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# A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading

Thomas S. C. Farrell

## Introduction

Reading has been described as what happens when people look at a text and assign meaning to the written symbols in that text (Aebersold and Field 1997, p. 15). But what makes a reader understand a text, the words in the text or what the reader brings to the text?

The answer is a bit of both: meaning is created when the reader interacts with the text. Models of reading in a first language have been created to describe this interaction between reader and text, and what happens when people read. The three main models of how reading occurs are Bottom-up theory, Top-down theory and the Interactive school of theorists. These models have also been used to describe how reading in a second/foreign language occurs.

The goal of most second/foreign language reading programs is to turn “learning to read” into “reading to learn” (Carrell, 1998). Although Singapore has students who read English as a first language, the schools also have students who read English as a second and a foreign language. In fact, it can be said that many beginning and reluctant first language learners learning to read use similar methods to second/foreign language learners.

How then can teachers of second language reading help students overcome some of the problems of learning to read and motivate and transform a hesitant reader into a strategic reader who reads to learn? For example, often beginning second language readers plunge into a text and, when they meet a difficult word, or confusing paragraph they cannot understand, their reading grinds to a halt. Reading then becomes “painful, boring, no fun, and too difficult”, as some beginning second language readers have sometimes commented. Before deciding on what kind of reading instruction to offer students, it is essential for reading

teachers to have a clear notion of what reading is. This paper focuses on what is involved in the reading process by examining (briefly) three popular models of how reading occurs. Implications for the teaching of reading are discussed.

## What is reading?

What do people do when they have to read? Do they use their previous knowledge and experience of the topic when trying to understand the meaning of a passage? Or do readers depend on the text itself for information on a topic? One model of reading, called the Top-down model, argues that readers bring prior knowledge and experiences to the text and that they continue to read as long as the text confirms their expectations. This top-down process can be explained as follows: the reader first looks at a passage or a text. Then he/she guesses about or predicts what the text will be about (based on their prior knowledge and experience of the topic) after reading the title, the headings and sub-headings. The reader then continues to read the text seeking confirmation about the topic based on their prior knowledge of that topic. So readers fit the text into knowledge and experiences they already hold.

A second model of how reading occurs, called the Bottom-up model, suggests that a reader reads the words and sentences and looks at the organization of the text (without relating it to experience or prior knowledge) in order to construct meaning from what was written in the text—meaning depends both on knowledge of vocabulary plus syntax. The bottom-up process can be explained as follows: when we read, one thing we do is extract the propositions from the text. How? By chunking the sentences into constituents and constructing the propositions from there. Comprehension then depends on the propositions we have extracted which serve as the basis of what we understand and recall (Richards, J. C., personal communication). This is the opposite of the top-down approach; instead of working from meaning to text (top-down), this model has a reader working from text to meaning (with a focus at word and sentence level).

A third model of how reading works, called the Interactive model (Stanovich, 1980), argues that both top-down and bottom-up processes occur when a person reads a text. Figure 1 outlines how this interactive process may work for fluent readers.

Figure 1 outlines the steps a fluent or mature reader may follow when reading a text using an interactive approach:

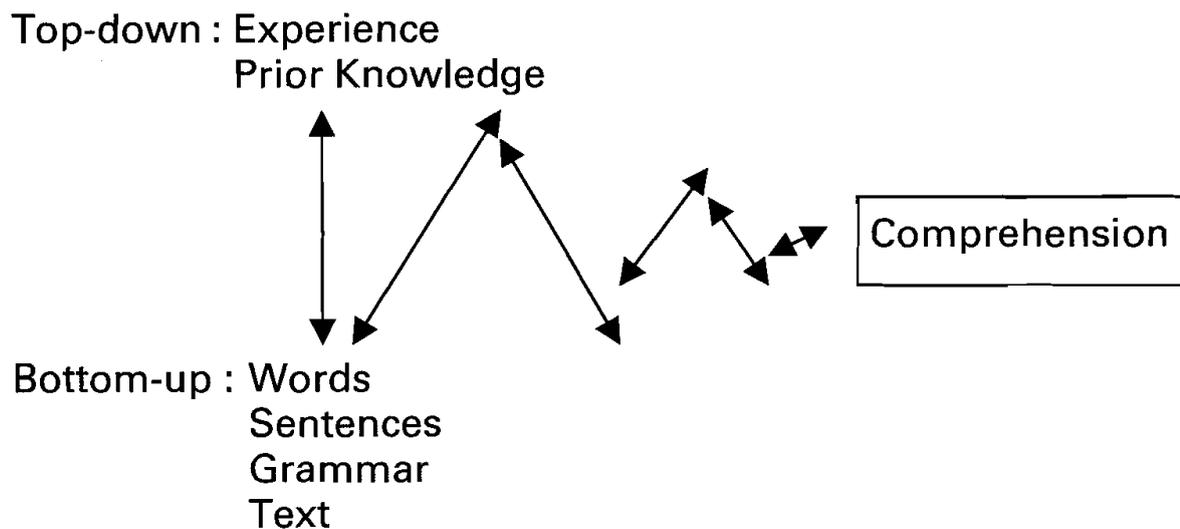


Fig. 1. Reading as an interaction between top-down and bottom-up models.

- (i) *Hypothesize or predict*: Good readers begin by predicting what the text will be about. For example, when reading the newspaper, we know that a particular item is about sports because it occurs in the sports section, we use the headline to predict or guess what the article will be about and, if it interests us enough, to continue reading.
- (ii) *Sample the text*: Good readers then actively pick words that fit these guesses. They do not spend time on function words such as *the, of*.
- (iii) *Continue the cycle* of predicting and sampling as long as the text poses no difficulty. When there is a problem (for example, an unknown word), the reader will ignore the problem. This continues until the problems accumulate to the point where the reader realizes that the prediction was wrong and comprehension breaks down.
- (iv) When comprehension breaks down, the reader frames a new hypothesis and restarts the cycle of predicting and sampling.

## Differences between First and Second Language Reading

So far the discussion of the reading process has focused on the nature of reading in a first language. However, there are some important differences between reading in a first language and learning to read in a second/foreign language. Grabe (1991) suggests that second/foreign language readers, especially adults with previous experiences, world knowledge and more developed cognitive abilities, begin reading in the second/foreign language with a different knowledge base than when they started to read in their first language. Adult second/foreign language readers also have more developed metacognitive abilities and may be more highly motivated to succeed in reading in the second/foreign language.

Aebersold and Field (1997, pp. 23–24) have compiled a list, briefly outlined below, of factors that may influence reading in a second/foreign language (for a more complete discussion, see Aebersold and Field, 1997, pp. 21–34). These are:

- Cognitive development and learning style orientation at the time of beginning second/foreign language study—the reading strategies of a 6-year-old learning to read in a second/foreign language are quite different from those of a 20-year-old learning to read in the second/foreign language in terms of world knowledge and reading strategies acquired in the first language.
- Language proficiency in the first language—readers with higher levels of proficiency in their first language are more able to transfer reading skills from their first language to their second/foreign language proficiency.
- Metacognitive knowledge of the first language structure, grammar, and syntax—learners who are more able to describe and discuss rules of their own language appear to be more proficient at improving their second/foreign language reading processes.
- Language proficiency in a second/foreign language—second/foreign language students need to have attained certain levels of proficiency in the second/foreign language in order for their reading to improve. A reading teacher's first step is to assess this level of proficiency for selection of appropriate materials.
- Degree of difference between the first language and a second/foreign language—the greater the differences between the first language and the second/foreign language (writing systems, rhetorical structures, appropriate strategies), the more difficult it is to acquire a high level of reading proficiency in the second/foreign language.
- Cultural orientations—attitudes towards text and purposes for reading; types of reading skills and strategies used in the first language; types of reading skills and strategies used or appropriate in the second/foreign language; beliefs about the reading process (use of inference, memorization, nature of comprehension); knowledge of text types in the first language (formal schemata); background knowledge (content schemata) all influence success in reading in the second/foreign language.

Some second/foreign language reading researchers (e.g., Nunan, 1991) have suggested that second/foreign language readers may have a tendency to rely on top-down aspects of reading comprehension because they do not understand the vocabulary (words) in the text. This top-down view of how reading occurs in a second/foreign language is very much in vogue today. However, Paran (1996) has remarked that good readers may not rely on hypothesis formation and

prediction as much as is commonly thought. Visual input and bottom-up processing during reading may be of greater importance than first thought. Paran (1996, p. 29) has observed that second/foreign readers may rely more on context and guessing because the second/foreign language reader "has to compensate for the lack of good linguistic skill." As a result of this, one of the goals of second/foreign language reading instruction, according to Paran (1996), would be to enhance the readers' bottom-up skills. Paran (1996, p. 29) continued: "When L2 [second/foreign language] readers become more efficient, they need to rely on context support less and less." This observation may make sense because when first language readers read a text they have, as Eskey (1988) has observed, already acquired automatic word identification that requires no conscious cognitive effort. However, this automatic recognition of words does not happen for second/foreign language readers, especially beginners. Therefore, it seems logical that exercises be provided in order to compensate for this deficiency. Paran (1996) has suggested that word recognition exercises be incorporated in a reading program for beginning readers in a second/foreign language that encourage development of these automatic processes.

Beginning second/foreign language readers often become more focused on individual words (bottom-up) than would more fluent readers until they have built up a critical mass of language knowledge (Grabe, 1986). However, by relying on the text for meaning, these beginning readers may not always make successful interpretations about the author's intended meaning. This is because the writer of the text may have made certain assumptions about the background knowledge a reader will bring to the text.

One of the best definitions of reading that I have seen is the following:

Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation (from: Anthony, H. Pearson, P., & Raphael, T. (1993, p. 284).

It really sums up all of what is presented in this article about the reading process. The reading process involves the reader in *active* (my emphasis) interaction with what is presented in the text. The reader brings important past experiences to the text, and encodes the meaning of the text based on his/her prior experiences.

## Discussion

### *Teaching Method Example*

A major problem less skilled readers have while reading is that they do not often engage in comprehension monitoring. That is, they do not notice that they do not understand what they are reading. Consequently, these less skilled readers should take a more strategic approach to reading. This section outlines one activity (see Farrell, 2002, for more activities) that teachers of second/foreign language reading can use when teaching these strategies to their students.

### *Predicting*

Prediction is linked to the strategy of activating prior knowledge. Prediction creates anticipation and gets students thinking about previous experiences they may have had about the topic *before* they read about it. Research has shown that good readers use prediction as they continue to read into a story by seeking to confirm or adjusting earlier made intuitions about the topic. So, prediction works before and while reading.

Prediction asks students to guess what will happen next in the story (from chapter headings, and sub-headings). Prediction involves the readers in active interaction with the text by making them think about what they have read and what they will read next.

The following steps may be useful for teachers to consider when designing exercises/activities for prediction:

- Step 1: Prepare a text on the overhead projector
- Step 2: Show the students the title/picture/first line/first paragraph. Have students predict what the text is about or what is going to happen next (narrative). Teachers can use questions such as "What do you think this text will be about? Why? Can you support your statement?" The purpose is not to get the correct answer but to encourage student thinking and participation. Teachers then write student responses on the board and then show the next section (on the OHT) to confirm or reject student responses. The teacher checks the students' responses.
- Step 3: The teacher repeats the cycle of Step 2.

The purposes of training students in using prediction are as follows: it motivates the student, it increases comprehension, it helps students to share peer knowledge/reasoning processes and it gives responsibility of comprehension to the students.

Prediction is a strategy used throughout the reading process (pre-, during- and post-reading). The procedure includes using the cover of the book, chapter headings, using past knowledge, and using the text. Pre-reading activities include having the students guess what will come up in the lesson based on their prior experiences with the topic. During-reading prediction procedures have the students use the text itself, and any pictures or illustrations that confirm (or adjust) predictions made during reading. Post-reading prediction procedures include having students make adjustments based on their reading of the text. At this post stage the students confirm (or adjust) predictions made before the reading. In this way, pre-, during- and post-reading activities are linked together to give a coherent understanding of the text.

Sections of this paper first appeared in Farrell, T. S. C. (2002). *Planning Lessons for a Reading Class*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

### Implications

Teachers of reading are urged to remember the following points when preparing effective second/foreign language reading lessons (from Farrell, 2002):

1. The reader brings something important to the text—previously acquired schemata. These schemata are networks of prior interpretations and they become the basis for comprehension. The text is filtered through these pre-existing schemata and the reader will try to match these pre-existing schemata with what he/she reads in the text.
2. The meaning of the text is constructed by the reader. The reader actively tries to make connections between the text and what he/she already knows about the world based on his/her cultural values, native language and discourse processes.
3. The process of comprehension is a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes. When the reader tries to comprehend there is a “bouncing back-and-forth” between the reader and the text, between a readers’ top-down knowledge of the topic and the text. Comprehension is then reached. If it is not, readers will make readjustments until comprehension is reached.
4. The teacher of reading should provide training in both the top-down and bottom-up processes. However, if the students are seen as stronger in one area, then compensatory instruction may need to be directed to the deficit area.

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