Developing Different Skills
Using Different Texts

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Introduction

Reading is a key language skill that has long had a significant place in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. This skill allows students to have access to ideas communicated by people in different locations and eras, giving them the opportunity to broaden their horizons and deepen their knowledge of the world. Reading in a foreign language is essential not only for promoting the students' personal and cognitive development, but also for improving their study and job prospects in a globalized society. Due to the importance of reading, one of the priorities of language teaching should be to provide students with the tools they need to tackle texts in manifold contexts and for manifold purposes more and more autonomously. In this paper, I argue that, in order to adequately prepare students for the challenges they will face outside the classroom, teachers need to develop different reading skills in the classroom by using a wide variety of text types.

Textbooks and Reading

Typically, in foreign language classes, teachers tend to develop reading skills by using texts and activities from textbooks. As my analysis of a small sample of textbooks of English currently used in Portuguese schools reveals,[1] textbooks have various insufficiencies that impoverish the students' reading experience. One of the most common problems found in textbooks is the lack of variety of texts and activities.

In fact, the textbooks for elementary levels (i.e. 7th grade) that were analysed mainly use fabricated texts which employ a limited range of vocabulary and grammatical structures. The excessive concern over linguistic simplicity makes these texts artificial and little motivating for students. Furthermore, it denies them the opportunity to develop skills they will need to use when reading authentic texts outside the classroom, such as inferring meaning from context. Reflecting the poverty of the texts, the reading activities proposed in these textbooks tend to exclusively focus on the identification of information directly stated in the text.

Like the textbooks for elementary levels, the ones for advanced learners in the 12th grade offer a limited range of texts. The textbooks analyzed include few literary texts and privilege the use of (authentic) non-literary texts from sources that are extremely accessible to students, like the Wikipedia or the BBC. As these texts have an informative function and an objective style, they are what Zarate (25) calls denotative documents. Unlike connotative documents (e.g. literary texts), they explicitly present facts and do not have different layers of meaning, which leaves little room for interpretation and speculation about their meaning. For this reason, it is easy to understand why the reading activities in these textbooks focus on the comprehension of explicit information. Seldom are learners invited to interpret the text or to develop other relevant skills, like inference or prediction.

Thus, the choice of texts and the activities proposed by textbooks neither allow students to become familiar with the characteristics of different text types nor encourage them to develop various reading skills. In order to adequately help students to deal with different texts and make their reading experience richer and possibly more motivating, teachers and materials writers need to devise different reading tasks. They need to bridge the gap that exists between the theory of foreign language reading and the practice in many textbooks.

Reading Skills

In the field of reading research, it has long been established that reading is a process in which the reader actively processes and constructs the meaning of the text and that this complex process involves various skills (cf. Urquhart and Weir; Kapler; Hudson). As Urquhart and Weir

(90-91) and Hudson (84-103) note, although a number of skills taxonomies have been proposed, there is still little consensus concerning the content of the taxonomies and the terminology used to describe them. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that a reading skill is "a cognitive ability which a person is able to use when interacting with written texts" (Urquhart and Weir 88) and few would dispute that this concept is useful for structuring the teaching and learning of reading. Therefore, for teaching purposes, it is important to define which skills students have to develop in order to be able to read effectively.

With a view to overcoming the difficulty created by the lack of consensus about skills taxonomies, I consider that teachers should follow the proposals of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL),* the document that serves as a common basis for the elaboration of syllabuses, examinations and textbooks across Europe. According to this document, "to read, the reader must be able to: *perceive* the written text (visual skills); *recognise* the script (orthographic skills); *identify* the message (linguistic skills); *understand* the message (semantic skills)" (Council of Europe 91). In addition to these skills, others are also mentioned*,* including inferencing, predicting and scanning skills (Council of Europe 92). Based on what is defined in the *CEFRL*, I propose that the core reading skills that have to be developed by foreign language learners are: scanning, skimming,[2] inferencing, predicting, semantic skills (comprehension skills) and cognitive skills (interpretation skills).[3] The other skills mentioned in the *CEFRL* are assumed to be indirectly developed whenever students work on comprehension and interpretation skills.

Both skimming and scanning are skills that involve expeditious reading. While skimming corresponds to the quick reading of a text in order to get the gist of it, scanning refers to the rapid reading of a text to find a specific piece of information (Grellet 4). These skills are often used in the real word, for example, when we read the classifieds in search of a given piece of information or when we quickly go through a text to get a general idea of its meaning and decide if it is worth reading in detail. Working on skimming and scanning skills is a means of helping students break the habit of reading all texts carefully, regardless of their reading

purpose, and gradually become flexible readers, that is, readers who are able to adapt their speed to their reading purpose.

Predicting is also a fundamental skill in the teaching and learning of reading. This skill is defined by Grellet (17) as "the faculty of predicting or guessing what is to come next, making use of grammatical, logical and cultural clues" and, I would add, one's own knowledge of the world. The importance of prediction is best understood in the light of what is known about the process of reading. According to the interactive models, which today are considered the models that best describe the process of reading (Cornaire and Germain; Hudson 39), in this process the reader simultaneously uses bottom-up and top-down processes. In bottom-up processing, the reader constructs the meaning of the text by first decoding its basic units – letters, words and sentences – and then stringing these detailed elements together to build up a whole. In top-down processing, the reader constructs meaning by formulating hypotheses about the text based on his/her knowledge of the world and text type and by continuously refining them throughout the reading process. It is by making use of predicting skills that readers formulate the hypotheses that will help them make sense of the text.

Similarly, inferencing is a skill that helps the reader process and construct meaning. According to Grellet, "inferring means making use of syntactic, logical and cultural clues to discover the meaning of unknown elements" (14). This skill can be used for inferring the meaning of unknown words (Grellet 14), establishing connections between different pieces of information in the text (Urquhart and Weir 202-03) or discovering implicit ideas, based on what is explicit in the text and the reader's knowledge of the world (Nuttall 114). Since this skill serves different purposes, it plays a vital role in helping the reader comprehend and interpret the text.

Even though some authors (cf. Urquhart and Weir; Grabe) treat the terms "comprehension" and "interpretation" as synonyms, the distinction between these two concepts made by *CEFRL* is relevant for teaching purposes, since we empirically know that interpreting a text is a more complex task than comprehending it. According to Hudson, comprehension skill is "the ability to derive meaning from what is read" (79). Comprehension involves a literal reading

of the text. In contrast, interpretation is defined by Quinn as "the process of constructing meaning in a text" (212) and, as Abrams and Harpham (158) note, the readers mainly make use of this skill when they read texts with different layers of meaning. In other words, interpretation skill is the reader's ability to actively construct the meaning of the text, by going beyond its literal meaning and filling the gaps of the text in the light of his/her knowledge and experience. This skill involves a more profound and subjective reading of the text than the comprehension skill.

Text Selection

In order to develop the various skills mentioned above, students must be given the opportunity of working with varied texts, since each text type requires the reader to use different reading skills. For example, whereas classified ads require readers to primarily employ scanning skills, a poem invites them to use interpretation skills. Thus, offering students a variety of texts is fundamental for preparing them to employ appropriate skills for reading texts with different characteristics and functions. This variety can simultaneously make the students' reading experience more motivating.

As the ultimate aim of teaching reading is to prepare students for effectively reading texts outside the classroom, authentic texts need to be used in reading tasks so as to allow the students to become familiar with their characteristics and develop strategies for dealing with the difficulties they pose. Contrary to belief, even beginners can work with authentic texts. As Sanderson points out, "in practice, very low-level students can work with difficult texts, provided the task we set is suited to their level and demands less-than-complete reading of the text in order to be completed successfully" (15). In other words, it is not the intrinsic level of difficulty of a text but rather the appropriateness of the task to the learners' level that constitutes the deciding factor. Hence the well-known maxim in language teaching – "grade exercises rather than texts" (Grellet 8).

When choosing a text for a group of students, teachers need to bear in mind that students are able to understand language at a level far higher than they are able to produce

and that linguistic complexity is not the only factor that determines the degree of difficulty of a text. According to the *CEFRL*, a number of factors influence the difficulty of a text. These include: discourse structure, length of the text and relevance to the reader (Council of Europe 65). In addition to these, Ellis identifies other important factors that have to be taken into account in the process of selecting a text, including: cognitive complexity, familiarity of the information and contextual clues (222). Evidently, long texts with a high linguistic and cognitive complexity and no contextual clues are the most demanding texts for students.

Activity Design

If teachers use different types of text and intend to develop various reading skills, they need to construct varied activities. In the process of constructing reading activities, instead of artificially imposing an activity on the text, teachers should analyse its characteristics, identify why one would normally read it and how it would be read to decide what activities are the most appropriate for the text.

Direct questions, multiple-choice questions and true or false questions can be very useful reading activities, provided they are used to bring about understanding rather than just measuring it. To be true learning opportunities, questions must draw students' attention to difficult and important parts of the text, make them think about its meaning and help them develop different skills. As Nuttall explains, "the questions that help are those that make you work at the text. Well planned questions make you realize what you do not understand, and focus attention on the difficult bits of the text" (181).

If a text is to be explored in depth, students need to be asked various types of questions, including: questions of global comprehension, which require the students to grasp the overall message of the text; questions of detailed comprehension, whose answers are explicitly expressed in the text; questions involving reorganization of information scattered in the text; questions of prediction; questions of inference, which oblige students to consider what is implied but not explicitly stated; questions of interpretation; questions about the writing style and questions of personal response, which invite the students to express their reactions to the text.

Devising questions for which there is no single straightforward answer will lead to greater discussion and reflection on the text.

As an alternative to the traditional questions, other less conventional reading activities of varying degrees of difficulty can be constructed. The easiest and most motivating unconventional activities are the ones that involve little or no linguistic response. In this type of activity, students can be asked to match the text to an illustration, order the frames of comic strips or label a diagram according to the text. In addition to these, there are many motivating activities involving language production that can be useful for teaching and learning reading, especially at more advanced levels. These include, for example, writing a summary of the text, writing a letter to a newspaper in response to an article, discussing responses to a text in groups or doing a jigsaw reading task (i.e. a task in which students read different texts and then share the information they have gathered in order to piece together the whole story). In short, all activities that help students think about the text and discuss its meaning constitute appropriate reading activities.

Cultural Dimension

In order to help students fully explore the meaning of an authentic text, reading activities must invite them to reflect on the cultural dimension of the text. Since an authentic text expresses and alludes to values, behaviours, products and meanings shared by the members of the culture to which it belongs, to comprehend a text, the reader needs to understand not only its words, but also its cultural references. As Byram explains, "an individual coming across a document . . . from another country can interpret it with the help of specific information and general frames of knowledge which allow them to discover the allusions and connotations present in the document" (37). Thus, reading authentic texts requires students to make use of their prior knowledge and at the same time allows them to acquire new knowledge. Reading in a foreign language can be a space of cultural encounter between the reader, who is a member of a culture, and the text, which belongs and refers to a foreign culture.

Given that the students' cultural baggage does not always allow them to comprehend the allusions and connotations of the texts, it is important to construct activities focusing on the text's cultural dimension in order to avoid comprehension problems resulting from a mismatch between the reader's and the text's references. For example, before reading, teachers should activate the students' prior knowledge by promoting a discussion of the theme of the text. During the reading process, they might ask students to identify the cultural references of the text and, if necessary, they could also give them a matching activity with short informative texts about the people, products and events mentioned in the text.

With a view to raising awareness of cultural difference and promoting reflection on culture, teachers need to encourage students to compare the aspects of the foreign culture present in the text to their own culture and experience. According to Byram and Morgan, the comparative method is a useful means of helping students to analyse culture from an intercultural perspective (42). By comparing, students identify and analyse the characteristics of the foreign culture and their own culture. As a result of this comparison, they might realize that their culture is a social construction and that their values, beliefs and behaviours are not the only possible and naturally correct ones. Therefore, this comparison stimulates students to interiorise attitudes of decentring and become open to Otherness. Students with these attitudes will be in a better position to enjoy and learn from the cultural encounter promoted by reading, without renouncing to their foreign perspective.

Reading Stages

The different types of activities mentioned above constitute the bricks with which reading tasks are built. As various authors suggest (cf. Philips; Cuq and Gruca; Nuttall), reading tasks must be divided into three stages: pre-reading, reading and post-reading.[4]

The aims of the pre-reading stage are twofold: to facilitate the students' entry in the text and to engage them in the reading process. Based on the premise that what the reader brings to the text is of primary importance in comprehending it, in this stage, teachers need to activate the students' prior knowledge about the theme of the text by doing a brainstorming or

discussing the theme orally, for example. In addition to this, they must encourage students to make predictions about the text, using such elements as the title, the images or the first lines as a basis for formulating their hypotheses. These activities allow students to activate relevant knowledge and vocabulary and to build expectations, providing them with an adequate conceptual framework for understanding and interpreting the text.

Although teachers have to make sure students possess the necessary knowledge to understand the text, they must not arm them with too much prior information. Excess of information would deny students the opportunity of individually discovering and interacting with the text. This opportunity is particularly important in the case of literary texts. As Dantanus underlines, "the first response to the text must be as open-minded and unprejudiced as it can possibly be. . . . If you put a label . . . on the text you are studying, you will inevitably be influenced by this label and take a less active part in the explorative process". Therefore, as suggested by Matos, an aesthetic reading should be privileged. This mode of reading allows the reader to establish an individual relationship with the text and appreciate its aesthetic qualities. It contrasts with efferent reading, which is a mode of reading that "situates the text in a web of concepts supplied by teachers, critics and the norms of the text" (Matos 155). Thus, if we intend to promote an aesthetic reading of texts, pre-reading activities must not disclose too much information about the text. They should reveal no more than what is strictly necessary to arouse the students' interest in the text and prepare them for reading.

In the reading phase, students should use the hypotheses formulated before reading as a starting point to explore the text and gradually move from a global understanding towards a detailed understanding of the text. To begin the study of the text, it is a good strategy to set a task requiring students to skim through the text in order to check their hypotheses and/or answer simple global questions. For example, in this stage, students could be asked to choose a title for the text, to identify its theme or to select the sentence that best sums up the text. The students can carry out these activities without understanding all the words. Therefore, as Wright and Brown suggest, "initial skimming of the text is a semantic strategy which, even though readers acquire no specific details during the exercise, does contribute to their confidence about

tackling the text" (23). Furthermore, this initial skimming gives students an overview of the text that will help them arrive at a more detailed understanding. The skimming phase must be followed by a second reading of the text. This second reading should be guided by activities that make students explore details of the text and develop different reading skills (eg. inference, interpretation and scanning). This is also the appropriate moment to introduce activities about the vocabulary and the cultural references of the text.

To conclude the study of a text, in the post-reading stage, teachers need to encourage students to react to the text, question it, relate it to their experience and establish comparisons between the cultural aspects present in the text and their own culture. This emphasis on the student's response is informed by the Reader-Response Criticism. According to this theory, the text does not have an intrinsic meaning, but rather a meaning that the reader constructs by using his/her skills and knowledge to give shape to the potential meanings of the text (Schultz). As Gallas and Smagorinsky explain, "readers have vast knowledge about the world, cultural practices, themselves, social dynamics, and other factors that they use to infuse coded texts with meaning" (58). Consequently, the same text can be read differently by different readers and can evoke varied images, feelings, associations and interpretations. Thus, it becomes clear that reading has not only a cognitive dimension, but also affective and subjective dimensions.

These different dimensions cannot be absent from foreign language classes. For this reason, in reading tasks, students need to be encouraged to give voice to their reactions and perspectives. This is also important, because it is via emotional and affective responses that individuals develop positive attitudes towards reading in general. As Harmer underlines, "one of the most important questions we can ever get students to answer is *Do you like the text?* . . . By letting them give voice (if they wish) to their feelings about what they have read, we are far more likely to provoke the 'cuddle factor' . . . than if we just work through a series of exercises" (288).

If teachers want reading tasks to be true learning opportunities, rather than mere tests of comprehension, they need to use the tasks to promote active discussion of the text and reflection on the process of meaning construction. The interaction between the teacher and the

students plays a key role in favouring the comprehension of the text, since, as Scott and Huntington emphasize, comprehension is not just an individual cognitive process; it also involves the construction of meaning through interpersonal interaction. These authors explain that "comprehension occurs not only during the reading process, in the interaction between the reader and the text, but also after the reading process ends" (Scott and Huntington 4). That is, the interaction that takes place in the classroom can illuminate the meaning of the text.

Consequently, during the correction of reading activities, instead of accepting the first correct answer and moving on to another question, teachers must ask students to explain how they arrived at the answer, encourage them to express alternative answers and analyse why a certain answer is acceptable or inappropriate. Through this discussion, students explore the meaning of the text, develop reading strategies and learn the processes of critical thinking that good readers use. Teacher-led discussions are particularly important when students read texts with several layers of meaning. By discussing the text with the teacher and his/her peers, the student has the opportunity to go beyond his/her initial interpretation and actively discover and construct new meanings and interpretations of the text (Gavelek and Raphael 184). Thus, the key ingredients of the teaching and learning of reading are: initial individual study of the text guided by a reading task and subsequent active participation in discussion.

Conclusion

To sum up, in reading lessons, students must be given an active role and they need to have opportunities to read authentic texts of different types, develop the different reading skills, discuss the text and explore the cultural, cognitive and affective dimensions of the text in an integrated way. By using this approach to teach reading, we are giving students the tools they need to read autonomously and effectively, while promoting positive attitudes towards reading. In brief, we are helping our students become good readers .

Notes

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¹ I analyzed the following textbooks: *Link Up* (12th grade); *Screen 3* (12th grade); *Cool Zone* (7th grade) and *New Getting On* (7th grade).

² Although it is not mentioned in the *CEFRL*, skimming is consensually considered an important reading skill by the experts in reading (see Nuttall; Grellet; Cornaire and Germain).

³ For a matter of clarity, I will use the terms "comprehension" and "interpretation" to refer to the concepts of "semantic skills" and "cognitive skills"*,* respectively, since those terms are more commonly used in the literature.

⁴ For practical examples of reading tasks, see Teixeira or Grellet.

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