DEVELOPING READING SKILLS:

A Synthesis of Methodologies

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to explore the various theories on learning to read a foreign language, principally those of the Audio-lingual Method and the newer cognitive approach, to test these theories against classroom experience, and to arrive at a synthesis of methods for teaching Spanish speaking EFL students to read English. Further, as we are interested not only in theory, but in application in the EFL classroom, we will point out what this synthesis of methodologies implies in our classroom techniques for teaching reading. In effect, we will be discarding what does not work and adding other newer, techniques that seem viable in the EFL classroom.

WHY THE NEW INTEREST IN READING?

There are several good reasons why we are hearing more about reading in the seventies than we did in the sixties. They are the following:

1.   Student-oriented EFL learning. There is a general feeling in educational circles that we should be more oriented to student needs and interests, rather than to materials, as has been the focus, especially in Audio-lingual teaching. One way this has manifested itself is in the needs of students to read, and to read interesting materials. They were bored with the pattern drills and "over-learning" of the Audio-lingual Method and the little attention it paid to reading. Relevance to student needs has made us realize that skill in reading EFL is somehow a more realistic and perhaps attainable goal than trying to give the student competancy in all four skills. The likelihood of a student having to read English is much greater than of his having to speak English or write English.

2.   Individualization and Grouping. Related to these general considerations of student-oriented learning is the boom in individualization. Individualization and grouping lend themselves very well to

reading. It is no secret to EFL teachers that beyond the most basic instruction in reading, there is a wide variety of reading aptitudes present in the typical classroom: some are slow learners, some fast; some read their native Spanish well, others not; some can speak English with some facility; others have never heard it spoken by a native;some have adequate grammar; others have no formal grammar training, all factors in determining individual progress in reading. But individualization and grouping can handle most of the differences in kind in quantity of progress; and, in addition, it often means that there is less boredom in reading, as we can let the student select materials of interest perhaps only to that one student (in the class), an important factor in maintaining enthusiasm and motivation in the reading program.

3.   Questioning of Audio-lingual Methodology. The current questioning of the Audio-lingual method has had a salutory effect on attention to reading skills in the EFL classroom. Audio-lingual teachers seldom spent much time on reading and the reading itself was decidedly seen as occupying a second place to hearing-speaking skills. Moreover, second language methodology had little to say about inculcating reading skills. If we take Nelson Broks as representative of Audio-lingual Methodology, he has almost nothing to say about reading in his influential book, Language and Language Learning, (1964). Cognitive learning theory, on the other hand, does give a prominent place to reading: concerned with the analogical and creative thought capacities of man, rather than with his habit-formed behavior there is a natural affinity of this learning approach to the development of reading skills.

4.   English for Special Purposes. Another important reason why reading is getting more attention today is the new interest in ESP, English for Special Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, or EST, English for Science and Technology. Programs and materials for such courses are usually centered on reading. It is felt that instead of trying the impossible, that is, teaching the ability, to speak, read, and write English in a given number of hours, usually all too few, we ought to concentrate on what these students really need. This is often, very clearly, a reading knowledge that will equip them to read their textbooks, to read specification manuals, stock order catalogues, technical journals, and the like.   In most cases English for Special Purposes is actually "Reading English for Special Purposes". It might be added that this interest in technical reading and writing is producing research and materials that are extremely useful to the teaching of reading in general.

THE AUDIO LINGUAL APPROACH TO READING SKILLS

The Audio-lingual approach to reading skills is worth reviewing

because, while Audio-lingual theory has been questioned for several years now and some of the excesses and dogmatism of this approach discarded, there is still much that is useful in Audio-lingual techniques. Moreover, if one talks of a cognitive theory of learning in opposition to Audio-lingual, it must be pointed out that this newest theory of language learning as yet has given us no new coherent language learning/teaching methodology to rival the former position of the Audio-lingual Method. Cognitive theorists have shown convincingly that some of the premises of audio-lingualism are simply unsound and some of the techniques are ineffective, confirming what many classroom teachers already know. Rather, a better way of looking at the methodology controversy is to see revisions of the old theory and a synthesis emerging. (See James Ney, "Toward a Synthetization of Teaching Methodologies", Hispania, Sept. 1975, Pp. 424-429).

What did the Audio-lingual Approach mean in terms of teaching/learning reading? The following points, gathered from a variety of sources can be said to constitute the Audio-lingual theory on reading.

1. Learning to read in the first as well as the second language was merely changing the mode of perception from ear to eye, so that audio-lingual control of language was emphasized first, before reading. (Bloomfield, 1933; Fries, 1963).

2. Reading first what had been practiced audio-lingually meant an initial gap of weeks, or even months before the written word was introduced. (Northeast Conference, 1967, p. 1,; Politzer, 1963, p. 99) William Moulton stated in 1961, "The student should first be taught to speak the foreign language; teaching him to read it was a totally separate process if, indeed, there was time for it at all." (Mohrmann, C., ed., 1961, p. 86).

3. Reading and not translating, as practiced by the older grammar-translation method. That is, the direct perception of the meaning without reference to native language equivalents. (Politzer, 1963, p. 98; Rivers, 1964, p. 17-18)

4. Reading for content and not necessarily for building vocabulary, (Chastain, 1971, p. 18).

5. Reading without looking up the unknown words until the whole text was read. (Moulton, 1961, p. 18).

6. Sensible guessing. Inferring meaning from context. Carry over from first language (L 1) reading habits. (Moulton, 1961,18, Northeast Conference, p. 41-42).

7. Reading taught with other skills of hearing-speaking, and writing. Integrated into an Audio-lingual program with its emphasis on pattern drills, repetition, and "over-learning" for automatic control. (Northeast Conference, p. 10.)

8. Reading the selection two or three times, rather than giving it one careful reading was emphasized. (Chastain, 1971, p.184).

9. Reading large amounts, necessary to gain a wide recognition vocabulary. (Northeast Conference, p. 43).

10. Lastly, materials edited as to vocabulary, syntax, style. The student moved from controlled to completely liberated reading. (Northeast Conference, p. 10).

CRITIQUE OF AUDIO-LINGUAL PRACTICE AS RELATED TO READING.

In general, it can be said that reading played a secondary role in the foreign language learning process of the Audio-lingual approach. It was a neglected skill, along with writing. There was little written about inculcating reading skills and very little produced in the way of materials which reflected the audio-lingualists advice on handling the reading skills. The usual reading lesson focused on vocabulary building, with translations at the back of the book or at the bottom of the page, followed by a series of often detailed questions on the reading in the target language. Advice on the teaching and learning of reading skills was not often followed by text writers, teachers, or students. There were, for example, no exercises designed to promote sensible guessing, so that the student would not look up every word. Little attention was paid to what was read, or to what students might want to read. Much of the reading material produced in the Audio-lingual hey day assumed that the purpose of reading was to enjoy works of literature. Nelson Brooks, for example, has no chapter on reading in his influential book on language teaching and learning, but he does have a chapter on "Language and Literature", (Brooks, 1964). He seems to have adopted the grammar-translation goal of reading for cultural enrichment. Albert Valdman claims that the "true primary objectives of foreign language teachers are still today those that they were in the 1930's: the ability to understand literary texts and to compose grammatically correct sentences." (Lugton, ed., 1971.)

THE COGNITIVE APPROACH TO READING

If we look now to some of the newer theories, there are several points that would seem to have application to reading. Chastain maintains that "achievement in reading has been one of the strengths of the cognitive approach. Most of the studies have found that traditional students read better than AL students." (Chastain, 1971, p. 195).

It should not be difficult to discern why this is true. The whole emphasis of cognitive theory is on the thinking process and on grammar analysis, both of which lend themselves to the development of reading skills: it is the problem-solving approach, rather than the habit-forming goal of Audio-lingual teaching, that supports the development of reading skills. Meaning has an important role in cognitive theory, as it does in theories learning to read. And, of course, cognitive theory assumes that reading is introduced from the beginning, so that students in these programs have at least a time advantage over strictly Audio-lingual programs. Cognitive theoreticians do not recognize the hierarchy of hearing-speaking-reading-writing, in that order, but give reading equal importance with the other skills. For all these reasons cognitive approaches seem to produce better readers.

Cognitive theory, however, has produced nothing new or startling on the subject of reading: it is more a matter of giving reading a new priority and seeing the student's potential in this area in a new light. Rather than programming the learner's mind to recognize increasingly more varied patterns, as Audio-lingual theory advises, a cognitive approach to reading stresses the creative and cognitive powers of the reader which go beyond the linguistic forms. The process of deriving meaning from the printed page and the challenge of the unexpected which this often involves is seen as a valuable end-product in itself. And not only the student's reasoning powers, but his total life experiences are called upon to help him in this task.

Updated guidelines for the teaching of reading skills.
If we look again at the ten previously outlined points of audio-lingual theory on reading, and revise them in the light of the cognitive approach with specific applications to the teaching of EFL reading to Spanish speakers, have an updated guide to the teaching of reading.

1. To make the point that reading is merely changing the mode of sensual perception from the ear to the eye simply does not go far enough: it ignores the reading habits acquired in the first language

experience. The techniques of reading have already been mastered, so that students can transfer the approach used to reading, in L 2. In the case of Spanish to English, this is a tremendous advantage: both have alphabetic written languages based on a sound system in which phonemes are represented--imperfectly, of course--by letters, and both use the Roman alphabet and read from left to right, horizontally. The two languages have similar morphology systems for word formation and similarities in syntactical structure (English showing a predominately subject-verb-object ordering that corresponds to the most common pattern of several in Spanish). Considering vocabulary, there are reported to be 50,000 cognate words, that is, 50,000 words whose printed representation and meanings are similar in the two languages. (Ramsey & Spaulding, 1956). These advantages, on the other hand, must be balanced against the sometimes widely different character of the written language when it is compared with the spoken language. Audio-lingual methodology assumed that somehow Audio-lingual control of a language prepared the student for reading. But the reader often encounters a language that is in a sense a different dialect of the standard spoken form he is learning: a great deal of the vocabulary syntax, and rhetorical devices he will find in reading are not common to the spoken language. Defining these divergences from the spoken language and offering some kind of exercises in them is one of the tasks of a reading skills specialist.

2. The insistence on a pre-reading gap of time is not, apparently, well founded.

It has not been proven that there is, in fact, a "natural order" of foreign language presentation, hearing-speaking-reading-writing. It has been suggested that possibly the reading skills be taught first, or both the passive skills, reading and hearing, before the active skills of speaking and writing, (Chastain, 1971).

3. The dictum to teach reading and not translation is probably well founded. As suggested above, already acquired reading skills in L 1 can be applied to L 2.

4. Reading for content, focusing on general meaning and away from the words themselves seems advisable. This also follows the model of learning to read L 1. Chastain speaks to this point in the following passage:

> Students need to be encouraged to read for the content of the material as they do in their own language. Meaningful reading recquires concentration upon important elements which convey the message. Constant attention to each word presents such an overwhelming amount

of information that the mind cannot process it all, even in the native language. Just as in listening comprehension, the students must learn to focus their attention on message-carrying, manageable units of language in order to avoid being bogged-down in a mass of detail.

(Chastain, 1971, p. 185)

5.   Reading without looking up the unknown words until the end of the passage seems, then, to be a good strategy. It is more efficient because it avoids the inevitable interruption in the train of thought that accompanies this traditional attack on reading L 2.

6.   Sensible guessing, making use of a problem solving approach, likewise, is effective. It calls upon all of the student's reasoning. cognitive powers, and on his total life experiences.

7.   Teaching reading with the other Audio-lingual skills may not be a sound approach. It may not be at all practical. In situations of limited time and resources, merely teaching reading skills may be the only solution to a problem. Concentrating on one skill will certainly be less frustrating than trying to deal with the four-pronged attack in our usual EFL programs.

8.   Reading the passage several times, rather than laboriously working over the assignment word by word is a good technique. From this writer's experience, the students retain more by concentrating on the total meaning of the reading assignment.

9.   Reading large amounts of material, rather than focusing on limited materials to be treated in depth, may still be a debatable point. Certainly, exposure to large amounts of reading material is important to building up a large recognition vocabulary, but this does not preclude the reading of selected materials with great attention, in order to bring out patterns in rhetorical structure and grammar.

10. Lastly, the Audio-lingual technique of moving from very controlled reading matter to liberated reading is sound. This merely follows the learning principal of going from the known to the unknown.

IMPLICATIONS FOR READING PROGRAMS

The foregoing synthesis of the reading skills methodology implies certain goals and techniques for teaching these skills. Without treating

the research being done today in defining the problems of teaching foreign language reading or in determining the most effective learning strategies, we can suggest approaches and techniques that arise form our renovated guidelines for a methodology of teaching EFL reading.

One of the most important implications for the EFL classroom is simply to focus more attention on reading as a valuable skill in itself, and not merely as supportive of the goal of audio-lingual communication. This means that teachers must develop a more enlightened approach to the teaching of reading, beginning with a determination of the needs of the students. Questionnaires and interviews should tell us what demands exist for reading, and further, what type of reading material is preferred by each individual student. With this knowledge, the teacher can tailor individual or group packets to the precise needs of the students, not a technique which derives from our revised reading methodology, but one which can be employed to great advantage in the reading program. No longer depending on standard reading texts, the teacher is called upon to do a great deal more work in materials development but this is necessary in any case for an effective reading program.

Beyond selecting reading materials appropriate to the student's interest; and reading level achievements, the instructor will also have to isolate problems in reading techniques and provide exercise materials prior to the reading of the assignment itself. Here the cognitive approach comes into play in that we are now spending more time on explanation of materials, on analysis, rather than merely plunging into some kind of controlled reading matter, to be followed by the usual comprehension and composition work. One type of pre-reading exercise, which can be very effective, consists of a passage of connected discourse in the students' native Spanish.

A number of key words are left out (or indicated by blanks), followed by a similar passage in English. Both are designed to show that educated guessing, using a variety of linguistic, contextual, and semantic clues will give the reader an over-all comprehension of the reading selection without knowing the meaning of the omitted words. Once the student understands that the procedure for gaining an acceptable level of reading comprehension does not involve looking up sometimes hundreds of new words, he can focus on the meaning of what he is reading, rather than on the vocabulary. This problem-solving approach conforms to the advice on reading methodology of the congnitive theorist Kenneth Chastain.

Other valuable exercises are those which expand the student's recognition of cognates and the regularities in word formation, which

may be similar to those corresponding to his native Spanish. Certain
exercises can show the correspondences between suffix endings, for
example in nación - nation, sentimiento - sentiment. The process
of adding morphemes, to generate a new meaning for already-learned
English words which may not have a common reflex in Spanish is
another useful learning activity (For example, forming the word
"motherly" form"mother" using the -ly morpheme segment to indi-
cate manner, or "bothersome" from appending the suffix "some",
indicating a quality, or cause, to a simple noun). Such activities
can give students much more ability and confidence in recognizing a
vast number of new words. Another approach involves analysis of
sentence, clause, and paragraph structures common in a particular
reading selection prior to its reading by the students, particularly
where structural patterns are at variance with the commonly found
Spanish patterns. (A sentence such as "They don't like the idea of
leaving the party early", for example, would present several syntac-
tical and morphological problems to a Spanish reader that could be
discussed and dealt with prior to the reading assignment.) These kinds
of pre-reading activities help expand the student's abilities to
understand new reading materials before he encounters them on his
own, either in the text to be read, or in the comprehension questions
at the end, which usually put the student in a testing situation rather
than in a learning one, as is proposed here.

The synthesis of reading methodologies above also implies clear-
ly stated and realistic goals in reading skills development. If we want
to de-emphasize vocabulary in favor of over-all comprehension, this
must be reflected in our stated goal. It might be added that often the
goals are higher in comprehension tests in foreign language reading
than in the native language. Reasonable, acceptable results, especially
if we are emphasizing content, over vocabulary, might, at least in
the beginning, be only 60%, 75%, or 80%, rather than 100%. (Which is
probably not an attainable score on a timed reading comprehension test
if the student were reading in his native language.)

Another implication of this composite reading methodology is that
in selective ways Spanish can be used in the classroom. Certainly in
vocabulary study, involving cognates, in analysis of structural ele-
ments where a contrast is beneficial, and often in explanations, the
use of Spanish is entirely appropriate. Another place where Spanish
could be used effectively without unduly affecting classroom English
language discipline is in comprehension testing. As we are not teach-
ing new material at this point, but merely trying to determine the
level of comprehension attained, using Spanish in some kind of objec-
tive testing might be the best medium of communication.

SUMMARY

This article has aimed at refining an up-to-date methodology for teaching reading in the EFL program. A synthesis of the audio-lingual and the cognitive approaches to the subject has been made. Then, in an effort to make practical applications of this methodology, suggestions, not at all exhaustive, were made in the area of classroom goals and techniques which also combined features of general educational trends, not necessarily concerned with language teaching such as individualization and grouping. Thus the approach taken here has been theoretical, but also pragmatic, ultimately aimed at giving us the tools to do an effective job of teaching reading in an EFL program.

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