

## **Re-envisioning Reading Comprehension for English Language Learners**

**A critical point of view by: Paula Restrepo and Erika Martinez**

*“Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting”.*

*Aldous Huxley*

When teaching a second language, it is important to bear in mind that the four skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading must be facilitated and developed with the same relevance. However, some learners might tell their teacher they can understand everything he says, but they are unable to produce; or that they can understand a simple text, but when they face comprehension questions that require a critical level of understanding, they do not perform as expected. It is well known that productive skills depend on receptive skills (listening and reading) due to these serve as models for written and oral production; even though one of the most common problems teachers face with students and one of the most complex processes during teaching is oral and written comprehension, we could say that learners are more exposed to listening than to reading practice. It is to say, learners listen to their English teacher in the classroom and they listen to music in English, but second language learners do not have reading habits not even in their mother tongue. Reading is a process that involves attention, creativity, and reading strategies to develop effective comprehension from a text; throughout many years, authors support different theories in which they state the importance of involving students in real contexts. Our attempt in this paper is to point out the idea that reading is not an activity of translation, as some learners might think, rather a task that entails taking the meaning of words within a meaningful context for learners. Besides, we strongly believe that learners will read better in their second language if they learn about text's characteristics and if they think about their own learning process, using a set of strategies to grasp meaning from texts. The main article Re-envisioning Reading Comprehension for English Language Learners, mentions some strategies that, from our own teaching experience, did not work as expected, and others that can be taken into further consideration in our teaching practice.

Reading is a complex process where students should identify words, phonics, rhythms, order, and meaning within a cultural context; for this reason, when a student has some difficulties to decode these characteristics, they will probably find challenges in reading comprehension. According to Nunan (1991), reading, in this view is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalents in the quest for making sense of the text. He referred this process as the “bottom up” view of reading.

The article mentions different reading strategies such as self-questioning and making inferences, which are part of research-based reading strategies and are useful in our context. However, we would like to suggest that there are other strategies teachers can use which could be more relevant and well structured as the metacognitive strategies, defined by (Devine, 1993; Flavell, 1981) as strategies that function to monitor or regulate cognitive strategies; they include checking, planning, monitoring, testing, revising, and evaluating students' strategies for learning. The aim of these strategies is to evaluate how effective a student cognitive strategy is, it means to collect the textual information. We found the metacognitive strategies are a successful tool for our students to check their reading comprehension process.

According to Hudson (2007), previous research shows that having rich schemata on a subject matter is related to better reading comprehension; for instance, it is noticeable that students' performance improves when they are familiarized with the content of the text. A reading that is culturally familiar for learners, such as "Barranquilla's Carnival" for Colombian learners, or "All Saints Day" for Mexican learners, provides them with enough background information to assimilate the text and increase the interest towards the same.

Singhal (1998) also points out that L2 readers, who do not possess cultural background knowledge on an English text, are limited in comprehending the text message, which support the previous view; however, what about teaching the Anglophone component, Which is said to be part of the competences a learner must develop to fully accept a second language as part of his own communication code? We disagree then, with Hudson and Singhal's assumption in the sense that beyond the cultural content in the text, learners can make use of strategies to get meaning from the written piece; using true cognates and words that they recognize from academic previous knowledge, for example, not necessarily related to cultural issues. This point of view is supported by Marsha Bensoussan (2005) who assures "No one really knows to what extent students use context in guessing the meaning of new words. Some teachers of advanced learners of EFL (English as a foreign language) prefer to expose students to new words in context, hoping students will acquire the vocabulary through contextual clues".

The use of vocabulary in L2 is more than just an academic process that occurs in a classroom. Nowadays, the current teaching styles and methodologies allow the observation of how students discover vocabulary through interesting tools like songs, movies, theater, among others. The grammatical rules become then, a follow-up process that sometimes requires more time, but which acquires remarkable meaning when learners have enough vocabulary to be articulated through linguistic features. According to Krashen (1985) the learner improves and progresses along the 'natural order' when he/she receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage 'i', then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to 'Comprehensible Input' that belongs to level 'i + 1'. Since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Krashen proposes that natural communicative input is the key to design a

syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some 'i + 1' input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence". The Input hypothesis is Krashen's attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. So, the Input hypothesis is only concerned with 'acquisition', not 'learning'.

Currently, as mentioned before, beginner students tend to translate word by word, in order to have the whole meaning or idea from a text. According to the article, L2 readers especially in their introductory stage are likely to translate words from English into their first language. They feel that they are unable to understand what a text is about without comprehending the meaning of each word. They stop at a point when they encounter unknown vocabulary, making this task slower than expected, and look up words in the dictionary to confirm their meaning. There is a risk of misunderstanding when they translate all unfamiliar words into their first language, because it can cause negative interference. Therefore, overusing the bottom-up approach -when learners focus on specific parts of the text (words, sounds, syllables, etc) - may cause a disadvantage in terms of getting real meaning and the time spent in the exercise itself. In contrast with this assumption, we strongly believe that, by showing students the word in a different way (not merely in the written form but using images, for instance), learners can challenge themselves to develop strategies with a critical level of performance. In our context, most of the students understand the meaning of a text when they have previous information of it, using flashcards, posters, pictures from magazines etc, in this manner students receive the input visually and when they come across with the word in a text, they will recognize and relate it with the meaning. Not all Teachers use the same methodology to teach; there are some teachers that use bottom-up to guide students step by step, giving them not only the meaning of each word, but the significance of each letter. Students begin to be skillful readers when they do not only have the capacity to understand word by word in a text, but the general idea of the same. Most of the students need to relate the language knowledge and their background experiences in order to comprehend the message from the text. The author that supports our point of view is Gough's (1972), who described reading as a sequential or serial mental process. Readers, according to Gough, begin by translating the parts of written language (letters) into speech sounds, and then piece the sounds together to form individual words, and after that piece, the words together to arrive at an understanding of the author's written message. In their reading model, some authors like LaBerge and Samuels (1974) compare humans and computers. For these researchers, humans have an ability to catch elements from exterior and internalize them (this process is reflected when learning words): first students recognize them, then memorize them; as humans we have the capacity to do different tasks at the same time, we move from one job to another, from interpreting words' sounds to comprehending the general message from a text.

Consistent with the article and as we previously brought up, if students translate unknown words into their L1 they could not be able to maintain information from the text and this is the cost by overusing bottom up approach. At this point we

disagree with the author due to the fact that we consider there must be a balance in the use of these two processes: Bottom up and Top down. The bottom up is related with slow reader, because the readers construct the meaning reading word by word and letter by letter; top down is related with successful reader, who reads in a complete and efficient manner. Reading comprehension is not only a process where students can work focusing just on one approach, it is essential to combine two or more strategies when the students are learning not just how to read, but also how to write. Alderson (2000) considered reading as an interactive process (a conversation between writer/reader, even though the writer is not present), where students have the chance to confirm and foresee the meaning; this happens through the use of bottom-up and top down models.

## Conclusion

Although many of the processes considered above are useful and well known in our own experience, we can infer that reading comprehension is based on how the teacher gives the appropriate and necessary tools to help students understand the vocabulary they will use in the reading activities. In that sense, learners will have complete and unified meaning of it. Regarding the authors invited in this discussion, the meaningful input is the principal tool for students' understanding of what they read, this, taking into account that every student perceives the world in a different and particular way. The teacher's job, therefore, is to find and create a bilingual and bi-literacy setting where both languages complement each other but at the same time they do not depend on each other. The cultural different schemata in the appropriate use and in the suitable context will equip the learner to achieve a competent reading performance.

Reflecting on our teaching process, we believe teachers need to see each student as a unique universe, besides the kind of strategy to use into the reading process. It is also important to remember that reading cannot be separated from the other skills, it is significant to understand the complex learning process, in this case reading; the bottom –up/top down processes play an decisive role when teaching this skill, the combination of these two elements in a balanced and not overused way, may lead our students to a well-structured reading comprehension. Reading goes beyond the content or how culturally related to each individual's context it can be, but how efficient is the early familiarization with strategies can help learners not only to successfully comprehend general and specific facts about the text, but gain new vocabulary and develop critical skills that will be useful for any kind of reading.

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