposes textbooks. Finally, she elicited data from four Brazilian postgraduate students through an introspective technique.

Cavalcanti's work goes far beyond the borderlines of the controversy - language problem or reading problem - focussing on the reading process proper regarless of language differences.

To her mind, language proficiency and reading proficiency are complementary. Assuming the underlying reading process to be universal, she regards surface differences derived from foreign language readers' inability to make optimal use of their general reading and or foreign language linguistic competence (CAVALCANT 1983:5).

2.3 - To Make a Long Story Short

Trying to approach the question at stake, I consider two points. First, it appears that the issue cannot be bound to foreign language competence. Second, it seems quite difficult to set both proficiencies apart. There is an interplay of language skills and reading skills that cannot be satisfactorily accounted for either by psycholinguistics or by cognitive psychology. As CAVALCANTI (1984) does, I hope pragmagtics might bring us a less frustrating answer.

It is my contention that having attained a not yet defined language ceiling - I believe to be about low intermediate level - the learner can be encouraged to trigger the development of reading strategies. As both proficiencies are deeply interwoven, the improvement of reading strategies will entail the improvement of linguistic competence.

3 - THE APPROACH ADOPTED AT UFRGS

3.1 - Rationale

Having described the situation and discussed the main issues involved, I now turn to the approach adopted to design a syllabus likely to cope with the constraints and cater for the objectives proposed as well. The approach seeks its fundamental reason on the learner's awareness of reading as a conscious act. Used to taking reading for granted as a natural by-product of elementary education, the learner realizes that reading is a process that can be scientifically observed, understood and voluntarily monitored.

The awareness implies two main components: the affective and the cognitive. Self-confidence and commitment make up the former while being acquainted with the psycholinguistic aspects of reading accounts for the latter. Both contribute to drive the learner towards introspection turning his mind inward upon his own reading process eventually.

Self-confidence is here thought of as the learner's reliance on his own potentialities. In an anxiety-free environment, self-confidence derives from the idea the learner builds

of himself as an individual able to achieve what is expected from him. The feeling is highly dependable on how he sees himself and on how he is regarded by the teacher and by the classmates.

Commitment has to do with motivation, it involves willigness to perform tasks and take steps to reach an established goal percieved as desirable. The committed student feels himself adherent to the syllabus designed and struggles to keep pace with the pedagogical procedures developed.

The concept of reading as a psycholinghistic process is basic for the approach. The fact that psychological and linguistic factors are deeply interknitted and intrinsicly blended are made clear for the learner. Thus, he realizes what is set on in his brain when his eyes meet a printed page. Though avoiding to overload the learner's mind with the sophistication of theories, the teacher illustrates the various aspects of the reading process.

The awareness derived from the two main components, the affective and the cognitive, brings about metacognitive strategies likely to help the reader to monitor his reading. Being alerted to the reading proper in the one hand and to his own cognitive resources on the other, the reader gradually becomes able to ad equate skills and strategies to the demands of a variety of reading situations.

3.2 - _Aims_

Broadly speaking the ultimate aim viewed by the teacher who adopts the approach is to help the learner experience reading as a venture worth-undertaking. Permeating through every objective formulated, method selected, technique chosen, activity devised, the aim gives the whole syllabus a sense. A venture worth - undertaking implies the idea of freedom, easiness, self-decision-making, dicovery and pleasure.

In other words, the aim is getting the learner to know the book, getting him familiar with libraries and its resources. Helping him to become aware of the reading process is not enough if he is not encouraged to read and if reading appears as a dull painful chore.

Briefly, to stimulate the reader curiosity towards the printed matter is paramount. He must be given the opportunity to browse among genuine paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines and newspapers in the library. The interest, I dare say, the lust for reading is not likely to arise from the mere handling of typed pages or photocopied materials in classroom environment no matter how appealing they might look.

Of course, it is hard to avoid the use of manifold copies. There are moments when the copies are highly helpful.Much reading is taught by using "_fakes_" specially where the acquisition of authentic printed materials cannot be afforded. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that, if we really look for,

we are likely to discover unexpected riches in our own university libraries.

The target of reading lessons is by no means limited to activities developed and materials read inside the classroom. They are but an illustration of how to cope with reading and of how reading is processed. If their influence stops, when exercises are completed and questions correctly answered, they fail. Good materials are the ones that motivate the learner to search for further reading.

In fact, reading is an individual, free activity that should be normally perfomed at will, without guidelines, tasks assigned, tests in view. In a reading course, all these are necessary to the extent they help the learner to develop his reading skills. Ideally, they should be left aside the moment the learner takes over and finds real pleasure and enjoyment in reading.

3.3 - _The Syllabus_

For the aims to be achieved within the perpective of the rationale advanced, the syllabus designed strives to be dynamic. In fact, it is constantly being adapted to meet the demands of the engoing situation. Learner-centredness, process-orientedness and discourse-basedness are the features painstakingly kept.

Emphasis is placed on the learner's potentialities and on the effectiveness of his monitoring the learning process. More importance is given to the operations involved in achieving reading comprehension than on the virtual product attained. Attention is called to the text as a sample of discourse in action with all characteristics and implications of language in use.

If the syllabus is screened, three phases are found. They can be termed introspection, self-confidence, and consolidation according to the main objectives aimed at during each one. Interweaving cognitive and affective areas, they overlap drawing in linguistic and pedagogical factors.

3.3.1 - Introspection

Following AUSUBEL (1968:37-87), the first phase derives the whole learning process from the learner's first reading experience: reading in the mother tongue. Activities are designed to focus on the role linguistic patterns and knowledge of the world play in reading comprehension. Self-assessment tasks help to enlarge the learner's perpective of his own reading process.

The awareness of the various operations involved in performing reading exercises is far more important for the learning to take place than the correct answer given to the questions. The psycholinguistic guessing game (GOODMAN 1978) thus played prepares the reader for the task of monitoring his own reading.

3.3.2 - Self-Confidence

The student must feel confident he can really read in English. It is up to the teacher to prevent any disappointment. Frustration usually follows overdemanding reading tasks.

Text selection is crucial during this phase. On top priority are appearance and interest. Challenging topics, appealing lay-outs, meaningful typographical resources, familiarity with the subject are preferable qualities to linguistic simplicity. Activities geared at an approppiate level virtually ensure satisfactory completion. Confronted with rewarding tasks, the student overcomes biases and advances in his learning.

3.3.3 - Consolidation

Following two initial stages mainly intended to motivating the learner, attention is drawn to the writer himself and to the way he organizes his message. Assuming that the student is sufficiently knowledgeable of reading techniques and strategies, the teacher now embarks on the task of sensitizing the reader to text structure and discourse features.

The third phase is the longest and the most complex. The development of text-attack skills that go far beyond text into discourse (NUTTALL 1983:80-124) makes high demands on the teacher, his professional ability, his own reading skill not to

mention his understanding of the reading proper. It is a hard teaching phase but, at the same time, it means a highly rewarding learning stage for both teacher and learner. Both are supposed to advance towards the ideal goal of full reading comprehension.

3.3.4 - Integration

The syllabus is cyclicly designed so that the learner is encouraged to use reading skills and strategies at different levels of delicacy and different levels of comprehension throughout the course of instruction. He is stimulated to read for gist, to search for bits of specific information as well as to identify main points, express critical judgement and assess the implications of contet. In short, objectives and teaching points tackled are cumulative. Activities developed and tasks set are continu ously resumed from the beginning to the very end of the course.

3.4 - Results

3.4.1 - Limitations

Having outlined the approach and characterized the syllabus, I now report on the effectiveness of the teaching - learning process developed. Before embarking on the issue, I

indicate the limitations of the findings.

First, there is no evidence based on quantitative data accurately collected and analysed. Pieces of research have been carried out by the teachers engaged in our ESP team at UFRGS. HARBICH (1981), LIMA (1983), FACHIN (1982) describe spe cific courses based on the rationale previously mentioned and organized after the steps of the syllabus designed. The evalu- ation they put forward is rather qualitative and draws in the re sults of classroom tests and questionnaires informally applied.

Second, the approach is essentially process-oriented. Evaluating a syllabus based on such an approach risks to be illu sive since most standardized reading proficiency examinations are product-oriented (CELIA 1983:76-7). Moreover, the actual out come of a process-oriented approach to reading is hardly assessed at the end of the course. It is likely to be reached later on if the syllabus has provided the learner with the capacity of carrying on the process triggered.

Third, up to now, we have not been able to keep track of our reading learners so as to follow up the actual develop- ment and effective application of their reading skills. The issue concerning the improvement of their proficiency in English is not evaluated either.

3.4.2 - Expected Results

Having discussed the limitations of the findings re-
ported, I now consider the extent to which the students succed
in developing the skills necessary for coping with their further
readings. A pre - posttest system allows the teacher to evaluate
how the student improves during the course. Leaving aside the
consideration of uncontrolled variables and qualities of the tests,
the results can be regarded as satisfactory.

I take as reference the specifications provided by
the Royal Society of Arts Examination Board (1983) for the test
of reading of the examination called "English as a Foreign Lan-
guage" in order to be able to rank the students performance in
the pre and posttest applied. Students who are below the Basic
Level at the pretest succeed in arriving at it whereas those who
already start at the Basic Lecel attain the Intermediate Level
at the posttest.

More meaningful than the marks the students get is what
the teachers and librarians observe the students to perform. Con
tent textbooks in English are borrowed. Volumes of reference
books in English are consulted. English language magazines are
checked in and out.

Students' self - evaluation is worth-quoting. As the
final reading assignment of the semester (MARMET & FLORES DA CU
NHA, 1985) they are asked to use a textbook relevant to an area
of their academic studies. Very often, the enthusiastic comment

"I have never thought I could read a book in English" is found
in the paper.

3.4.3 - Unexpected Results

To the observable expected results, add some unexpected
outcomes. First, students' reading ability in the mother tongue
grows to an incresingly large extent. There is a sort of trans-
ference from foreign language reading skills to first language.
Poor reading that usually hinders learning in content areas im-
proves and so does the ability to study.

Secondly, having discovered how helpful the library
can be, students begin resorting to its resources at most. They
find out books and magazines they are interested in. They search
for books and periodicals that might enlarge the scope of their
studies. They ask for new materials to be acquired. Gradually,
the belief that attendance to English reading classes improves
reading ability in Portuguese too is spread out.

CONCLUSION

After considering various aspects of the utopic task faced by the teachers of English at UFRGS, I now come to the conclusion. What appeared unbelievable and impossible, teaching reading in English in 60 hours to false beginners of English with poor reading ability in Portuguese, now seems quite feasible. If the issue is viewed from the perspective envisaged by the Brazilian ESP team working at UFRGS, utopia turns to reality.

In fact, the students seem to acquire the capacity of developing skills likely to ensure the reading habit. The utopia of learning a foreign language in 60 hours turns out as the reality of promoting reading skills for a lifetime.

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