

READING: THE OPEN DOOR

Rosa Maria Neves da Silva - UFMG

Reading has been analyzed as the most crucial point in teaching a foreign language. Not because it is considered a difficult subject for the learner, but because of the implications it carries in relation to areas like speaking and writing. *When* and *how* to read have been discussed over and over and no evident proof about the best answer has been found. So, methods and issues have shown a great variety of interpretations and have tried several means of solving the problem.

As Rivers says, the fact that the most modern approaches for the teaching of a foreign language stress the oral skills above all, many of these active methods have been understood as neglecting reading.

Well known teaching methods such as the Audio-Lingual and the Audio-Visual methods have led the students to listen to and speak a foreign language simply assuming that these students are supposed to talk to native speakers immediately after they leave the classroom and that the colloquial expressions and basic structures learned are enough for this communication. It is proved, however, that the social context of many countries does not provide this chance of meeting a native speaker everywhere and that language learning is not only or essentially based on the assumption of oral communication. On the contrary, a complete learning of any language requires more knowledge than the simple communication through dialogue patterns, for the simple reason that although every language is primarily spoken, it is largely and necessarily used for cultural and social purposes.

Reading is, then, a major issue to allow the learner to enter the complete world of a foreign language.

The early stage of learning, as well as the dialogue-communication purpose of learning can perfectly be held on the basis of repetition, construction of structures and pronunciation, but reading can never be dissociated from the stage of oral practice. It is known that although much emphasis was put on the two oral steps of listening and speaking, most scholars are now concerned about the *process* of reading and its implications. It is basically necessary to understand the way each person learns how to read, the goals one has when reading, and finally the techniques that can be applied to each case.

Fries points out that the student is "developing a considerable range of habitual responses to a specific set of patterns of graphic shapes" when reading, which means that once learning how to read, one has to recognize symbols, place them into patterns, get the particular sets of significance and through all these things get the primary goal of reading, i.e., the comprehension of the expressed idea.

In a general sense, it also means the recognition of the basic words or word groups in the text as the source for the content of the text. As the word groups and letter combinations vary from language to language, the learner of reading has to get used to them through a process which can allow him to interpret the way the native speaker uses to express universal or particular ideas.

Valette says that "reading is the one skill students may occasionally use when they have left the classroom. It is also the skill which is retained the longest." Since it is the only step that can be found everywhere in the native way of use, reading remains more in the students' mind than any other step in foreign language learning. Besides, reading is the clue to any general view

of the language incorporating ideas, grammar, structure, printing at the same time.

Structuralists once considered it an association of words and sounds. For them, any kind of writing is just a representation of sounds and reading is decoding these sounds. But not all the languages have a direct phonological representation of sounds and English is obviously one of those. English sounds can be represented in several ways of letter combinations. Hence, this new "medium of expression" as Falk says, does not show an one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds. In fact, the English language has a gap between sound and writing.

Transformalists consider that writing is not a representation of sounds and reading does not require going to the sound to get the meaning.

Psycholinguists say that reading seems to be not a matter of decoding sounds but getting meaning directly through the words. For them, letters are not matched to sounds when one is reading. The faster reader tends to read visually but does not go to the sound.

In fact, reading implies a grapho-phonemic clue which does not go into the sound. Sound, associated only to the whole word form, and the fast recognition of syntactic and semantic markers make up the process of reading.

Thonis interprets reading as a "visual symbol system superimposed on auditory language." She is surely placing reading as a concrete symbol system - a physical subject while the oral material relies on a mental image. Speech is understood as a means to produce this mental image physically - as a physical apparatus decoding an idea. Thonis also cites reading as the "receptive aspect of written language."

On this basis, it seems logical that the first step on

learning how to read has to be the sound-symbol relationship and its recognition. Hence, reading can be said to be a device to develop a mental process which includes the learning of grammar and structure, besides the phonological aspects.

The Purposes of Reading

In a foreign language classroom, reading acquires another aspect and a more delicate purpose rather than the ones it is supposed to be used to in a native language class. Instead of being a new device for developing a better knowledge of the language, it is here a device used to *teach* the language. The purposes of its use, then, have to be established. Scholars have given emphasis to the fact that reading can teach syntactic meaning and the following reasons are related as the basis for the statement:

- reading is decoding as opposite to speaking and writing (encoding);
- the psychological reality of certain aspects of transformational description of syntax helps the selection and preparation of reading materials;
- reading requires syntactic meaning.

Although it has been very difficult to point out the universal aspects of reading comprehension, and although this fact has been the cause for many difficulties in the establishment of a complete method for teaching reading, it is inside the three areas of meaning in reading comprehension (lexical, structural and cultural) that the teacher has to find his goal and his way.

The teacher must be aware that reading can teach speech. If one remembers that speech is made by producing a group of words at once in a meaningful situation, then he will place reading as a major

device. Nobody speaks by sounding a series of separate sounds, but by producing a sequence of them. Phoneticians have said that, in many cases, nobody can produce a single sound in isolation and that the pronunciation of an isolated letter can be the cause for many errors and misunderstanding.

The process of "sounding out" is defended by some teachers and corresponds to the pronunciation of sounds in isolation which causes its main difficulty. For this process, one has to use a method named "phonics." This process emphasizes the association of letters with sounds, and each letter is claimed to 'say' a certain sound. If the purpose of reading at the time it is being taught is only the ability to produce sounds, to exercise the phonological and physical process, this method can be used although much attention has to be given to the phonetic features and the problems described above have to be carefully watched to a point they can be avoided. A teacher when using a "phonics" method cannot have word meaning or syntactic meaning as a primary goal. For this simple reason, this approach carries the most disadvantages. Its tendency is to be a linguistic device more than a foreign language learning device.

Another point claims that reading can teach structure signals. Usually, when learning a foreign language, the student tends to read by getting the content words of the selection. By using the simple kind of question-answer exercise, a teacher can call his attention to the grammatical markers which constitute the linking units for the content words. Grammatical markers like prepositions or adverbs must receive the most attention. Differences in meaning can be shown through changing these markers. While reading, the student can get the correct use of these signals, for any learner must have in mind that content words with no linking might be uncorrectly understood.

As Thonis says, reading requires both language and thinking. Thinking is acquired through the content words but language involves the grammatical signals. Those markers are responsible for the appearance of the grammatically correct surface structure but also for the difference in the underlying structure. Students must be taught the recognition of differences in the deep structure: when learning reading in their own languages, the student has already got his grammatical patterns, but the non-native speaker has to deal with the interference of his own native language . The student must then, be able to recognize the grammatical markers with the correct meaning. As an example, one can remember the problem of prepositions, which can lead the reader to a complete misunderstanding of the context.

No doubt is left about the role of reading to teach culture. Culture is understood as the development of people, a nation, a civilization, a society. Culture is the history, the science, the literature which describes a society. Thonis says that "the literature of any society reveals the values, the conflicts, and the experiences, both past and present, of its members."

The role of reading here, is then that of making the reader recognize, understand and analyze this environment which is in the whole far from him and his own. The use of different symbols, of significant images, a strange vocabulary, or a complete figurative description of facts and people provides a visual exercise as well as it motivates the student for deepening appreciation and gives him enjoyment while developing the reader's attitudes and interests and thinking.

Rivers pointed out that "for development of fluent reading, the student must be encouraged to read a great deal. This will only be possible if the subject matter of readers is of real interest to him and suitable for his age level." We know that

nothing is better than literature and history to attract the student, for they give him the feeling of development while understanding the subject. At the same time, it requires a careful evaluation of levels for it will be almost impossible for the student to get advantages from a higher degree than that one he is able to get. Literature has to be shown step by step, slowly but efficiently. Besides an in-depth of a society's history and behavior, literature is a source for developing vocabulary apart from that one which makes the student practice vocabulary as an immediate means of communication in the classroom. On the contrary, vocabulary acquisition here is a major development for writing well - not only writing daily colloquial expressions, but words that can express the learner's own thought about the most various subjects. However, we must not forget that the use of literary texts is one of the major controversial areas in reading.

On the whole, we understand that reading can be used for two purposes:

- a) the student can read for culture acquisition, i.e., he will not be concerned about the language, but only about the facts presented by the selection;
- b) the student can read for both purposes - the language and the culture - and the teaching of the language will be regarded as one of his basic goals.

In the first case, the learner can even use translated texts, but we find it a secondary step on the use of reading literature (and literature is understood as magazines, newspapers and books that express the society's ideas).

In the second case, however, reading has to be made in the original language for one is not only concerned about the facts,

but basically about the presentation of them through the structure and the vocabulary of the target language.

In either case, reading must be viewed as the first concrete open door to the most general and fundamental aspects of language.

Bibliography

- Decannay, F.R. and Bowen, J.D. *Techniques and Procedures in Second Language Teaching*. New York: Alemar, Phoenix Publishing House Inc., 1967.
- Falk, Julia S. *Linguistics and Language*. Lexington, Mass. : Xerox College Publishing, 1973.
- Macnamara, John. "Comparative Studies of Reading and Problem Solving in two Languages," *TESOL*, Vol. IV, N.2, p. 107.
- Morris, William, "Teaching Second Language Reading at the Advanced Level: Goals, Techniques, and Procedures," Vol. IV, N.1, p.17.
- Rivers, Wilga, M. *Teaching Foreign Languages Skills*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Smith, Frank. *Reading*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Thonis, Eleanor Wall. *Teaching Reading to Non-English Speakers*. New York: Collier-Macmillan International, 1970.
- Valette, Rebecca M. and Allen, Edward David. *Modern Language Classroom Techniques*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972.
- Wilson, Lois Irene. "Reading in the ESOL Classroom - a Technique for Teaching Syntactic Meaning," *TESOL*, December, 1973.