

Learning How to Cope with Reading in English for Academic Purposes in 26 Hours

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This paper describes classroom procedures for developing a set of abilities with which Brazilian professionals can cope with reading needs in English in the shortest possible time. The approach is based on the notion that, since the students are already literate in their L1 (Portuguese), the task of coping with the new language is not as complex as it has been traditionally implied. This view stems from the reading universals hypothesis, which assumes that there are some reading strategies that can be transferred from L1 to L2. Since the typical Brazilian professional is a 'false beginner in the study of EFL, he normally has a substantial amount of dormant lexical and syntactic competence which can be readily put to use to achieve the desired goal. Linguistic aspects involved in processing the foreign language are approached by means of a break-down technique of simplification, together with a set of reading activities aimed at developing 'the guessing game'.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the approach to reading for academic studies taken at the Sociedade Brasileira de Cultura Inglesa (SBCI), São Paulo, Brazil - one of the largest schools in the world dedicated to the teaching of EFL. The course 'Reading Skills for Academic Studies' is aimed at Brazilian professionals who need to read specialized materials in order to be acquainted with the latest developments in their fields of work, and who, because of work overload, are usually in no position to afford more than one 100 minute meeting per week. Given this logistic constraint, plus the fact that one semester of studies at SBCI is normally composed of 16 weeks, the total number of classroom hours was limited to 26.

Once the possible study time was defined, we embarked on the task of finding the most representative types of written discourse and the most productive activities to be employed in those 26 classroom hours. This paper is not concerned with the criteria for text selection, and will instead describe the main classroom procedures adopted, together with their underlying information processing theories.

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THE READING UNIVERSALS HYPOTHESIS

Various authors have described the reading behaviour of foreign-language readers. Clarke (1979) studied adult Spanish speakers reading in Spanish and English. Cziko (1979) analyzed the ability to read French of English-speaking students as compared to native French-speaking students. Rigg (1977) studied oral miscues of Arabic, Samoan, Navajo, and Spanish native speakers reading in English.

It is interesting to see that in all these studies, both experienced and inexperienced foreign-language readers appear to be processing information in ways very similar to native readers. The inexperienced reader in L2, for instance, is said to suffer from a 'conviction that he *has* to process every word if he is to understand anything at all.' (Eskey 1973). The student tends to rely exclusively on graphic information in a strictly myopic, serial, bottom-up perusal of the printed line. Another researcher confirms this observation:

Students with less competence in French did not use contextual information and instead employed a more bottom-up strategy of relying primarily on graphic formation. (Cziko 1979:101)

Conversely, experienced readers in both L1 and L2 seem to take full advantage of their previous knowledge by processing larger chunks of text, making predictions about what is to come, and sampling the passage to confirm, modify, or reject their conceptual hypothesis.

These findings have given origin to the theory that reading processes have universal characteristics. This view, known as the *Reading Universals Hypothesis*, is strongly supported by Rigg (1977), Clarke (1979) and particularly by Goodman (1979) who wrote:

... it would seem that the reading process will be much the same for all languages with minor variations to accommodate the specific characteristics of orthography used and the grammatical structure of the language. (p. 27)

THE TRANSFER OF READING ABILITIES

If the Reading Universals Hypothesis is valid, we would logically expect that once the student has learned to employ reading strategies in one language they would show to some extent in the other language. It is interesting to see that this is precisely the case as reported by many teachers and investigators (West 1960; Lambert and Tucker 1972; Al-Rufai 1976; Alderson et al 1977; Lopez 1977; Chitravelu 1980). Moreover, it has been found that training students to improve their reading in EFL also substantially improved their reading in the vernacular.

But what is actually transferred between the two languages? Let us explore this issue by entertaining some speculations. In the first place, learning to read a foreign language should be easier for someone already literate in another language, regardless of how similar or dissimilar it is. In the broadest possible terms, the ability to see meaning in symbols on paper (either ideographic or alphabetic) needs to be acquired only once. Thus in our Brazilian situation, our students, who have learned to read in an alphabetic script, would not have to 'relearn' the principles of the alphabet. In this

sense it is safe to state that the more mechanical aspects of reading in English (including the left-to-right sequence) transfer directly from Portuguese.

From a cognitive standpoint, it also makes sense to assume that reading for either entertainment or information are universal reading purposes. Thus, scanning, skimming, spotting central and secondary ideas, inferring non-explicit information, deducing meaning from context, comprehending the writer's intention, etc. would also seem to be reading activities employed by experienced readers in all languages.

From the point of view of rhetorical features, we again seem to be faced with universals of some sort which are normally acquired in the vernacular. Some of the things scientists do to communicate their ideas to other scientists include:

- sequencing events in time
- giving examples
- relating ideas
- comparing and contrasting concepts
- conceding, affirming and denying
- changing focus
- giving reason, purpose and result

And this list is by no means exhaustive.

Irrespective of the language used in scientific discourse (whether English, French, Indonesian or Chinese), basic cognitive and methodological processes of scientific research would seem to constrain the author to employ similar rhetorical features in the writing of science and technology (Widdowson 1974). We are still far from being able to provide conclusive evidence that discourse structure is common to different languages. However, at least in the context of science and technology, the possibility emerges that this is the case. Mackay & Mountford (1978) claim this possibility to be a fact:

... the processes and procedures of science are the same no matter what the mother tongue of the scientist concerned ...(since)... scientific discourse represents a way of conceptualising reality and a way of communicating which must, if it is to remain scientific, be independent of different languages and different cultures.

However, some authors have taken the position that rhetorical features of scientific discourse have to be taught to all adult foreign students. Their contention seems to be that because these students cannot read in English, they must know nothing about how writers convey information and how written information is most efficiently retrieved. In our own particular situation, we are confronted with the fact that the Brazilian professional not only possesses a substantial knowledge of his subject matter, but also knows how scientific written discourse is normally realized in Portuguese.

Consequently, it seems that, rather than attempting to teach rhetoric in English, a more effective approach would be to start by taking advantage of what the learner already knows unconsciously (Ausubel 1968). Thus, the first step would be to develop an awareness of how these rhetorical features are realized in Portuguese (L1) and then show the way in which they are put to use in English (L2).

When confronted with a new type of discourse written in L1, experienced readers tend to employ bottom-up strategies, i.e., they do not merely sample the text to confirm their guesses about what is to come (a top-down view), but process written information at the word level almost. This will no doubt recur when faced with discourse written in a foreign language. Then the teacher's task will be to make experienced readers aware of how they put reading universals to use in their native language, and how it is possible to transfer those abilities into the foreign language situation. As a result, the students will tend to reduce the amount of linear and serial word processing and will increase the amount of hypothesis-testing.

COPING WITH THE NEW LANGUAGE SYSTEM

Learning to read in a foreign language certainly involves a great deal more than transferring reading universals from the native language. What was stressed in the previous section was the fact that we do not necessarily have to start from scratch every time we learn how to read in a new language. The really unknown territory is the linguistic system of the foreign language. But even here we are confronted with some previous knowledge.

The Brazilian High School program includes six years of English studies and, in addition, all would-be University students must take an English component test in the University Qualification Exams. The type of students we are concerned with, then, have reached a 'threshold level' which is entirely based on a knowledge of the language system, but not on how this system is effectively put to use in communicative discourse. The typical Brazilian professional already knows something about English lexis and syntax, a knowledge which is usually the result of meaningless rote learning.

The teacher, then, does have some raw material to start with in dealing with the linguistic aspects of reading in English. His task will be to reactivate this dormant knowledge by organizing the array of data and helping the student see how what had been up to that moment 'useless knowledge' can be readily employed to disclose meaning from discourse written in English. A suggested means of doing this involves the *breakdown approach*.

THE BREAKDOWN APPROACH

The breakdown approach to reading in English for Academic Purposes can be summarized as follows:

1. A piece of discourse of the type the students must read in the course of their professional work is initially simplified (a) by breaking complex sentences into a series of simpler ones showing clear clause boundaries; and (b) by editing syntax and lexis to make it closer to that of the students' first language.
2. These meaningful chunks are gradually displayed on the overhead projector (OHP), the main ideas being presented first, followed by supporting details.
3. Immediately after this, the students are shown the original text so that they can see how the writer's original message was realized on the page. Attention is paid to rhetorical features, linking devices, anaphoric reference, redundancy and other relevant discourse features.

The first part of the scheme above involves simplification. The criteria employed in the simplification of texts will now be discussed in some detail.

Simplification Criteria

Reading skills have been found to improve with material which approximates closely to what the readers already know, i.e. the oral language in the case of L1, and the vernacular in the case of foreign language readers (Ruddell 1968). Thus, Webster (1977: 14) recommends that 'beginning readers should be given the advantage of natural, easily flowing language in grammatical patterns with which they are familiar.'

I have attempted to create familiarity both at the syntactic and at the lexical level by approximating the target text to a text which is closer to what the students already know (i.e. Portuguese).

For example:

- (a) The tense marker in Portuguese is always a suffix attached to the verb stem. Brazilian learners, therefore, have difficulty with English structures which do not follow this pattern. Thus,

The minister underwent more problems in
(Portuguese: *O ministerio enfrentou mais problemas em*)

is easier for them to comprehend than

Nowhere did the minister undergo more problems than in

- (b) Technical maintenance manuals tend to include sentences which do not follow the NP-VP sequence, which is the most regular sequence in both English and Portuguese, e.g.

Tapped off of the primary of T1 is the primary of T2 whose secondary is the source for the +15v regulated bias supply.

This sentence can be understood with greater facility if:

- the two concepts are presented separately;
- the first concept is expressed in a more frequent pattern; and
- the technical item *tapped off* is replaced by a counterpart which is similar to Portuguese (i.e., *connect*):

The primary of T2 is connected out of the primary of T1. The secondary of T2 is the source for the +15v regulated bias supply.

As can be seen, simplification procedures attempt to handle both syntax and lexis. Let us look at each one in more detail.

A Syntactic Simplification

Experience has shown that the most crucial areas tend to be compound nouns, ING-constructions, and a combination of the two.

A.1 Compound Nouns

When the original passage contains items like:

The five year contract problem
(Portuguese: *O problema do contracto que termina ao fim de cinco anos*)

the students are first presented with:

The problem of the contract which terminates at the end of five years

Similarly, a phrase like:

An ant behaviour analysis textbook

is normally presented as:

A textbook about the analysis of the behaviour of ants

A.2 ING-Constructions

Phrases like:

activities involving comprehension

might be wrongly processed as *Activities are involving comprehension*, since -ING is closely associated with the Portuguese -ando / -endo / indo, i.e.

cantando = singing; morrendo = dying; sentindo = feeling

A possible approach to this is to present the students first with:

activities which involve comprehension

A.3 Combination of A.1 and A.2

a wind speed measuring instrument

is first presented as

an instrument which measures the speed of the wind

B Lexical Simplification

Applying the Portuguese approach, it is assumed that

He fractured his cranium. (Portuguese *crânio* = skull)

is simpler to process than

He cracked his skull

Thus the view is taken that words like:

explicate, veracity, obfuscate, occult, incertitude, castigate, monopolize, expedite

do not present comprehension difficulty. And, by the same token, such words as:

bring about, shrinkage, overhead, speed up, straighten out, layout, slipping, derricking, slewing, turn-over, gating

are difficult for speakers of Latin languages. Thus care must be taken that they are dealt with adequately. For example, the sentence

The heavy rains brought on floods.

would be simplified as

The heavy rains caused inundations

From Simplified to Original Discourse

The activities described above have been defined as a process of lexical and syntactic substitution, as a linkage between the usage available to the writer and the one available to the reader (Widdowson 1978). But the simplification of usage may lead onto a distortion of use, to employ Widdowson's terms. Because of this point, the simplified version is immediately followed by the original passage. Furthermore, the students are not exposed to the simple clause version more than once. The approach centres on the clause as the minimal information unit, but this does not mean that we *stay* at that level throughout the lesson. The various clauses forming the genuine sentence are immediately put together into their original form, and the students are made aware of the syntactic changes involved in the process.

This point can be illustrated with the following example, which is a transparency prepared as part of a reading lesson:

A new system of communication had been invented.

It was the electric telegraph.

Engineers were installing cables between Paris and Berlin.

They wanted to telegraph messages between the capitals of France, Belgium and Germany.

A new communication system - the electric telegraph - had recently been invented, and engineers were laying cables between Paris and Berlin to telegraph messages between the capital cities of France, Belgium and Germany.

Meaningful Learning

The procedures described so far are intended to produce a text which is as simple as possible for this particular group of learners, and at the same time is designed to facilitate their progression to the original text. The simplification does not, however, guarantee comprehension of either version of the text. The procedures so far aim at encouraging the students to recognise what they already know. Comprehension, however, involves the learner in reorganising pieces of information and relating them to his previous knowledge in order to produce new information. This type of learning has been introduced in the breakdown technique by inserting discovery tasks which lead the student onto the graphic cues in the extract that act as signposts for meaning. These discovery tasks have the specific objective of developing in the students two broad kinds of communicative abilities, which I shall distinguish as micro- and macro-abilities. Thus I shall talk about the micro-ability to deal with lexis at inter- and intra-sentential level, and about the macro-ability to process larger units of information at various discourse levels.

A Sense Relations

In this section we will describe the types of activity which are displayed to develop in students the ability to disclose lexical meanings by processing sense relations of two types: A.1 paradigmatic, and A.2 syntagmatic.

A.1 Paradigmatic Sense Relations

By paradigmatic is meant 'the relationship that a linguistic element has with elements with which it may be replaced or substituted' (Palmer 1976). Thus, when confronted with the two sentences:

Engineers were installing cables. (simplified)

Engineers were laying cables. (original)

the student is expected to discover the sense of *laying* by being encouraged to relate it to *installing*. The assumption here is, of course, that the latter item can be easily related to his knowledge of Portuguese (i.e. *instalar*). Thus the learner would first comprehend the item *installing* appearing in the simplified sentence and then he would relate the sense thus obtained to *laying* in the original sentence. This example illustrates an instance of a kind of synonymy which has been described as 'context-dependent' (Lyons 1968).

A.2 Syntagmatic sense relations

According to Palmer (1976), by syntagmatic is meant 'the relationship that a linguistic element has with other elements in the stretch of language in which it occurs'. In this case the student is expected to discover the sense of unknown lexis by relating terms intra-sententially. Thus in the sentence

1 2 3 4

Stockbrokers were buying and selling shares in the Paris and Berlin stock
 5
exchanges.

we assume that 2 and 3 are known items (experience has shown that this is generally the case). The task is then to discover the sense of 1, 4 and 5. We also assume that comprehension is not a dichotomy of the YES/NO kind. That is, rather than having either full comprehension or no comprehension, the reader is most likely to obtain something between these two extremes. Consequently, in the above sentence it is possible to obtain some degree of comprehension without the overt knowledge of 1, 4 and 5. Hence we could attempt to relate the three unknown items to three categories, which in Fillmore's terms (1968) would be:

Agentive Accusative Locative

Then, by using his knowledge of syntax, the student could arrive at the following:

(Some people) were buying and selling (something) in the Paris and Berlin (somewhere).

This is already a degree of comprehension which will serve as a stepping-stone for the final objective. (It may be the case, of course, that this level of comprehension is enough for his reading purpose.) Notice that now the student is in a position to deduce the referential meaning of the complete sentence by looking up only one word in the dictionary. In the actual classroom situation, the teacher would provide the translation. Giving the learners the translation of *shares* would, for instance, be sufficient for them to complete the task.

B Discourse Relations

The sense relations described above have been associated with a micro-ability whereby the student has to focus his deductive ability on individual items in order to be able to relate them to each other and thus disclose meaning. Discovering the sense of logical connectors, however, involves a somewhat more complex ability. The student is now required to relate clauses, sentences, or even paragraphs, in order to decide on the way in which logical connectors are put to communicative use. Thus, this ability involves a discourse *macro*-ability where the student is processing much larger units of information than in the cases previously described.

An example of how this macro-ability could be developed is shown in the following extract taken from the first lesson of a reading course:

Two sections of the telegraph line had just been completed. One section ran from Paris to Brussels and the other ran from Berlin to Aachen. The third cable, which would connect Brussels and Aachen, had not yet been laid, *SO THAT* it was not possible to send messages between Paris and Berlin all the way by telegraph.

To simplify the task of discovering the meaning of *so that* in this lesson, the student is first asked to recognize the communicative value of the clause following *so that*. Thus, immediately after being presented with the breakdown and the original paragraph, the student is given the following problem-solving activity (on OHP, in Portuguese):

A última ideia do parágrafo que começa com SO THAT é _____ das ideias anteriores.

(a) um conceito oposto (b) uma conclusão (c) uma causa

greater proportion of hypothesis-testing strategies in that he will be sampling a few cues here and there to disclose the new information which, as in the case above, he knows has the communicative value of a conclusion.

The inexperienced foreign language reader, on the other hand, is not helped at all by these communicative signals which he cannot decode. They are not signals for him, but just more words he has to process. He is therefore obliged to employ bottom-up strategies by carefully analyzing smaller chunks of information in order to attempt a logical relation between them.

DEVELOPING READING FLUENCY

The breakdown system is designed to lead the student from a simplified version to the original text. We cannot, however, stop there. To achieve fluency in reading in the L2, the student must be given the opportunity of practicing various types of comprehension abilities. According to Barrett's Taxonomy (in Clymer 1968: 58), these types are:

Literal

- recognition of details
- recognition of main ideas
- recognition of sequence
- recognition of cause and effect relationships

Reorganization

- classifying
- summarizing
- synthesizing

Inferential

- inferring supporting detail
- predicting outcome

Evaluation

- judgements of fact or opinion
- judgements of adequacy and validity

The tasks projected on the OHP take the traditional language-testing types (i.e. multiple choice, true and false, blank filling, subject-predicate matching, etc.). One important difference, however, is that since we are not interested in testing in the conventional sense of attempting to measure comprehension, the answers are not definite, but must be 'negotiated' in the class. This position encourages interesting group dynamics whereby the students (and the teacher) must provide logical arguments to support a possible answer. Besides doing away with the measuring concept involved in testing, the system of achieving a group consensus of opinion concerning the solution of each comprehension task is consistent with the view that meaning is not exact and therefore, on the page, ready to be grasped by the reader. Reading is a creative interaction between reader and writer through a text (Tierney and La Zansky 1980). Previous knowledge and the ability to relate old and new

information are crucial to effective reading, and these are practiced in groups while trying to agree on the best possible solution to a given problem-solving task.

The teaching procedures involved in this stage of the reading lesson will be illustrated with one instance taken from an early lesson in the course. A transparency with a testing type of question (say, multiple choice) is presented. The students are asked to attempt possible answers from what they remember from the previously presented text. This is not a memory recall activity, but in fact a way of creating doubts and questions in the reader's mind. Then the text is handed out to the students and they are asked to read it to clarify their doubts. As can be gathered, what looked like a simple memory recall issue was really a way of creating purposeful reading. Confronted with the task of answering the multiple-choice items, the students will unconsciously proceed to read purposefully and selectively. Thus they engage individually, in pairs, or in small groups, in the various sorts of reading activities which Pugh (1978) describes as scanning, skimming, receptive reading and responsive reading. Attempts have been made to include in the distractors semantic and syntactic areas which are known to be problematic for Portuguese-speaking students. Consider the following activity which is to be carried out in relation to the text below:

Match the number with the correct letter

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 1 The telegrams ... | 3 The agent ... | 5 The stockbrokers ... |
| 2 A pigeon ... | 4 The train ... | 6 Reuter ... |

- A ... received telegrams from Brussels.
- B ... delayed the messages.
- C ... could not be sent directly to Paris.
- D ... was a much faster way of communication.
- E ... took seven hours to get to Aachen.
- F ... wanted to improve their business.
- G ... had to send his pigeons to Brussels by train.
- H ... were very effective between Brussels and Aachen.
- I ... received telegrams from Paris.

A new system of communication - the electric telegraph - had recently been invented, and engineers were laying cables between Paris and Berlin to telegraph messages between the capital cities of France, Belgium and Germany. Two sections of the telegraph line had just been completed. One section ran from Paris to Brussels and the other ran from Berlin to Aachen. The third cable, which would connect Brussels and Aachen, had not yet been laid, so that it was not possible to send messages between Paris and Berlin all the way by telegraph. Telegrams from Paris, for example, were transmitted to Brussels; they were sent on by train to Aachen and the Aachen telegraph station then transmitted them to Berlin.

When Reuter investigated who was using the telegraph he discovered that it was mainly stockbrokers who were buying and selling shares in both the Paris and Berlin stock exchanges. He reasoned that they would like to get

information back and forth more rapidly and the slow trip between Aachen and Brussels was the cause of the delay. He knew that trains took 9 hours, while a carrier pigeon should take only about 2 hours. He therefore employed an agent to run his messenger service in Brussels and bought 40 pigeons in Aachen. He built a dove cote at his home in which some of the doves could live, and the Brussels agent kept the rest at his house.

On April 21st, 1850, Reuter started his pigeon post. He arranged for the Brussels agent to send the first message. Pigeons carry messages only one way: they are sent in baskets to the starting point of their journey and then they fly back home. Reuter sent some of his birds to Brussels. A list of the latest share prices on the French stock market was telegraphed to the Belgian capital. The Brussels agent wrote the prices on a sheet of very thin paper and put the list into a little silk bag. He tied the bag to a pigeon and sent the bird into the air.

(Adapted from Wymer 1976)

Let us consider item 3. The most logical answer is 3I (= *The agent received telegrams from Paris.*) However, the inexperienced foreign language reader may choose:

- F, if he does not have an adequate command of English possessive pronouns;
- A, if he has not comprehended that the agent lives in Brussels; or
- G, if he has not understood the above idea, plus the fact that carrier pigeons fly only back home.

A similar set of distractors operate for item 1, whose most logical answer is 1C (= *The telegrams could not be sent directly to Paris.*) Thus the inexperienced foreign reader might choose:

- D, if he cannot distinguish between *was* and *were*;
- B, if he does not understand the meaning of *delayed*; or
- H, if he has not comprehended that there was no telegraph line between Brussels and Aachen.

Notice that in the two items discussed the first distractors present 'syntactic traps'. The student who chooses them will learn valuable grammatical information when it is explained to him why those answers are wrong. The other four distractors shown above could be described as 'semantic traps'; and while trying to get out of these traps, the student is encouraged to purposefully read relevant sections in the text (i.e. receptive reading) to discover why he was not correct. This intensive reading will, many times, involve the various comprehension activities as described in Barrett's Taxonomy.

These approaches to the development and practice of reading comprehension strategies have been used with all the various types of problem-solving activities included in the lessons after the 'breakdown' is over. Thus the emphasis is placed not on getting the right answer, but on reflecting about the sorts of mental process which lead onto the commonly agreed 'correct' answer. *In short, we are more interested in the means used to achieve the goal, than in the goal itself.*

CONCLUSIONS

The classroom activities presented in this paper are aimed at developing a reading awareness by means of which the students can consciously put to use various psycholinguistic strategies to achieve their reading purpose.

The reading universals hypothesis claims that the reading act is basically the same in all languages. It then follows that a possible approach to reading in English for academic purposes is to strengthen the students' reading abilities in their native language, and then show them how these abilities can be transferred onto the foreign language situation.

In short, it is possible to teach foreign students how to cope with their reading needs in EFL in a very short time by:

- 1 bearing in mind what the students already know;
- 2 making them aware of what they can already do in L1;
- 3 showing them possible ways of improving their reading abilities in L1; and
- 4 teaching them how to transfer these abilities onto the L2 situation.

Much about the reading process is not yet clear; some facts have already been established; others are less generally accepted but seem to offer practical solutions to classroom procedures. This paper has presented an approach which seems to be successful in our own situation. The extent to which it could be extrapolated to other circumstances is for the reader to decide.

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