DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 119 527 FL 007 555

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TITLE Clarifying Goals in the Teaching of Reading - Teaching a Foreign Language: From the Reading Specialist's Viewpoint.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; Workshops based on this paper were presented at Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (New York, NY, April 11-12, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Applied Linguistics; *Cognitive Processes; Deep Structure; *Language Instruction; Language Teachers; Learning Processes; Oral Communication; Psycholinguistics; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; *Second Language Learning; Surface Structure; Syntax; Written Language

ABSTRACT

From the perspective of a reading consultant, the processes of thinking and reading apply to efficient learning. Language teachers should know: (1) the difference between surface structure and deep meaning of an utterance, (2) the importance of "affect" on learning: the reader's personal involvement with the material and with its presentation, colored by prior knowledge of the subject and attitude toward it; and (3) theories regarding cognitive patterns in analysis of material, vocabulary load, and repetition interval. Teachers should be aware of linguistic differences between written and oral communication which cause writing to be variously interpreted by readers, since surface structure available to the reader is merely a representation of deep meaning. Discrepancies between teacher impressions and student mastery, arising from inaccurate perceptions, can be expected and eradicated. Recent studies suggest: (1) teaching idioms and larger units of meaning; (2) teaching multiple uses of vocabulary from the outset, and teaching relational words such as prepositions first, because of their frequency in patterns; and (3) subsequently teaching content words in context through synonymy. Ambiguity must also be provided for. Noting patterns of comprehension, based on what the subject is, what the opinion about the subject is, and how it is presented when reduced to a single unitary meaning, is one approach to improving reading efficiency. (Author/CLK)

"I see a voice..., and I can hear my Thisby's face."
Shakespeare, Midsummer Night's Dream
Act V, sc. 1.

Teaching a Foreign Language: From the Reading Specialist's Viewpoint

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Question: How much does a foreign language teacher need to know about reading?

Answer: At least as much -if not more - than an English teacher.

Let's start with the great comic line in the title of this article. When the confused weaver, Bottom, presenting a play at the Duke's wedding in Midsummer Night's Dream, blurts out, "I see a voice," do you know what he means? you certainly do, even though what he means is not spelled out in the words he uses.

His real meaning is carried, as in all speech, by the pitch, stress, and pause of the delivery process, in the background of the entire situation, in what he had said and done earlier, and, ultimately, on what the audience makes of it. No matter how he tangles his words, we know that he's saying that he sees and hears Thisby. In the lingo of the transformational-grammarians, how he says it is "surface structure," and what he means is "deep structure." The difference between what we mean and how we interpret such communication lies in the realm of psycholinguistics.

Teachers of foreign languages need to know about these theories that explain linguistic structures of English in a general way in addition to their customary expertise for analyzing the surface structure of the languages they teach,

In all languages, the major difference between writing and speaking is that oral signals are replaced by conventional punctuation and by structure words (e.g. therefore, finally). A sophisticated reader learns to process the written signals, interpreting the deep meaning as accurately as possible, and with the least effort.

This reading process is influenced affectively and cognitively.

The affective, the personal and emotional side of reading, has regained attention of late. Going beyond what used to be called "motivate the student," it asserts that reception to reading and meaning is predicated on the openness or willingness of the recipient. It requires purposeful involvement of a student's life and interests interwoven with the reading process.

Thus, in vocabulary and comprehension lessons, an affective approach asks, "What does this term mean to you?" Use of personalized questions, of course, echoes the ancient philosophers; what's new is modern recognition, from behavioral research, that getting information into long term memory requires "association" and meaningful "rehearsal," and that learning, from Piaget's studies, goes through stages of "integration."

What we internalize is what we learn. How to internalize

without personalizing? We probably can't.

This leads us to the theory that the reader's attitude toward what he is reading, his prior knowledge, and attitude toward that knowledge are the most important variables in understanding what is being read.

This personalized view of reading alerts us to the need for noting carefully what meanings the student may give to what he read, what discrepancies exist, and why they arose. Misunderstandings may endure for years.

One of my students told me that he always thought that "specific" meant "important." Didn't teachers always ask for a specific example? On a standardized test, my English-speaking African student missed the meaning of "compound" thinking of "village,instead of a "chemical term." When students fail to react and their teachers think they just aren't listening; students may be listening, but not hearing "affectively."

Affective processing, in all languages, influences how we interpret what we read. How accurately does "surface structure" represent "deep structure" after being filtered through the screens of the reader's personal experience?

Cognitive processing, on the other hand, is concerned with the qualities of the material; a number of classic studies have analyzed sentence structure and vocabulary frequency, with reference to how thinking processes deal with language.

For vocabulary, for example, recent research has reaffirmed the importance of learning idiomatic expressions. A Canadian study of oral spontaneity found that one of five

words (of 131,536 words on 30 topics) was part of a "fixed expression." (Barker and Sochus, 1975) Since a word itself is not the basic unit of meaning (when interrupted at or in the middle, you will tend to finish the phrase), words should be taught in phrases (Jones, 1965). For the same reason, verbs should be combined with temporal adverbs to indicate tense, such as"walked yesterday" (Johnson, 1965).

The larger a unit is, the more coherency it has, allowing it to be "chunked" into a unitary meaning, the more likely that the meaning will be readily understood and recalled.

Introduction of vocabulary should include multiple uses for each word; learning one meaning often masks the learning of subsequent uses (Pike, 1967). Therefore, giving alternate meanings from the outset, allows for "expansibility" and a mind set for flexibility.

Unfortunately, the English-speaking student, accustomed to making a few words carry major burdens of multiple meanings, may be overwhelmed by more varied foreign vocabularies. In English, a formula has been worked out to show that the frequency of a word has a relation to the number of ways it can be used(The number of meanings of a word, except for a few of about a dozen of the most frequent ones, tends to be equal to the square root of its relative frequency, according to Zipf, 1945).

The prime frequency words in English, which include "the,""and,""a,""to,""of,"and"in" among the top six, have not differed in almost fifty years of observation, though frequency counts have been taken from all types of reading materials. The 110 most frequent words account for over 50 per cent of

frequency use and are mainly structure words.

Structure words, used more frequently than content words, express relational concepts. In English, they appear as prepositions, connectives, and pronouns, also as adverbs and adjectives. They tell "where" and "how much." (Dinnan, 1975).

A stumbling block occurs in translation when the other languages express these concepts with affixes instead of separate words. Establishing fluency, however, with syntactic (sentence patterns) regularity, can be expedited because the number of prepositions and connectives frequently employed is obviously limited. Mastering patterns which include the structural concepts of causality, chronological order, contrast, etc. would appear to be an efficient, logical approach to reading as well as to generating sentences in another language.

Content words, on the other hand, are unlimited in number: all the nouns and verbs.

If we can bring ourselves to accept the useful habit of accepting them through context, allowing the sentence, paragraph, situation, to clarify meaning, we can provide for lifetime language growth, coming closer to intuitive accuracy with experience (and occasional dictionary orientation).

Useful for English as well as other languages, ten clues for relying on context in this way are given by Thomas and Robinson (1972). When as many as 50 per cent of content words in a novel might be used only once, looking up every new word would hardly be worthwhile(Carroll, 1969).

As for syntactic structures, English speakers commonly use only a few sentence structures, mainly a brief subject-verb order. However, the major syntactic problem in comprehension, in reading, for native English speakers and for translators is ambiguity arising from deletions in the surface structure (Dawkins, 1875).

For example, we say,"This is a problem for foreign language teachers." We have deleted "of" from the surface structure which could have been "teachers of foreign language," and have combined:

1. "This is a problem."
2. "These are teachers."
3. "These teachers teach a foreign language."
4. "This is a problem connected with the teaching."

Items 1,2,3, and 4 represent the deep meaning which is expressed in the surface, "This is a problem for foreign-language teachers." The surface structure, "This is a problem for foreign language-teachers," means something else.

Another ambiguous statement which requires additions and redundancy when translated from English is "I think you're right." Among the changes required will be a connective "that" and a decision will have to be made as to whether the verbs are progressive, subjunctive, or other aspect possible.

Since English takes the deletion route of least

effort, the teacher of a foreign language, aware of these structural phenomena, forwarns the students of the need to augment English syntax with appropriate additions, some of which would be considered redundant in English.

Furthermore, unfamiliar structures, which are rarely used in English but taught, as theory, would not be perceived as worthy of notice until encountered by the student in foreign language study.

Teachers of bilingual students will be aware of the special need to differentiate between "deep" or inner meaning and "surface" or outer expression. Helping the student to recognize the universality of "deep" meaning in eye contact, gesture, and body language also gives validity to the concept that "surface" expression can take a myriad of acceptable forms.

"Surface" structure is adaptable, changeable, mutable to time, place, custom, and society. Comprehension will vary dynamically as an interchange between reader-author, speaker-listener: cognitively as well as affectively.

Comprehension can be expedited by recognizing the patterns of surface structure. Previewing, for example, alerts the reader to what is coming and, together, these techniques yield the dual dividend of recognition: "There it is, and that's how it fits into the idea." Instead of immediate repetition, merely spacing, allowing an interval of other sentences, before repetition, has the same effect of creating familiarity and enhancing association (Rothkopf, 1971).

8.

A comprehension technique that is simple and powerful in reading any material is to apply the following three questions to a passage or chapter:

(1) What is the subject of it?
(e.g. about "mountains"

(2) What does it say about the subject?
(e.g. "Mountains affect rainfall."

(3) How does it support that idea?
(e.g. - find the relationship of coordinate or subordinate details by underlining the structure words: and, but, after, when, because, etc. Sometimes the most important word could be "but" or "thus."

As Carroll notes, the general meaning comes first, then grammatical analysis, then understanding of key words(Carroll,1970).

THEN, add a fourth step:

Gather the meaning of the relationship of the ideas into a unitary understanding. What does it actually say (cognitively) and what does the reader think about it, reacting to it, absorbing or denying its validity (affectively).

SUMMARY:

A. Foreign language teachers need consider two areas of reading theory:

(1) General reading theory that applies to all languages,

(2) Specific linguistic characteristics of a language.

1. GENERAL READING THEORY

In modern psychological terms, reading is a dynamic process during which the individual chooses "meanings" during an intricate associational perception of symbols which touches upon his own background, his own intentions, the author's intentions, tone, viewpoint, etc. This is opposed to previous concepts of reading as a fixed "product" stopped in time, with a "correct" response to any given stimulus.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Implications of teaching reading as a dynamic process affect the teaching of foreign languages in a number of ways:

a. Multiple meanings of words should be taught in context. Every time a content word is found, it may have a slightly different use. See: Improving Reading in Every Class by Thomas and Robinson.

b. Meanings of words should be given by synonyms rather than by definitions.

c. Structure words (prepositions, connectives, adverbs, pronouns, adverbs, and adjectives) may be more important than content words (nouns and verbs). A relational word like "but" might be the most important word in the chapter.

e.g. Time: first, second, then, etc.
Cause: therefore, because, although, so, etc.
Comparison: While, like, etc.
Contrast: On the contrary, but, etc.

d. Sentences that have more deletions (one or two words may represent whole clauses which have been reduced in "inner thinking") are difficult to read and interpret.

e. Preparations for reading that orient the student in the subject, inspire prediction, acquaint the reader with reasons and purpose, lead to more efficient interpretation. Knowing the topic in advance enables the reader to choose more appropriately from the multiple meanings of words as they come up. This speeds up reading and prevents unnecessary regressions.

f. Although speaking generally has priority in learning a language, followed by listening, reading, and writing, all modes should be employed. Some students may need the triple reinforcement of kinesthetic-writing-seeing-saying for review as well as study.

g. Repetition interval can be strategically employed. A sentence which is repeated immediately may not be remembered as readily as one which is repeated after other sentences have intervened. This delayed repetition factor takes advantage of "readiness" and "recognition" produced by prior presentation.

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