

Approaches to foreign language reading

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This paper deals with various approaches to foreign language reading. During the audiolingual period reading was neglected in favour of spoken language skills. In the 1970s cognitive psychology made a strong impact on reading theories. Interactive models of reading appeared in the 1980s. Text comprehension involved interaction between top-down and bottom-up processing of information represented in the schema theory stressing also the importance of linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge.

Foreign language reading has been treated differently throughout its history starting from the audiolingual to the psycholinguistic period and to interactive models of reading. The period from 1940 to 1960 was marked by Bloomfield's idea that language is primarily speaking, an approach based on mechanistic and behaviouristic attitudes towards language learning. Writing and reading were neglected in the process of mastering spoken language skills.

Audiolingual language programmes stressed drill, memorization and formation of automatic language habits. There were only a few researchers, like Virginia French Allen, who insisted on written language (cf. Allen 1973).

At the beginning of the 1960s reading materials still served as a context for drill exercises and reading was viewed as a decoding process in which the meaning was built from the smaller units (letters and words) to the larger units (phrases and clauses). Very soon teachers became dissatisfied with the audiolingual method and

started finding more efficient ways of teaching reading comprehension. In 1967 Kenneth Goodman published his article: 'Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game' which marked the beginning of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistic approach to foreign language reading.

Reading was regarded as a complex process of extracting information and the reader was assigned an active role. Because he is in constant interaction with the text, the reader tries to reconstruct the writer's ideas. According to Goodman's theory there are four distinct stages in the reading process: prediction, sampling, confirmation and correction. Readers first predict information that will appear in the text, and later they either confirm or correct their predictions while processing the text.

Since meaning is a final product of reading, Goodman's model portrays the reader as a searcher after meaning who constructs meaning in a cyclical process. The reader focuses on the graphic display of the text (title, subtitles, italics etc.) and syntactic and semantic systems as he makes correct predictions about the textual meaning. If this is acceptable and in accord with the reader's previous experience, the meaning is assimilated. In case of any inconsistencies with already acquired experience, accommodations and modifications will occur.

Goodman's model is a macro model of reading which is not complete because it does not offer detailed micro modelling of all reading aspects. Every reading model must include:

- all text characteristics (structure, length, etc.);
- reader characteristics;
- syntactic and lexical characteristics;
- characteristics of a semantic system (proposition structure, cohesion, inference);
- orthographic characteristics;
- reading conditions.

Goodman's theory, however, has had a profound impact on foreign language reading.

Frank Smith (1971) has also claimed that the reader uses both visual and semantic information in dealing with the meaning of the written text. Fluent readers start their analyses with the deep structure of the text which is followed by the surface (visual) structure. Syntax is used as a means of predicting the surface display of information and minimal visual information helps to confirm the predictions. On the other hand, slow readers analyse all components of the surface structure without making any predictions. They deduce meaning only from the surface structure which often leads to their making mistakes. While reading »difficult texts« (i.e. topics that readers encounter for the first time), they discover meaning in an indirect way, namely identification of the words precedes comprehension.

Smith stresses the importance of linguistic knowledge which is necessary to make syntactic predictions about the organizational structure. He says that syntactic rules regulate the way words appear either in groups or in clauses, and knowledge of the parts of speech helps the reader to recognize these words. Smith emphasizes semantic predictions as well where hypotheses are made with regard to the meanings of words, clauses or larger language units.

In the 1970s the linear processing of information was advocated in reading which implied a one-way flow of information and an exclusion of any interaction between higher and lower-level information. Rumelhart (1971), however, criticized this concept and emphasized the overlapping of orthographic, lexical, syntactic and semantic sources, all mutually dependent, which serve as a simultaneous input in the reading process. This interactive model of reading and the cyclical processing of information have emerged as the accepted model in the 1980s.

The interactive approach to reading emphasized two ways of information processing: bottom-up and top-down processing. According to Eskey reading does not involve only predictions because a good reader also decodes text structures both lexical and syntactic (cf. Eskey 1988). Decoding is an automatic identification which requires no cognitive effort. This automatization enables the mind of a fluent reader to form predictions and interpret the text by using the top-down strategy. Stanovich considers the interactive model a compensatory model because 'the strength in one processing stage compensates for weaknesses in another' (Stanovich 1980:32). Poor readers who might be slow or inaccurate at lower-reading levels rely heavily on other knowledge sources (e.g. general knowledge or knowledge of the topic) regardless of the level in their processing hierarchy. This helps them form predictions.

Text comprehension includes the interaction of the bottom-up and top-down processes. While the former enables the reader to assimilate new information, which is inconsistent with his hypotheses of the content or the structure of the text, the latter helps him select alternative meanings for the incoming information. The bottom-up process consists of decoding separate linguistic units and syntactic structures which create textual meaning. The emphasis is on the lexis and grammar. The top-down process includes the reader's predictions which are based on knowledge and experience already acquired. These predictions are either confirmed or rejected in the reading process. This type of information processing helps the reader to better understand text cohesion and coherence. Knowledge of the world enables the reader to comprehend the text meaning in spite of certain inexplicitly stated information.

Patricia Carrell unites both processes in the schema theory calling them »the text-based processes« and »the knowledge-based processes«, namely bottom-up and top-down processes (Carrell 1987:461-81). She claims that successful readers combine both and accommodate themselves to the text. Poor readers rely heavily either on

the bottom-up process, which results in their inability to view the text critically, or on the top-down process, which makes them jump to conclusions and form quick hypotheses. This may be caused by the lack of background knowledge which forces the reader to rely on the text. Extralinguistic knowledge is thus of utmost importance with regard to:

- a) content schemata referring to the general knowledge and topic knowledge;
- b) formal schemata involving the knowledge of the organizational structure of the text.

M. Steffensen and C. Joag-Dev assert that the schema theory functions in the following way:

- a) schemata control text comprehension because readers try to find consistency between the known information which is part of their background knowledge and new information which comes from the text;
- b) schemata offer a good basis for filling in the gaps, i.e. they enable the reader to interpret the text coherently in spite of all implicit information;
- c) schemata limit the interpretation of incomprehensible messages - if the reader's schemata differ, the reader will try to interpret the vague parts of information once more and adapt them to his own schema.

The reader's active role is evident in the comprehension process and many authors have agreed upon the idea that readers create meaning while they interact with the text. Widdowson says that the text itself does not contain meaning but only a potential for conveying meaning which readers try to discover more or less successfully. Readers project their schemata on the text while reading and interpret the text according to their schemata. In case of a perfect concordance between writer's ideas and reader's predictions of the text content, schemata might become fossilized and stereotyped which does not lead to acquisition of new knowledge. Modifications of the existing schemata, based on new information, are essential.

Neisser claims that modifications follow the sampling of information and the application of schemata and this is the only way to incorporate new information into the existing knowledge structure (cf. Neisser 1976). If there is only a slight difference between the old and new schemata, modifications will be insignificant, but if schemata are dissimilar the reader can either:

- a) make minimal modifications stressing the priority of his own schemata;
- b) make significant changes admitting the priority of the writer's schemata.

Since schemata result from the reader's surrounding, the reader acquires both knowledge and experience from his environment. At the same time he should be familiar with the writer's world in order to start communication with him. Pat Rigg says reader's familiarity with the writer's schemata is more important for predictions than linguistic competence (cf. Rigg 1988). Cooper, Alderson and Devine, however, disapprove of this theory emphasizing instead the importance of linguistic competence which facilitates automatic processing of syntactical and lexical elements in reading comprehension (cf. Alderson & Urquhart 1984).

For Tierney and Pearson, reading is 'the active process of negotiating meaning between a reader and an author, both of whom create meaning, it is an event in which thoughtful readers act as composers' (Tierney & Pearson 1983: 568). They consider reading comprehension an act of composing a new version of the text when the reader acts as a planner, composer, editor and monitor. As a planner he defines his goals in reading, activates background knowledge and agrees or disagrees with the writer. As a composer he observes the text coherence and finds ways of filling in the gaps in reading comprehension. As an editor he reads the text and takes notes of his own reactions and questions. As a monitor he decides which model of meaning he will accept.

This approach implies a reader's active role. At the same time the reader's individuality is taken into account because the readers' experiences and knowledge differ and so do his or her interpretations of the text. Readers also differ in activating their own schemata, in perceiving the missing elements which are important for schemata filling, in making deduction based on the reader's acquired knowledge regarding content schemata and formal schemata.

Although foreign-language reading specialists offer a variety of reading models and give priority to different factors, they all view reading as an interactive process and examine basic elements which contribute to reading comprehension: linguistic knowledge, extralinguistic knowledge which refers to formal schemata (background knowledge of the formal, rhetorical, organizational structures of different types of texts) and content schemata (background knowledge of the content area of a text), reader's anticipation of incoming data, accommodation to textual input information and combination of bottom-up and top-down processing.

Linguistic knowledge helps the reader to anticipate the surface structure of the text. It is indisputable that new grammatical forms may present problems to the reader, along with the length and complexity of the sentence, propositional and participial phrases functioning as modifiers. In perceiving the text the reader must cope with words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and the entire text. Recognition of the surface structures, however, is an automatic process for a good reader due to his linguistic knowledge.

When reading a text the reader must be aware of four levels of meaning which are essential for text comprehension, i.e. conceptual, propositional, contextual and pragmatic. Text comprehension is also dependent on the purpose and goal of reading. Sometimes it is important to understand the text fully, sometimes globally or partially. When one reads newspapers the attention is focused only on interesting information. If, on the other hand, one reads a scientific journal, the reading strategy differs. Hosenfeld discusses various reading strategies which the reader uses to identify the meaning:

- a) forming predictions based on the title;
- b) evaluating predictions;
- c) using previously acquired knowledge;
- d) continuing reading despite wrong predictions;
- e) using contextual clues (cf. Hosenfeld 1984).

Reading strategies could be categorized into general and local. The former include: content anticipation, recognition of a textual structure, integration and evaluation of information, use of general knowledge in text comprehension, text evaluation etc. The latter involve: repeated reading of the text, paraphrasing, checking the meaning of the words, clauses and sentences.

We also have to make a distinction between extensive and reflexive reading strategies. The first one implies the reader's focussing on the comprehension of the author's ideas and the second implies the reader's linking of the ideas taken from the text with his personal experience and knowledge.

One could focus on strategies which either improve or impair understanding, e.g.:

- a) technical strategies which are useful for information decoding during skimming, scanning or finding key elements;
- b) strategies for discovering text coherence which involve efficient use of content schemata and formal schemata in anticipating the forthcoming text and identifying the key parts of discourse;
- c) active control of text processing which implies flexibility of the reading speed, evaluation and rejection of incomprehensible sentences.

It is indisputable that the combination of various strategies will produce the best results in text comprehension. The reader, however, must be fully aware of the reading strategies he uses in his mother tongue and he must try to apply these in foreign language reading. The research results obtained with various groups show the diversity of conclusions. Some researchers claim that their examinees do not use the same reading strategies equally successfully, regarding their mother tongue or foreign language. This could be observed in the testing of skimming. On the other hand, great similarities have been discovered between reading in the mother tongue and foreign language with regard to some specific tasks, e. g.:

- a) identification of the key sentence that summarizes the whole text;
- b) identification of other important ideas;
- c) synthesis of the global text message.

C. Alderson claims that there is a certain transfer of reading skills from the mother tongue into foreign language but only in similar languages (cf. Alderson & Urquhart 1984). There is a general impression that readers are slower in reading foreign language texts compared to the mother tongue and their level of understanding is also lower. Alderson says that in the process of foreign text comprehension reading skills in the mother tongue seem to be less important than reader's knowledge of the foreign language. It turns out that reading skills are more impor-

tant with simple texts. If the texts are, both linguistically and conceptually, more complicated, the need for a better command of the foreign language increases. At the same time the role of the reading skill in the mother tongue is neglected.

It is difficult to specify the reasons which present an impediment to text comprehension as regards the reading skill and the knowledge of the foreign language. The fact is that insufficient knowledge in these areas should be improved and mistakes reduced to a minimum. In any case mistakes are the result of various elements and not just one. The major areas of mistakes in text comprehension at a discourse level could be classified as follows:

- a) failure in distinguishing the main from subordinate idea;
- b) impossibility to follow development of the main idea;
- c) wrong inference;
- d) wrong interpretation of the complete text tone;
- d) misunderstanding of the relationship between word groups and clauses.

This list could be extended and the following readers' mistakes added:

- a) inability to realize text organization on the micro and macro level regarding text coherence and cohesion;
- b) disregard of the topic sentences;
- c) failure in recognizing utterance functions.

In the last two decades many significant changes have happened in the language theory. They have also had an impact on the reading models in ESP (English for Special Purposes) teaching. We cannot say that the skills and strategies which are required for reading ESP texts differ from the general skills required in other areas of EFL. It is simply important to classify these skills concerning the goals of reading, text characteristics and some new approaches to the language theory.

Therefore, we could focus on the following skills:

- a) skills which include flexibility in applying reading strategies;
- b) skills which are useful in dealing with non-verbal information;
- c) skills which are used in text reading at a micro level;
- d) skills which are required for text reading at a macro level.

The notion of flexibility in the reading strategies involves diversity of speed and manner of reading as to the reading goals and the text types, e.g. we read newspapers faster than we would read a scientific journal because in the first case we want to be briefly informed about daily events and in the second case we try to memorize as much information as possible. Many readers do not possess reading flexibility and are, therefore, very inefficient.

All non-verbal information must be exploited fully because this helps in text comprehension. Graphic signals, e.g. bigger line space or indentation, clearly indicate the beginning of a new paragraph. Bold letters (in titles, subtitles etc.) serve as

an indicator of information significance. Diagrams and symbols are also very useful in clarifying textual pieces of information that are incomprehensible.

Reading strategies and skills at the micro level refer primarily to conceptual meaning, understanding of syntactic relationships and sentence structure and intra-sentential links.

Many people think that unknown words are the main obstacle to text comprehension. This attitude must be rejected and everybody should be aware that unknown words may be ignored sometimes or various techniques could be applied in anticipating the possible meaning. Morphological analysis is often useful hereby (the use of prefixes and suffixes) or referring to the context. It is possible to understand the writer's message globally without detailed understanding of every single sentence. On the other hand if the reading goal is a detailed understanding of the text, the unknown words, together with the syntax of the sentence, may present an obstacle to text comprehension. In this case the reader should quickly read the complete text without stopping, even when faced with unclear parts, trying to get some information from the text. The second reading is slower followed by the search for meaning of the unknown lexical units. Besides, the reader should try to identify the questions that the text aims to answer. After the third reading the picture of the global message becomes clearer and the predictions about the content are either confirmed or rejected. However, if there are still unclear sentences, they should be approached analytically and the problematic elements should be analyzed in detail.

If we do not observe the text as a grammatical unit but a semantic one, then we can accept the definition of Halliday and Hasan who claim that the text is not composed of sentences but it is realized through sentences (cf. Halliday & Hasan 1976). Halliday says that it is not necessary to study intra-sentential cohesion because the structure of the sentence arranges the relationship within the sentence. On the other hand, such structural relationship does not exist among sentences and it is therefore essential to focus on the cohesive elements .

When intersentential relationship is expressed explicitly, it is easy to interpret the textual meaning but very often it is not the case. Then the reader faces difficulties in finding the rhetorical functions, organization of discourse, implicit attitudes, cohesion and coherence. In order to be able to recognize implicit rhetorical functions the reader must be primarily competent in recognizing these in explicit presentations. Later on, he can focus on multifunctional utterances and learn more about complex relationships within a discourse.

Besides finding the rhetorical functions of sentences, it is important to discover the principle of sentence organization within a paragraph, because this organization differs from text to text. Hereby, one should be aware of the distinction between a

physical and a conceptual paragraph. In order to be able to follow the rhetorical organization of the text and to do the analysis at the macro level i.e. to understand the text coherence, the reader must have adequate knowledge of the topic and be able to evaluate significance of information. In other words, he must be familiar with the content and formal schemata. Since the formation of the macro structures depends on already established schemata, the reader should be familiar with them because it helps him make hypotheses about the text which facilitates the reading process.

Everything that has been mentioned so far, clearly shows how difficult it is to comprehend a text in a foreign language and how interrelated various factors are. All approaches to reading have elements in common which must be taken into account when considering the reading process, e.g.: the extra-linguistic and linguistic knowledge of the reader, reading strategies, motivation, ability to read in the mother tongue, text characteristics (organization and text structure, syntactic, semantic and lexical complexity). The reading process must be approached as both a communication and a mental activity. Active reader involvement in the process of creating meaning cannot be ignored. Reading is a receptive not a passive ability and an extremely important tool in foreign language learning.

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PRISTUPI PROCESU ČITANJA NA STRANOM JEZIKU

Razumijevanje pisanog teksta na stranom jeziku tretirano je na različite načine kroz povijest. Za vrijeme audiolingvalnog perioda čitanje je bilo zanemareno. Sedamdesetih godina kognitivna psihologija snažno je utjecala na teoriju čitanja. K. Goodman i F. Smith pripisuju aktivnu ulogu čitaocu budući je on u stalnoj interakciji s autorom teksta. Osamdesetih godina pojavljuje se interaktivni model čitanja. Razumijevanje teksta obuhvaća interakciju dva načina procesiranja informacija: **bottom-up** i **top down** predstavljenih u teoriji shema P. Carrell. Razumijevanje teksta odnosi se na mikro i makro razinu, a utemeljeno je na jezičnom i izvanjezičnom predznanju recipijenta.