



Approaches to English as a Foreign Language Reading Comprehension: Research and Pedagogy

Reading processes comprise a variety of actions and routines which, as part of human mental activities, are complex and difficult to describe. But all educators agree about the centrality of reading and the importance of literacy regarding education, access to culture and information, and even inclusivity, i.e. real integration of individuals into the educational system whatever their situation, background or abilities.

The nature of reading ability and the fact that it is such a core necessity for coping with everyday life demands in modern societies has made it necessary to approach it from different angles that complement and enrich its depiction. Thus, Psycholinguistic theories gave way to Information Processing, Cognitive or Pragmatic theories, reading being connected both to the mental and to the social sides of human activity. But when dealing with the Teaching of Foreign Language Reading, the landscape gets even more complex because we must add the contrastive aspect to the already existing group of theories and evidence regarding the mother tongue.

Moreover, the digital revolution has reached the reading field, which cannot be considered any longer as the ability to get information from printed sources. In a digital environment, both the information layout and the processes themselves are changing, so that it becomes necessary to revisit the ways information is conveyed –and especially through hypertext– as well as the ways people approach it. In other words, in order to study foreign language reading nowadays, we must take into account text and discourse changes as well as individual and social aspects –mainly in formal learning settings–, and the variations in the different mental processes that take place during the reading process.

In the present volume we consider different perspectives towards EFL reading. The main EFL reading-related areas of today's research and pedagogy are informed by cognitive, sociopragmatic, knowledge management or educational theories. All of these are present in

the contents of this volume. Although there is a general bias towards adult language learning situations from tertiary education onwards –as this group is the commonest target for most contributors– some articles, especially those regarding foreign language reading processes, are applicable to most foreign language formal learning situations whatever the target group's age.

In **Part I, *Reading Processes in the New Learning Contexts***, four papers address reading comprehension processes in relation to reader- and text-related aspects, such as memory capacity, short-term memory, word recognition or use of strategies, on one hand, and type of text information support (i.e. printed vs. digital) and structure (i.e. discourse markers), on the other.

Ingrid Fontanini and Lêda Maria Braga Tomitch tackle the difficult task of assessing the reading comprehension of university students faced with linear, printed texts and with hypertext. The authors hypothesize that Working Memory Capacity, as a limited resource, is likely to impose restrictions on the reading process, and that this burden will be weightier in the case of L2 students' comprehension. They also hypothesize that the mental representation that subjects make of the text will be influenced by the type of support, or mode of text representation, as they call it. In the case of hypertext, the authors argue that the burden will be greater because of the fragmented nature of hypertext as compared to linear texts.

Measures of reading performance and recall are used in Fontanini's and Braga Tomitch's study to compare reading in both cases, paying special attention to subjects' attempts to find textual coherence. Forty-two speakers of English as an L2 from two different L1 backgrounds (21 Brazilians and 21 Chinese) participated in the study which shows an effect of text representation on reading recall and performance, especially in the case of lower memory span. The paper contributes to a tradition of studies which seek to find the relative weight of different variables and components taking part in the reading process, and adds evidence supporting the effect of literacy background on transfer. Results also provide further support for a construction-integration reading model which includes the construction of a propositional meaning from the text-base plus the integration process whereby readers grasp from different resources to get global coherence from texts. Fontanini and Braga's contribution casts light on some of the paths to follow in future research, regarding the role of components such as electronic literacy or global versus local coherence in relation to foreign language reading, text representation and perception of contradictions.

Within the tradition of Schema Theories, **Ana Cristina Lahuerta Martínez** gets deeper into the role of discourse markers on the EFL reading comprehension of Spanish students. Lahuerta provides evidence of the positive effect of discourse markers, as signals which guide the readers in a top-down fashion, showing the readers the text structuring, thus helping them to find the information and compensate for the lack of other types of knowledge. The role of individual variables, such as sex, age or general learning competence (as compared to the EFL one) on reading is measured as well as the role of text familiarity. Both reader and data-driven processes are thus considered as the two parts of an interactive-compensatory model. Results add further evidence to previous research on the role of schemata and prior knowledge and offer lines for further research.

Tony Ridgway focuses on an aspect rarely studied in relation to EFL reading, i.e. the role of the “inner voice” on reading comprehension and learning in general. Speech recoding, as a cognitive phenomenon, is linked to thinking, learning and reading. Ridgway reviews this concept and its relation to perception and comprehension, offering ideas for classroom implementation with the aim of helping beginning and intermediate readers develop this “inner speech”. In his paper lower order processes, such as word and speech recognition, are brought into focus, in relation to working memory capacity, short term memory and information storage and retention. Ridgway claims that the development of inner voice and ear while reading in a foreign language depends on the development of an automatised phonological store in the target language. He offers sound pedagogical implications and classroom suggestions in order to achieve this aim.

The fourth chapter, by **Esther Usó & Noelia Ruiz**, also addresses the phenomenon of hyperreading, comparing reader behaviour when reading hypertext and when reading printed text, but the authors examine a further component of reader’s knowledge, i.e. strategy use, of special interest to foreign language learning and teaching. Many studies have already been conducted on the use of certain reading strategies and the usefulness of explicit teaching of strategy use in the EFL classroom, but most have been carried out in relation to printed texts. As Fontanini and Tomitch, Usó and Ruiz aim at determining the incidence of the hypertextual medium on reading comprehension. Participants are tertiary EFL students, as in the first chapter, but their mother tongue is Spanish. Although the results do not corroborate those obtained by Fontanini and Tomitch, both the instruments and the assessment methods are different in the two studies: they only coincide in the search for global comprehension data. The authors conclude that “the hypertextual medium fosters strategy use” and, thus, “could be

regarded as an effective tool for fostering learners' use of reading strategies, including both top-down and bottom-up strategies".

Part II of this volume, *Pedagogical issues in the teaching of EFL reading*, addresses some of the issues previously tackled in Part I, focusing on pedagogical aspects, such as classroom implementation of reading techniques, the integration of reading into wholistic activities, or bringing up debates and controversies related to the teaching of special languages and the need of focusing on specific vs. general academic vocabulary lists for enhancing reading in the ESP classroom.

Juan Pino Silva presents an extensive reading project involving the use of Internet and seeking to integrate reading in an ambitious learning project. This project takes place at Simón Bolívar University (Caracas, Venezuela). Its goal is the gradual acquisition of autonomy by EFL learners, apart from the direct aims of reading fluency acquisition and EFL learning. The paper addresses some key pedagogical tenets and makes an account of the changes that have taken place in the evolution from the original, paper-based reading project, to the present times in which a web-based programme and the creation of a social network group have been the main tools used. In this sense, Pino's paper complements the theoretical articles about hyper-reading in Part I by presenting the practical side in a thoroughly prepared and solid classroom project.

Russell Dinapoli shows how to integrate reading skills in a motivating wholistic ambitious scheme which mixes up drama playing, EFL learning and reading in tertiary education. It is not a coincidence that current research on reading makes emphasis on meeting emotional and individual learners' needs as a way to enhance reading gains and foreign language learning in general, alongside the development of metalinguistic awareness and specific reading strategies through overt teaching. Dinapoli addresses mainly the emotional side of it, again based on the assumption that stimulation of both brain hemispheres will lead to a more efficient learning attitude and communicational readiness. In line with Bathkinian learning theories which call for a dialogic approach to learning-teaching which helps learner engage in their own processes, drama offers the possibility of acting out meaningful discourse related to their own fields of specialisation (in the experiment described, the target group is composed of Business tertiary students). Dinapoli also offers interesting reflections about the relation between learning settings (formal vs. informal) and learners' and personal involvement, which derive from the different projects carried out in the teaching and drama playing projects put into practice at Valencia's Universitat Politècnica.

The chapter by **Ken Hyland** and **Polly Tse** deals with academic lexis and provides further evidence for a narrow angle approach to ESP teaching (Hyland, 2002) as opposed to a wide angle approach (Huckin, 2003). The authors examine the range, frequency, collocation, and meaning of items on *the Academic Word List* (AWL) in a large multidisciplinary corpus. The items selected –generally classified as semi-technical vocabulary –are compared across different disciplines from the *hard* and the *soft sciences*. Routine patterns of expression and semi-technical vocabulary had already been found especially hard to manage when reading prose for specific purposes (Olàh, 1984). The results obtained are thought-provoking in the sense that they show different patterns of occurrence of the terms analysed, which commonly contribute to ‘lexical bundles’ that, in turn, reflect disciplinary preferences. The authors question the widely held assumption that there is a single core vocabulary needed for academic study and suggest that “teachers should assist students towards developing a more restricted, disciplinary-based lexical repertoire”.

Paul Nation again focuses on the critical aspect of reading, i.e. reading speed, a desirable goal for students to swiftly get information, and discusses some of the techniques used in the EFL classroom for the development of reading fluency (e.g. repeated reading, paired reading, 4/3/2 reading, extensive reading aloud, read-and look-up, easy extensive reading, silent repeated reading). After reviewing many of the techniques connected to silent and oral reading, including some common reading modes like skimming or scanning, Nation considers practical issues regarding reading speed assessment, learning and development of reading speed over time.

The last paper, a review article by **Piedad Fernández-Toledo** and **Françoise Salager-Meyer**, seeks to relate reading theories and approaches from the last decades to general EFL and educational tenets, looking for new ways of meeting knowledge-based theories, pragmatic lines on teaching and the teaching of reading, and educational theories focusing on literacy and its development among students.

The evolution of the concepts of literacy, information, knowledge and reading itself is reviewed with an emphasis on the new contexts and discourse forms brought up by technologies and on the need of integrating reading into meaningful teaching approaches that pursue the development of multiple literacy, not to forget the latest research carried out on reading comprehension that points to individual factors (motivation and attitude) and metalinguistic awareness as elements to focus on and to investigate more deeply.

Jose Gabriel Ferreras and **Manuel Hernández** close this volume with a review of the book “*Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons,*

and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills”, by Nancy Frey and Michael Douglas. We consider this the best way to close an issue which aims at presenting the old and the new views on reading and literacy. Increasing the readers’ awareness of alternative ways of looking at these concepts in connection with new learning needs and contexts goes through the dismantling of rigid categories trying to find newer ways in the common, *no men’s and all men’s lands*.

All in all, we expect the reader will find in this special issue on reading answers to the specific questions they might ask themselves regarding research and pedagogy of EFL reading. We are very grateful to all those who have contributed to make this special issue a reality, sharing their findings and reflections. We would also like to thank the scholars who have kindly accepted to review these papers. Their suggestions and indications enriched the final outcome.

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