

MAKING READING INSTRUCTION COMMUNICATIVE: A FOCUS ON THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

ESTHER USÓ-JUAN
Universitat Jaume I, Castellón

ABSTRACT. *Nowadays the skill of reading is seen as an interactive, constructive and contextualised process that has an essential role in facilitating the acquisition of communicative competence in a second/foreign language (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006a). However, and despite this current status of reading, the methodology of teaching reading remains somewhat unaltered and the role of the learners in the process of learning to read is often a passive one. It is the aim of this paper to advance recommendations based on research findings for making reading instruction communicative and therefore, provide learners with an active role in the process of reading. These recommendations focus on the areas of i) fluency rate, ii) vocabulary building, iii) activation of background knowledge, iv) the development of strategic reading and v) the need to promote extensive reading.*

KEYWORDS: *L2 reading ability, reading instruction, communicative competence.*

RESUMEN. *Hoy en día la habilidad lectora se considera un proceso interactivo, constructivo y contextualizado que tiene un papel esencial en facilitar el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa de los aprendices en una segunda lengua/lengua extranjera (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006a). Sin embargo, y pese a esta nueva conceptualización, la metodología en la enseñanza de la habilidad lectora no ha cambiado significativamente y el papel del aprendiz en el proceso de aprender a leer es con frecuencia pasivo. Así pues, el objetivo de este artículo es proponer una serie de recomendaciones basadas en los resultados de investigación para hacer la instrucción de la lectura comunicativa y de este modo, conceder a los aprendices un papel activo en el proceso de lectura. Estas recomendaciones se centran en las áreas de i) fluidez lectora, ii) aprendizaje de vocabulario, iii) activación del conocimiento previo, iv) lectura estratégica y v) la necesidad de promover la lectura extensiva.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Habilidad lectora en una segunda lengua, instrucción en comprensión lectora, competencia comunicativa.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that reading ability in English as a second/foreign language (L2) is of vital importance to academic studies and future professional success. With strong reading skills, learners will definitely make progress “not only in learning English, but also in learning in any content class where reading in English is required” (Anderson, 2003: 69). Moreover, arguments for the importance of this skill abound in the amount of reading research conducted over the past four decades which has better defined what reading involves and how readers make sense of written texts. This research has helped experts to consider reading as an interactive, constructive and conceptualised process that has an essential role in facilitating the acquisition of communicative competence. In fact, the recent model of communicative competence proposed by Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006b) highlights this communicative role of reading by viewing it as the manifestation of interpreting written discourse (i.e. the core component of the model), and as a way of manifesting the rest of the components (i.e., linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural and strategic). However, and despite this current status of reading, the methodology employed in the area of reading instruction does not follow a communicative teaching approach. In fact, learners are often asked to read a passage and answer the typically list of comprehension questions that follow the text, without much training. In such a process, learners read word-by word and spend much time translating the unknown words they encounter in the passage and consequently rarely focus completely on the message. If this is the case, how might reading be taught then in a way that provides learners with opportunities to play an active role in the reading process? How can reading be

taught in a way that reflects its current communicative conceptualisation? It is the aim of this paper to provide an answer to these questions by recommending a series of pedagogical techniques that derive from research findings.

2. COMMUNICATIVE READING: INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

The recommendations for the teaching of reading proposed in this section are based on findings from L2 reading research, and focus on the areas of i) fluency rate; ii) vocabulary building; iii) activation of background knowledge; iv) the development of strategic reading, and v) the need to promote extensive reading (Aebbersold and Field, 1997; Anderson, 1999, 2003; Grabe and Stoller, 2001, 2002; Eskey, 2005).

2.1. *Develop reader's overall fluency rate*

The development of fluent reading has been regarded as a crucial indicator for efficient L2 reading (Grabe and Stoller, 2001). As defined by Eskey (2005: 568), it involves “the ability to convert most written language into meaningful information so automatically that the reader does not have to think about the language and can concentrate on combining the information obtained with background knowledge to construct a meaning for the text.” However, even though research highlights its importance for making reading fluent and in turn, communicative, it is commonly not promoted in L2 reading instruction. Following Anderson (2003), one way to develop overall fluency rate is to train readers in reducing their dependence on the dictionary. For example, readers could be trained in the skills of scanning, skimming, predicting, and identifying main ideas in order to help them approach reading in a different way and enjoy reading, the ultimate goal of reading instruction. All in all, fluency activities have to meet the following four conditions: i) learners' familiarity with text features and vocabulary; ii) a focus on the text message; iii) pressure to read at a higher speed than the usual one; and iv) quantity of such practice (Nation, 2005).

2.2. *Develop reader's vocabulary*

Studies on the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension in L2 instructional settings support the contention that vocabulary development is a critical component of reading comprehension and that these two factors are closely interwoven. Therefore, there is a need for developing vocabulary in the reading class to facilitate learners' text comprehension. In this regard, Nation (2005) recommends a range of techniques, including *guessing from context*, *learning from word cards* and *using word parts*. The strategy of *guessing from context* through reading involves learners' use of both linguistic clues (i.e., the part of speech of the unknown word, its immediate context and its wider context), as well as the background knowledge clues to guess the meaning of unknown words in a given text. As pointed out by Nation (2005), for the strategy to be successful, learners should be familiar with 98% of the running words in the passage. Once learners guess the meaning of the unknown word, they should check that the guess is correct in the dictionary, especially if they have been trained in the use of such a tool. The second strategy, *learning from word cards*, consists of rote learning and has been proven to be an effective technique. Finally, the last strategy, *using word parts*, suggests the learning of word parts, particularly prefixes and suffixes, to help learners in the acquisition of new vocabulary.

2.3 Develop reader's background knowledge

There is overwhelming research evidence that background knowledge is a precondition for making sense of the written text (Chen and Donin, 1997; Lahuerta, 2002; Usó-Juan, 2006). Background knowledge related to reading includes knowledge of the world, that is, cultural and content knowledge, and knowledge of how texts are organised. On the basis of such knowledge, readers construct some initial hypotheses about the written passage and have expectations as to what is coming next in the passage. In an attempt to build or activate learners' background knowledge of the text content and structure, a variety of activities have been suggested. As regards the building of background knowledge of the text content, Anderson (1999), for example, suggests classroom discussion of the text content through the use of i) *anticipated guides*, which include provocative statements to challenge learner knowledge of the text topic, or ii) *semantic maps*, a technique in which learners are given a key word or concept that is part of the text, and then they are requested to generate and discuss ideas associated with it. Needless to say, if learners do not have background knowledge to activate, teachers have to build it by presenting them with information about the text topic via television, newspapers or magazines.

With regards to the activation of background knowledge of text structure and discourse organisation, Grabe and Stoller (2001) propose *text-analysis* and *graphics-related* activities to guide learners towards understanding how texts are structured and subsequently facilitate text comprehension. *Text-analysis activities* include among many others: i) the identification of topic sentences and their relations to other sentences; ii) the identification of transition phrases or words together with a description of what the next section is about; iii) an explanation of what a set of pronouns refers to in the text; or iv) the identification of those clues that facilitate the recognition of major patterns of organisation like comparison-contrast, problem-solution, and so forth. Additionally, *graphics-related activities*, such as the use of graphic organisers (i.e., a visual picture of text information) or graphical ways to organise information, are particularly recommended with difficult texts to promote learners' awareness and discussion of text organisation.

2.4. Develop strategic readers

A key element in fostering reading comprehension includes the reader's skilful use of comprehension strategies (Koda, 2005; Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor, 2006a). The term *reading strategies* refers to those conscious or unconscious procedures, actions, techniques or behaviours that learners can utilise in order to enhance the communicative act between them and the writer and make up for interpretation problems. Thus, knowledge of different strategies which have been categorised into metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective (Ediger, 2006), and the ability and disposition to use them effectively should receive a prime consideration in a reading course. To that end, and drawing upon previous work by instructional researchers (Anderson, 1999; Grabe and Stoller, 2001; Janzen, 2002; Ediger, 2006), the following approach could be implemented in the classroom in order to develop strategic readers. The approach consists of three main stages: i) *teacher's direct instruction*; ii) *learner's reading practice*, and iii) *teacher's feedback on strategy use*.

In the first stage (i.e., *teacher's direct instruction*), the teacher explicitly instructs learners in strategy use. The instruction focuses on metacognitive information by addressing questions such as what the strategy is, as well as when and why the strategy should be used. In addition to this instruction, teacher modelling of (i.e., thinking aloud) effective reading strategies, including strategies to monitor text comprehension, could be of great help since the application of this technique in the classroom allows learners to observe an expert reading

behaviour and subsequently promotes learners' metacognitive awareness (Anderson, 1999; Janzen 2002). A few strategies should be presented at a time and the interrelationship among them explained. Instruction should be scaled over time to allow learners to become more independent readers.

In the second stage (i.e., *learner's reading practice*), learners put all theoretical concepts into action. Learners can be asked, for example, to collect a range of reading materials in a single topic and across different genres (Ediger, 2006). In class, they could practise the think aloud reading procedure and complete a chart with information about strategy use, more specifically, with information about what strategies they used as well as when and why they used them. This practice could be used as the basis for discussion on how the purposes for which one reads affect the selection of specific strategies.

Finally, in the third stage (i.e., *teacher's feedback on strategy use*), the teacher provides feedback and metacognitive reflection on the learners' performance so as to drive them to use more appropriate reading strategies depending on the purpose for reading and, therefore, help them become more autonomous in the reading process.

2.5. Develop extensive reading

Extensive reading is acknowledged as being a key component in reading programmes (Carrell and Grabe, 2002). It involves reading large quantities of texts for general comprehension over some extended period of time, the goal being pleasure or just practice. In general, studies into extensive L2 reading have reported that not only is reading ability enhanced, but that there is also an improvement in a range of areas of language knowledge including vocabulary, linguistic competence, writing, spelling and reading fluency, among others (Day and Bamford, 1998). In an attempt to promote extensive reading, and make it more interactive and communicative, a variety of activities can be suggested. Learners can be asked to read the same book and complete a reading worksheet for homework with questions that discuss the content of the book, as well as readers' personal experiences (see Appendix A). Alternatively, learners can read different books, and after completing the same reading worksheet, they can be asked to recommend their book to the rest of the class. Both activities could lead into class discussion of what learners have read. Additionally, asking learners to bring in interesting reading passages that they may find in a variety of sources including excerpts from internet, newspapers, books, magazines or comics, could also be of help in promoting extensive reading. Each learner could take a text home and prepare an oral report to present in class (see Day and Bamford, 1998: 149, for ideas on how to prepare an oral report on written material).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has been the goal of this paper to advance recommendations aimed at making reading instruction communicative. In so doing, it has addressed five crucial areas related to reading development, and has exemplified how they can be implemented into current teaching practices by presenting a range of pedagogical activities. It is hoped that the ideas presented here are a starting point to make teachers aware of the importance of providing learners with an active role in the process of reading and, thus, provide them with the opportunity to develop their overall communicative competence through reading.

REFERENCES

- Aebbersold, J. A. and M. L. Field. 1997. *From Reader to Reading Teacher. Issues and Strategies for Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, N. J. 1999. *Exploring Second Language Reading*. Boston, MA.: Heinle and Heinle.
- Anderson, N. J. 2003. "Reading". *Practical English Language Teaching*. Ed. D. Nunan. New York: McGraw Hill. 67-86.
- Bamford, J. and R. R. Day, eds. 2004. *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carrell, P. L and W. Grabe. 2002. "Reading". *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*. Ed. N. Schmitt. London: Arnold. 233-250.
- Chen, Q. and J. Donin. 1997. "Discourse processing of first and second language biology texts: Effects of language proficiency and domain-specific knowledge". *Modern Language Journal* 81: 209-27.
- Day, R. R. and J. Bamford. 1998. *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ediger, A. M. 2006. "Developing strategic L2 readers by reading for strategic purposes". *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills*. Eds. E. Usó-Juan and A. Martínez-Flor. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 303-328.
- Eskey, D. E. 2005. "Reading in a second language." *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Ed. E. Hinkel. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum. 563-579.
- Gill, R. 1985. *Mastering English literature*. London: MacMillan.
- Grabe, W. and F. L. Stoller. 2001. "Reading for academic purposes: Guidelines for the ESL/EFL teacher". *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Ed. M. Celce-Murcia. Boston, MA.: Heinle and Heinle. 187-203.
- Grabe, W. and F. L. Stoller. 2002. *Teaching and Researching Reading*. London: Pearson Education.
- Janzen, J. "Teaching strategic reading". *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Ed. J. C. Richards and W. A. Renandya. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 287-94.
- Koda K. 2005. *Insights into Second Language Reading. A Cross-Linguistics Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LaHuerta, C. 2002. "Empirical examination of EFL eaders' use of rhetorical information." *English for Specific Purposes* 21: 81-98.
- Nation, P. "Teaching and learning vocabulary". *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Ed. Eli Hinkel. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum. 581-596
- Usó-Juan, E. 2006. "The Compensatory nature of discipline-related knowledge and English language proficiency in reading English for academic purposes." *Modern Language Journal* 90: 210-227.
- Usó-Juan, E. and A Martínez-Flor. 2006a. "Towards acquiring communicative competence through reading". *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Skills*. Eds. E. Usó-Juan and A. Martínez-Flor. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 261-77.
- Usó-Juan, E. and A Martínez-Flor. 2006b. "Approaches to language learning and teaching: Towards acquiring communicative competence through the four skills". *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Skills*. Eds. E. Usó-Juan and A. Martínez-Flor. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 3-25.

APPENDIX A

EXTENSIVE READING WORKSHEET

1. Information About the Book

- 1.1 Author:
- 1.2 Date of publication:
- 1.3 Title:
- 1.4 Publisher:
- 1.5 Genre:

2. The Facts

2.1 *The characters*

- 2.1.1 Who are the characters?
- 2.1.2 What are they like?
- 2.1.3 How is their personality established?
- 2.1.4 What is the relation between them?
- 2.1.5 Is social class evident? If Yes, How is it evident?
 - in dress
 - in employment
 - in names
 - through language (etc.)

2.2 *The setting*

- 2.2.1 When does the story take place?
- 2.2.2 Where does the story take place?
- 2.2.3 Does setting reveal the personality of characters?

2.3 *The action*

- 2.3.1 What happens in the novel?
- 2.3.2 What is the theme of the book?
- 2.3.3 Can you make a visual representation of the progression of the plot (i.e. opening, conflict, complications, climax, and resolution)?

3. Personal Response

3.1 *Your impressions*

- 3.1.1 What did you like best?
- 3.1.2 What did you like least?
- 3.1.3 What would you change in the story?

3.2 *Your feeling and experience*

- 3.2.1 Do you identify with any of the characters?
- 3.2.2 Do you find any interesting cultural information?
- 3.2.3 What surprising/interesting lesson did you learn from the reading? How does the lesson connect to your own life?

3.3 Your *rating* (circle one)

- | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------------------------|
| 3.3.1 Great | = | (I loved it) |
| 3.3.2 Good | = | (I liked it) |
| 3.3.3 OK | = | (I didn't mind reading it) |
| 3.3.4 Boring/Stupid | = | (I wish I hadn't read it) |

- 3.4 If you circled 3.3.1 or 3.3.2 write a short ten- to twenty-word "come-on" for the book. Explain why others will enjoy it as much as you did.

*Adapted from a) Gill (1985); b) Day and Bamford (1998); and c) Bamford and Day (2004).