



Instruction as a strategic way to enhance the L2 reading process

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RESUMO: Este artigo revisa alguns estudos sobre o ensino da leitura em aulas de inglês como LE, a fim de discutir se a instrução na leitura pode auxiliar no processo de aprendizagem e como ela deve ser ensinada. Será sugerido que a instrução e a interferência do professor podem conscientizar os aprendizes sobre o processo de leitura, bem como encorajá-los a usar estratégias de leitura, levando-os a obter uma melhor compreensão textual e a desenvolver as suas habilidades cognitivas neste processo de aprendizagem de leitura em uma língua estrangeira.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Leitura, Instrução, Estratégias, Compreensão, Aprendizes

ABSTRACT: This article aims at reviewing some literature about the teaching of reading in EFL classes, raising a controversial issue about whether reading instruction can lead to reading improvement and how it is best taught. In this paper, it will be suggested that teachers' instruction and teachers' interference may raise learners' awareness and also encourage learners to use reading strategies while reading a text, thus providing learners with better text comprehension, as well as enhancing their cognitive skills in their reading process.

KEY-WORDS: Reading, Instruction, Strategies, Comprehension, Learners

Introduction

The main issue discussed in this article addresses the role of instruction, that is, the teacher's role in the English as a foreign language (EFL)² reading process. Reading is considered a complex cognitive process (ZWAAN & BROWN, 1996) not only when learners are learning how to read in a second language (L2)³ (TSUI, 1995, p. 113), but also when they start reading in their first language (L1). Because of that, there is a considerable amount of research in the area of the role of instruction during the reading process in both first and second language acquisition within different perspectives. In order to understand how EFL teachers should prepare learners to read texts through instruction, some review of literature is going to be reported. First, I am going to present some aspects of the reading process regarding the stored information in learners' memory, as well as how activation of learners' prior knowledge

happens when reading a text (RUMELHART, 1994; CARRELL, 1988) in order to see how the reading process takes place in individuals' memory. Second, I am going to discuss the teacher's role in reading classes concerning the importance of reading instruction in EFL teaching (URQUHART & WEIR, 1998; TOMITCH, 2002). Finally, I am going to suggest that awareness, as proposed by Schmidt (1995), is crucial during the reading process, and that teachers should encourage learners to construct meaning through scaffolding⁴ (ROSENSHINE & MEISTER, 1997, based on WOOD *et al.*, 1976) and reading strategies in order to improve their cognitive skills and enhance learning.

Review of literature

The teaching of reading has been one of the important issues discussed in the EFL teaching area lately. Many researchers (BROWN, 1994;

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² This term refers to the status of English in a society where it is only taught as a subject in the classroom, and is not used as a medium of communication in education, business or government.

³ The term L2 here is concerned with EFL, thus both terms are going to be used interchangeably.

⁴ Scaffolding is some form of support that a teacher or student provides to help other students make a bridge between their current abilities and the intended goal.



MIKULECKY & JEFFRIES, 1996; NUTTAL, 1989; URQUHART & WEIR, 1998; PRESSLEY, 2000; MCCORMICK & DONATO, 2000; TOMITCH, 2002) have been investigating this topic and suggesting different ways to teach reading, showing how the reading process takes place, thus providing EFL teachers with some cues and hints on how to teach reading in their classes.

Some authors (NUTTALL, 1989; WEIR, 1993; URQUHART & WEIR, 1998) have shown that reading comprehension could be seen as a twofold interactive process: one that takes place between the reader's background knowledge and the information the text brings, which associates what is already known with the new information provided by the text, and the other which involves the interaction between the author and the reader in the act of reading. Concerning the former, the prior knowledge stored in individuals' memory can be defined as *schemata*, that is "data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory" (RUMELHART, 1994, p. 5). According to Rumelhart (1994), *schemata* could help learners understand the incoming information by means of establishing connections between the reader's prior knowledge and the new information in a given text. In other words, it is the previous knowledge that supports learners while they are reading on a topic and that enables them to make associations between their existing ideas and the assessment of new information. Still drawing on Rumelhart (1977), *schema theory* is basically a theory about knowledge, and all knowledge is packaged into slots, which are called *schemata*. In other words, *schemata* are used in the process of interpreting linguistic and nonlinguistic data, "in retrieving information from memory, in organizing actions, in allocating resources and generally in guiding the flow of processing in the system" (RUMMELHART, 1994, p. 4). Thus, the role of *schemata* in the process of reading comprehension is exactly to keep all the information acquired in order to be activated when necessary (CARRELL, 1988). Regarding the latter process, the interaction between the author and the reader, readers will be motivated to read according to the topic approached in the text, be it from their interests or not, when it is related to *content schema* or when it is *culture specific* (CARRELL, 1988). For Carrell (1988), a certain *content schema* may sometimes fail because readers select what they have interest.

Thus, they learn what they want to. Moreover, sometimes readers cannot understand the author's intention in a text not only because of their lack of knowledge on a given topic, but also because of some authors' ambiguity or vagueness (CARRELL, 1988).

In some cases, this misreading could also be associated with the complexity of reading a text in an L2. Some authors (ZWAAN & BROWN, 1996) claim that the L2 reading comprehension process is much more complex than in L1, since L2 learners have more limitations such as lexical access and syntactic processing constraints than L1 readers. For Zwaan and Brown (1996), less fluent readers usually use their L1 as a way to access word meaning and this is more resource consuming. Then, when nonfluent learners read a text in their L1 they probably will not be as exhausted as if they read a text in L2, because in L2, their cognitive procedures will be more limited to activate their *schemata* (CARRELL, 1988). In this sense, *schemata* also play a significant role in determining important information in the text, in drawing inferences or in generating questions about the text. Thus, if one has prior knowledge constraints about a reading topic, he/she will have difficulty in distinguishing whether information from the text is either important or unimportant, as well as in finding the central idea and understanding the author's intentions (SMITH, 1978).

In the classroom, the drawing of inferences and the questioning posed by the teacher through instruction could be considered as potential tools to guide learners to better comprehend a text in an L2. In the results found by Duffy (1997), "some teachers were in charge of their instruction; others passively followed directions" (p. 353). In other words, most reflective teachers are following their beliefs and their feelings in order to manage their reading classes, whereas others are trying to follow some instructional models without knowing how to properly deal with them. For Smith (1978), there is a gap in reading instruction, since teachers do not know exactly how to teach reading. In his article, Smith (1978) claims that teaching training assumes that "teachers should be told what they should do rather than what they should know" (p. 2). Moreover, Smith (1978) claims that teachers are not encouraged to make their own decisions, because of the methodology and/or the book they adopt in schools. Because of that, they teach

reading by following someone's instruction instead of reflecting on their own way of teaching, thus ignoring that each group has a different level, background knowledge, interests, age, motivation, etc. (URQUHART & WEIR, 1998). For Duffy (1997), teachers tend to follow a particular model, instead of combining models or extracting from them some ideas according to their feelings in each particular case. Duffy (1997) considers a good teacher that one who asks himself/herself questions about his/her work, whom he calls an *entrepreneurial teacher*, that is, a teacher who invents life-like learning situations, uses many models in order to "create from the models a model of their own" (p. 359), and also bases his/her instruction in *why*. In other words, an entrepreneurial teacher reflects on the way he/she teaches, why he/she teaches in that way, and why he/she chooses some texts and not others.

Considering that models could be helpful but that they can inhibit the teacher's ability to reflect and create their own procedures of instruction according to their beliefs, some important items will be discussed based on some authors (URQUHART & WEIR, 1998; ROSENSHINE & MEISTER, 1997; MCCORMICK & DONATO, 2000; STAHL & HAYES, 1997; PEARSON ET. AL, 1992; ESKEY & GRABE, 1998; PALINSCAR, 1986; DAVIES, 1995; HARMER, 1994). According to Urquhart and Weir (1998), teachers might take into account learners' level regarding vocabulary and grammatical structure knowledge when they previously select texts, as well as permit learners to choose their own texts, thus encouraging them to feel highly motivated in their reading classes. Still, these authors (based on VYGOTSKY, 1962) state that teachers should be *mediators* or *facilitators* by using tools to achieve their goals, as well as providing *scaffolding* to learners (ROSENSHINE & MEISTER, 1997; MCCORMICK & DONATO, 2000) in order to enable them to go on to an extra step and solve problems, instead of simply solving their problems themselves. As previously mentioned, scaffolding is some form of support that a teacher or student provides to help other students make a bridge between their current abilities and the intended goal (ROSENSHINE & MEISTER, 1997, based on WOOD et al, 1976). In this sense,

cognitive strategies could be taught by means of scaffolds. Still, these authors suggest that EFL teachers might use several scaffolding functions or procedures in their reading classes, which include: a) *reducing the complexity of the task to manageable limits*, b) *maintaining students interest, marking critical features*, and c) *demonstrating solutions when the learner can recognize them* (p.89).

For Pearson et al. (1992), a positive effect has been found in teachers' message with regards to how the construction of meaning takes place. The authors claim that this might focus on text structure in order to encourage learners to make their own questions about the text, as well as to connect prior knowledge to text ideas by making *inferences* (inferencing meaning from context), *predictions* (asking questions prior to the commencement of the reading task), and *elaboration* (the process of bringing prior knowledge to the ideas of the text in order to achieve the final representation of it).

Taking the above into account, an effective teacher will be the one who makes learners aware⁵ (SCHMIDT, 1995) of some reading strategies they can use so as to succeed in L2 text comprehension. Different from *skills*, which can be described as a cognitive ability that one can use when reading texts (URQUART & WEIR, 1998), *strategies* are "a physical or mental action used consciously or unconsciously for the purpose of facilitating text comprehension and/or learning" (DAVIES, 1995). According to Palinscar (1986), the use of strategies promotes the growth of interaction between the reader and the text and helps teachers monitor learners' understanding. For him, this instructional technique - by means of interaction between teachers and students - is called *reciprocal teaching*, in which teacher and students share responsibilities in order to enhance comprehension. Through reciprocal teaching, teachers have the opportunity to draw learners' attention to important features in a text. This technique can foster learners' consciousness raising skills (ESKEY & GRABE, 1988), thus helping them to become more proficient L2 readers. Hence, through consciousness raising, learners will be able to understand a text successfully as a result of their ability to use strategies and skills effectively (HARMER, 1994).

⁵ Awareness means paying attention consciously and it is very important at the precise time of learning.



Conclusion

Recently, many studies have been showing that there has been a great deal of evidence that reading comprehension strategies through teacher's instruction improve learners' understanding of a text. When teachers encourage learners to be aware of the text structure and of text versus context relationships, learners will probably be more confident and better prepared to understand the reading purposes, as well as to notice the need to approach various reading strategies according to text and purpose. As awareness is crucial in the L2 reading process, EFL teachers must select proper materials for their reading classes taking into account their learners' schemata. This is to help the learners succeed in their L2 reading, by means of applying some reading strategies. Thus, the teacher's role in this case is to optimize the learning process (TOMITCH, 2002) by providing learners with cues and hints on how to use strategies and their cognitive skills in order to improve this fascinating ability that human beings have been developing through centuries: *the ability to construct meaning from a language different from their mother tongue.*

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