

# Woods and Trees: The Correction of Myopia in L2 Reading

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Neither L2 Materials writers nor applied linguists have addressed task-focus in qualitative terms. Instead they have confined their attention to comprehensiveness of coverage. However, it is argued here that a helpful orientation towards written text can only be fostered in learners when tasks are ordered systematically, with priority being given to global meanings.

## INTRODUCTION

In the conclusion to their state-of-the art review of reading in a foreign language, Williams and Moran (1989) point out that theoretical positions underpinning teaching materials derive mainly from outside the classroom, and call for more 'reflexion upon, and evaluation of, the practices of teachers and learners.' (p226).

I intend to describe my own observations of certain learner practices, to speculate about the origins of these, and to suggest implications for methodology and materials. My observations are subjective, though apparently shared by others, and the conclusions I draw remain unsubstantiated. Indeed they are not highly amenable to research, and only a carefully controlled, longitudinal study could possibly change their status. However I proceed in the belief that subjective impressions can have value provided that they are not presented in another guise.

## READING PROBLEMS

Amongst native speakers the questions "What are you reading?" or "What's it about?" are commonplace and unlikely to engender panic or confusion. For however tenuous the readers' grasp of detail they are unlikely to be thrown regarding the more general nature of the a text. But the same innocuous questions often appear to intimidate non-native readers. EFL learners who have just looked up from a reading text often respond to a casual enquiry about its general content by hurriedly looking down again, apparently in search of the answer. The action is almost reflex. Subsequent questioning may reveal that they have understood much of the detail, so the difficulty in this case appears to stem from poor strategy rather than inadequate language proficiency (see e.g. Alderson 1984). They seem to have approached the text in such a way that they have simply missed the "point".

This close focussing on detail (the trees) in such a way that the reader is unable to respond to the discourse as a whole (the wood) could be regarded as a sort of processing myopia, the cognitive equivalent of the optical problem. It is highly regrettable, for apart from special cases where only discrete parts of a text are relevant to the reader's purpose, as, for example, with bus timetables to a traveller, the general meaning(s) of a text are surely the most important, being superordinate.

That is not to say, of course, that the discrete parts are unimportant, merely that these rank lower in the hierarchy of meanings.

Put another way, if I give learners a joke to read which is slightly beyond their comprehension, I prefer that they recognise it as a joke, whilst not fully grasping the details, than vice versa. Similarly I will feel disappointed if learners understand most of a text yet fail to recognise it as, say, a letter to a newspaper. And I will certainly regard an inability to relay, very simply, the topic of a text after one reading as reflecting a fundamental reading deficiency.

Others have made similar observations. Williams and Moran (opp.cit.p.222) claim that Maingay (1983) is 'reflecting a widespread belief' when she says that foreign learners often adopt a laborious word-by-word approach to reading.

### TRANSFER OF TRAINING

I assume that the poor strategy which I have described is due, at least in part, to poor training. I think many teachers would agree that certain L2 methods/materials are the most likely cause of learners' preoccupation with detail, and excessive text-dependency. For many learners have been trained to anticipate intensive questioning related to words and sentences, and have consequently developed distorted reading strategies. Urquhart (1987:394) expresses doubts about 'deep comprehension', and suggests that the very close analysis of a text sometimes demanded of EFL readers is abnormal, and may lead to the adoption of abnormal strategies 'more akin to discourse analysis than reading'.

In the case of certain learner groups this sort of approach may even have carried over from L1 reading instruction too, where, for example, memorisation has been valued more highly than evaluation. Wallace (1989) implies something similar when she remarks that some learners view reading as a matter of decoding the marks on the page. She notes that illiterate learners, by contrast, "have not been corrupted by particular educational processes, which can encourage negative learning strategies, both in terms of language learning and learning to read." (opp.cit.p.279).

### CORRECTION OF THE PROBLEM

If this diagnosis is correct, and if we are concerned with assisting reading processes rather than achieving a series of reading products, we have to help learners to orientate to global meaning from the outset, to take a run at a text rather than to examine it in strictly linear, microscopic fashion. This means we must always include global tasks in L2 reading materials, and most importantly, we must always *put these in first place*. In this way EFL learners may eventually adopt a more natural orientation towards text, independently of constraining tasks.

## GLOBAL MEANING(S) AND RELATED READING TASKS

By global meanings I mean, simply, any meanings which are only properly conveyed by the complete text. A consideration of what these might include suggests the following: topic, gist, function, attitude of the writer, purpose of the writer and, in the case of narrative or instructions, sequence. By global tasks I mean those which relate to such meanings. They are not to be confused with such concepts as “higher-order skills” (for a discussion on this see Alderson and Lukmani 1989). In fact the general opinion seems to be that tasks relating to global meanings are easier than lower-level tasks. Both Cooper (1984) and Berman (1984) conclude, from separate studies, that lower-level meanings presented relatively more problems than higher-level meanings for their EFL readers. Grellet (1981) and Williams (1984) make similar, though apparently unsubstantiated, claims.

In recent years there has been widespread agreement about the necessity of attending to discursal levels of text, and teaching materials published in Britain invariably include tasks which focus on these. However, the criterion for their inclusion seems to have been comprehensiveness, for task *ordering* is usually unsystematic. Spratt (1985), for example, outlines the various skills for which training should be provided, and remarks that these should all be given coverage in the longer term, but not necessarily in one lesson.

Few language pedagogy theorists have discussed task focus in qualitative terms. Exceptions to this are Grellet and Williams, cited above. They advocate that global tasks should precede lower-level tasks, and give the reason that they are easier, and will assist learners with subsequent guesswork concerning the details of a text. But whilst I fully agree with the necessity of grading tasks, my own chief reason for favouring such an ordering is rather different, that is, the resulting washback effect on learners' reading strategies.

Grellet also appears to have in mind a specific type of global meaning, that is discourse function. In her summary of the approach to reading she is advocating she fills the global task slot thus: “Study of layout: title, length, pictures, typeface of the text.” But I think that a variety of task types could fill this slot, corresponding to the various types of global meaning outlined above.

### TASK TYPES

A survey of current teaching materials will provide plentiful examples of suitable global tasks. These may be more or less direct (ie may or may not employ metalanguage), and include the following:

Provide (or select from a number of given options) a suitable title for the text.

Describe (or select from a number of given options) the function of the text.

- Suggest (or select from a number of given options) the identity of the writer.
- Describe (or select from a number of given options) the tone of the text.
- Describe (or select from a number of given options) the possible purpose of the text.
- Rearrange a jumbled gross chronology corresponding to the text.
- Rearrange a jumbled gross summary corresponding to the text.
- Select a diagram/ picture corresponding to the text.
- Correct an erroneous diagram/ picture corresponding to the text.
- Describe a personal response to the text.
- Relate the text to personal experience.
- Match the text to a picture of the writer (distractors given).
- Respond to the text in an appropriate non-linguistic way.
- Evaluate the text according to given criteria.

As has been frequently noted, specific task selection will depend upon the nature of the individual text. But what all these tasks have in common is that they can only be completed successfully on the basis of a global comprehension, and the content of the tasks should be at a sufficiently gross level to enable the learners to address them upon first reading and without further reference to the text. Only if readers in training are constrained in this way will they eventually acquire more helpful perspectives, and shed the tendency to close scrutiny of text mentioned earlier.

On the whole current reading materials include global tasks but do not assign these systematically to first position. Exceptions to this are Vincent (1984) and Maingay (1983). The former recommends a first reading for general meaning in the introduction to her textbook, and includes a 'Read for ideas' section immediately after each text. However, some of the tasks in this section are not sufficiently gross to be done without further reference to the text. Maingay, on the other hand, specifically instructs her readers to complete the general tasks 'without referring to the text'.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that many L2 learners appear to have developed distorted reading strategies, which prevent them from apprehending text holistically, and suggested that L2 (and possibly L1) reading comprehension materials which give priority to detail are to blame for this.

If teaching materials are to help foster good reading strategies, and not simply assist understanding of specific texts, then tasks relating to global meaning should always appear in first position. Although current teaching materials do not neglect global meaning (indeed it is the fashionable area of treatment), tasks are not generally systematically ordered.

In summary, I believe that we should aim for a situation where L2 readers apprehend the general nature of a text upon first reading, and do not fail to see the wood for the trees. We can best train them to do this by designing *and sequencing* tasks accordingly.

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