

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHEMATA TO READING COMPREHENSION

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A friend recently checked in late at a Dublin hotel and, being asked whether she wanted anything delivered to her room the next morning, asked for the FT. The clerk desk replied: "Sorry, we have Earl Grey tea and Chinese tea, but not FT."

(In: The Financial Times)

Abstract: The main purpose of the present paper is to examine how schema/schemata impact reading comprehension. It starts with the presentation of some definitions of key terms, such as reading (comprehension) and schemata, found in the literature, and moves to the discussion of the importance of schemata to reading comprehension as evidenced by numerous studies carried out over the past 20 years.

1. Introduction

The field of reading has received a significant amount of attention over the last twenty years. Historically considered a passive and "secondary" skill, reading has undergone a significant

shift, achieving a core status along the seventies and eighties, becoming the main focus of attention of several second language reading researchers, EFL/ESL teachers, material designers and, very recently, policy makers. EFL students have also become aware of its importance as a study skill as it has a strong effect on their academic performance. In other words, they realised that without effective reading comprehension strategies they would not be able to cope adequately with their academic demands. As Anderson (1994:177) points out:

Reading is an essential skill for English as a second language (ESL) students and, for many of these students who desire to attend an American university, reading is the most important skill to master.

The strengthening of the interest about the mental processes related to reading comprehension has made it a

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fruitful research area. This has been evidenced by the huge amount of studies conducted lately as well as by the various models of reading put forward aiming at trying to analyse and understand what mental processes are involved in reading comprehension and to describe how we understand texts the way we do. One of those [successful] attempts that has emerged is the schema theory. Thus, this paper aims at examining how schema/schemata impact reading comprehension. It starts with the presentation of some definitions of key terms, such as reading (comprehension) and schemata, found in the literature, and moves to the discussion of the importance of schemata to reading comprehension as evidenced by numerous studies carried out over the past twenty years.

2. Reading is...

What a difference a definition makes ...

In order to answer the question implicitly posed by the title of this paper, there is a need to briefly review the definitions of reading put forward by some outstanding researchers of the area. Thus, Smith (1978:102) comments about the multiplicity of meanings reading encompasses and argues that the usual definitions of reading lay people (including our students) have in mind are usually inadequate. In what follows we make comments about some definitions he presents as an illustration of such inadequacy.

1. Reading is... "understanding the author's thoughts" - this definition seems to be inadequate because

many times when we read we understand what we are biased to and not necessarily what the author intended us to. Research has shown that when we retell a story we usually 'choose' a version of our own, which may be very different from that one intended by the author. In fact, reader's retelling has been used as an evidence of the "conceptions and misconceptions" resulting from the schematic background that each reader brings into scene (cf. Goodman & Goodman, 1994:110).

2. Reading is... "understanding print" - this definition is inadequate because we can decode things other than just written words, such as gestures, faces, eyes, etc. Besides, it seems to oversimplify the concept of text;

3. Reading is "receiving communication" - we believe that nobody 'receives' communication, otherwise all messages would have a hundred per cent of success when delivered. In fact, communication is a two-way road, it is constructed by the interaction of several factors, such as the principle of cooperation between sender and receiver, their shared knowledge, beliefs, values, purposes, etc. If one or more of those factors fail to be considered, the message is unlikely to be communicated.

4. Reading is... "extracting information from the text" - but what if we do not extract anything from a text (i.e. if we do not understand its

but also because it presupposes personal engagement, interest, motivation and comprehension. Therefore, as Ciardello (1998) calls attention, "training students to generate questions is an important strategic plan for helping all students think and communicate" (p. 218). According to Graesser et al. (1996),

Question asking is a *limbus* test for understanding. People ask good questions when they are capable of identifying gaps, contradictions, incongruities, anomalies, and ambiguities in their knowledge base. Good questions emerge when a person attempts to advance existing knowledge. [...] Researchers have proposed that question asking is as fundamental a component of cognition as is perception, memory, learning, decision-making, and problem-solving (p. 22).

The questions asked may be related to any area, or "different levels": lexical, phonological, syntactical. Goodman's miscue analysis is very much concerned with these different levels and different 'activities' in which the reader has to be engaged in order to participate of this constructive approach to a text. Goodman and Goodman (1994) note that "as readers make use of their knowledge of all the language cues, they predict, make inferences, select significant features, confirm, and constantly work toward constructing a meaningful text" (p. 115).

We only ask questions when we are in a way 'tied up' to the text, i.e., we have a purpose in reading. The purposes in reading may vary but ultimately what we want is "to construct a mental representation of what the

message at all) ? How many times have we heard our students saying that they have read a text but they have not understood anything? 'This is Greek for me', that's what they say. Knowledge deficit, cultural conflicts, different purposes in reading, lack of motivation and so many other variables may cause comprehension failure.

On the other hand, Goodman (1988) defines reading as "a receptive language process" and "a psychological process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs" (p. 12). On his turn, R. Anderson (1984:473) corroborates authors like Carrell and Eisterhold (1993), Ruddell and Unrau (1994), Tierny and Pearson (1994), in his view of reading. According to him, reading is "an interactive process [with] simultaneous analysis at many different levels".

Obviously, as Smith pointed out, there are many other ways of viewing and defining reading. His own definition of reading, apparently simplistic, seems to be, in a way, very comprehensive and effective. For him, "reading is asking questions (...) and getting your questions answered" (ibid.p.105). This 'asking/answering' feature of the reading process makes all the difference in relation to those plain and inadequate definitions of reading used above as an illustration by Smith.

There is no doubt that asking questions is a very difficult task, not only because the traditional educational approaches do not allow much space for such a practice, (Kenny, 1993:431),

text is about." (Garnham and Oakhill, 1996:314). Thus, our purpose in reading could be just to enjoy ourselves, or (because we are experts on a topic) to check details, to learn about something, to get informed, etc. These purposes are encompassed by Graesser, Person, and Huber's (1992, in: Graesser et alii, 1996) "four major question-generation mechanisms: (a) attempts to correct knowledge deficits, (b) monitoring the common ground between speech participants, (c) coordinating social activity, and (d) monitoring the flow of conversation" (p. 23).

Hence, being able to generate (relevant) questions about a text implies that we are halfway towards its full comprehension; and being able to answer those questions implies that the text is likely to have been (totally) comprehended. Relevance, appropriateness and prediction are key concepts at this point. According to Gajdusek and van Dommelen (1993) critical thinking has as its main focus to teach students "to take responsibility for asking important, relevant questions" (p. 205). However, as pointed out by Dole et al. (1991), "teacher-generated questions are a time-honoured instructional practice in reading. In contrast, student-generated questions are rarely used, even though they have been shown to lead to deeper levels of text processing" (p.246).

Apart from relevance and prediction, appropriateness is another key concept to be taken into account when reading comprehension is at issue (i.e. asking/answering questions). As Pearson and Johnson (1978) state, "the issue is not whether or not to use questions, but

how, when and where they ought to be used" (p.154).

It is important to notice that the 'appropriate or relevant' questions asked (implicitly or explicitly), the way we approach the text, our commitment to it has to do, as Smith points out, with the background knowledge we have in relation to the topic focused. And background knowledge is the core of schema theory, which is our special concern in this paper.

3. The Schema Theory

Let's put it all together

One of the most influential theories to emerge from the research in the area of reading process, Schema Theory, as Ruddell and Unrau (1994) state,

holds the key to explaining the top-down view of reading as an interactive process. The reader's schemata are probably best understood as networks of associated knowledge that are activated and instantiated or as knowledge clusters that can be tapped for pieces of information that the reader reassembles to form new schemata (1011).

Proposed by Rumelhart (1977, 1981) and based on the ideas of Bartlett, Anderson, Kant and others, the schema theory, unlike previous mental models of reading, presupposes the integration of bottom-up and top-down processing. Also, the reader has an active role to the accomplishment of the reading process. In addition, being the result of a shift from a behaviourist view of reading, where meaning is considered to be found in the text only, to that one where meaning results from the negotiation between text

(new information) and reader's previous knowledge (old information), the Schema Theory represents perhaps a more dynamic and veracious contemporary account of the construction of the reading process. However, this is not an unanimous view. There are some controversy about its real effectiveness as a mental model posed by researchers such as Alba and Hasher; Beers; Mandler; Van Dijk and Kintsch (in: Clapham, 1996:20, 24, 27), as far as scope, levels of language processing covered, flexibility of the notion of schema theory are concerned. Notwithstanding, it has been welcomed by many of those working directly in the field of reading research.

According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1983:556), Schema Theory

has as its fundamental tenets that text, any text, either spoken or written, does not by itself carry meaning. Rather, according to schema theory, a text only provides directions for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge. This previously acquired knowledge is called background knowledge, and the previously acquired knowledge structures are called schemata(...).

Anderson (1994:469) refers to the reader's schema as

organised knowledge of the world, [that] provides much of the basis for comprehension, learning, and remembering the ideas in stories and texts. (...) In schema-theoretic terms, a reader comprehends a message when he is able to bring to mind a schema that gives a good account of the objects and events described in the message

On their turn Goodman & Goodman (1994:116) define the term 'schema' as

an organised cognitive structure of related knowledge, ideas, emotions, and actions that has been internalised and that guides and controls a person's use of subsequent information and response to experience.

Based on the studies of Anderson and Pearson (1984), Kintsch and Van Dijk (1978), and Spiro (1980), Oded and Stavans (1994) argue that

Previously acquired knowledge can be seen as the starting point for constructing a mental representation of text, while the minimal cues provided by the text itself are specific instantiations of the prior knowledge structure. When a reader interacts with a text, his/her mental representation of that text is a result of combining the content and rhetorical organisation of the immediate text with prior knowledge (497).

They add, in accordance with Carrell and Eisterhold (ibid., p.497), that "when a reader interacts with a text, his/her mental representation of that text is a result of combining the content and rhetorical organisation of the immediate text with prior knowledge".

It is interesting to notice the consensus in the various definitions of schemata above in relation to some basic elements. Thus, schemata presuppose big chunks of stored, organised and associated knowledge which is activated or instantiated at the appropriate moment by the reader. Also, the concepts of reading comprehension and schemata appear to be close-knit as the latter seems to

occur only when the former is constructed or activated. In Garnham and Oakhill's (1996) interpretation of Bransford's contribution to theories of text comprehension, this closeness is the base of "the constructive aspect of text comprehension" in which

information that is explicit in the text (almost always) has to be combined with relevant knowledge about the world. This knowledge comes from long-term memory and it may be specific knowledge about particular people, places, and things or general knowledge about types of people, places, and things. Construction and integration are closely connected because, in many cases, background knowledge contributes crucially to the integration of information from different clauses of a text (p. 316).

4. The Mismatches

*I say 'yes', you say 'no', I say 'come', you say 'go'
You say 'goodbye', I say 'hello'*

What causes mismatches? Tierny and Pearson (1994:502) point out the possibility that the reader does not have the relevant schemata for a text (content schemata in Carrell's terms); or that s/he has activated the inadequate schemata either because his/her purpose in reading was different from the author's or because s/he has been guided by culturally different aspects of interpreting the text. According to Anderson (ibid., p.472), those guides are age, sex, race, religion, nationality, occupation of the reader. This only highlights the fact that, as Carrell and Eisterhold (ibid., p.559) argue,

much of the meaning understood from a text is really not actually in the text, *per se*, but in the reader, in the background or schematic knowledge of the reader. What is understood from a text is a function of the particular schema that is activated at the time of the processing (i.e. reading) the text.

In a study carried out by Oded and Stavans (ibid), mismatches have been treated in a very interesting way. The desynchronization between the author's point of view ("correct schema") and the reader's one ("false schema") would depend on the way the specific knowledge about a specific text had been activated. We are used, either as teachers or material designers, to guide students to comprehend texts the way we think is the correct one by focusing on comprehension questions or on a specific perspective that could privilege the "correct schema". Activation of background knowledge is, therefore, an ideological activity. And it could not be different. As Baron (1997) calls attention, "the way we look at seemingly 'objective' data _ from the movement of planets to the composition process _ is inevitably colored by the cognitive and social models we bring to our studies" (p. 37).

Part of what we grasp from a text comes from this [induced] activation, or, in Oded and Stavans terms, "imposed schema activation."

Marsha Bensoussan (1998) uses the terms 'innappropriate' / 'wrong' / 'faulty' schemata activation to refer to the mismatches she spotted in an experiment carried out with EFL students at Haifa University to "examine the effects of faulty processing on reading comprehension and test scores." (215).

She hypothesises that there are seven conditions that wrong schemata could be activated:

1. Faulty top-down processing (cf. Oded and Stavans, ibid.);
2. Faulty bottom-up processing;
3. Level of the students' English reading proficiency;
4. Lack of motivation;
5. Over-involvement;
6. The topic is unfamiliar or too abstract;
7. Misleading or unfocused questions.

In the epigraph of this paper, what caused the mismatch between the clerk and the lady? Obviously he did not activate the correct schemata when he heard the expression 'FT'. We could try to find some other reasons for that content schemata failure, but the first thing which comes to our mind is the clerk's cliché mental framework in relation to women (obviously, other people may find different reasons to justify the clerk's misunderstanding).

Supposing the guest was a businessman, would the clerk have activated the schemata 'something to drink @ sub-schemata 'tea' @ FT? Or would have he selected _ after some mental effort, of course _ the schemata associating the two letters with the name of the British financial bible?

How about us, readers? What should we know in order to understand that text the way intended by the journalist who is telling the story ("correct" / "appropriate" schema)? Undoubtedly, that text poses significant problems to readers if the expected inferences are not generated. When I gave that text to my

students, for example, they told me they had not understood it at all but they acknowledged that the cause was not exactly a language problem. Content schemata failure, caused by lack of background knowledge related to cultural and phonological levels probably grounded their lack of understanding. In Besoussan's terms it would be classified under condition 6 above. In order for them to understand the text they should:

- know the meaning of 'FT' (Financial Times) and what it represents in terms of prestige, and credibility in the British economic journalism;
- have an idea of the type of people who read such a publication;
- be familiarised with the different brands of tea (Earl Gray, Chinese tea, etc.) usually drunk by British people;
- notice that the letters FT and the word 'tea' have the same pronunciation;
- be acquainted with the English jokes about Irish people (similar to Brazilian jokes about Portuguese people, it was obvious that the _ supposedly _ English journalist was trying to ridicule Irishmen);
- be aware of the stereotypes on which jokes are usually based.

After being provided with all the necessary information most of my students were not able to grasp the subtlety contained in the text. The problem was not that the joke was not funny, but simply because it was based on different expectations and cultural values (to which my students had no prior experience).

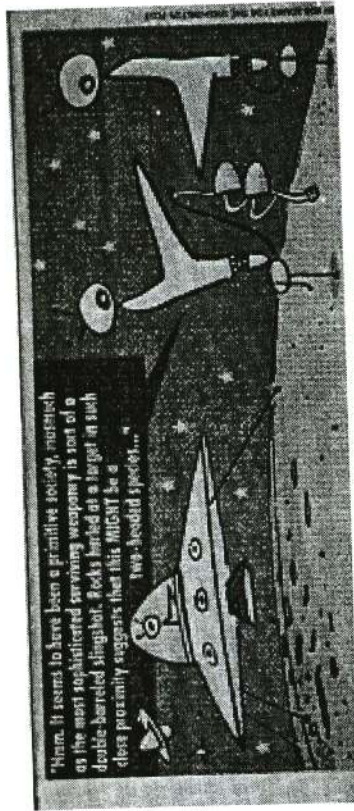


Table 1

Content mismatch (IN: The Washington Post, July 21, 1996)

Another example of mismatch caused by lack of content information can be seen in **table 1**.

The character is evaluating the situation based on his knowledge of the world. Being an alien, he probably had never seen or heard of a bra in his life. Therefore, the correct identification of such an object would be impossible for him. In fact, as he was able and ready to activate only weaponry schemata, he tried to interpret the object found based on such schemata. The result is wrong inferences and a complete misinterpretation!

thinking critically also implies to acknowledge the possibility of having a text interpreted under different perspectives which must be framed by "information about the identity, values, and biases of the speaker or writer" (Gajdusek and van Dommelen, *ibid.* p. 206). This possibility highlighted by the schema theory of a text having a multitude of different interpretations according to the different perspectives through which it might be analysed is illustrated by the cartoon in **table 2**.

5. The Importance of Schemata

What's schemata got to do with it?

Why is schemata important to reading comprehension, then? Perhaps because it is difficult to think of the reading process without this "cutting and fitting" mentioned by Anderson (1994:469) of prior personal experiences and knowledge of the world in the text.

He (I) proposes six functions of schemata which, I believe, provide evidence of their importance to the reading comprehension process (the comments are ours but based on Anderson's (*ibid.* pp.473-474) interpretation of those functions):

- a schema provides ideational scaffolding for assimilating text information® The broader the reader's background knowledge, the easier to adapt old schemata to new situations
- a schema facilitates selective allocation of attention® a schema guides the reader's attention to relevant points in text. Obviously the more schemata the reader has to be activated, the easier to

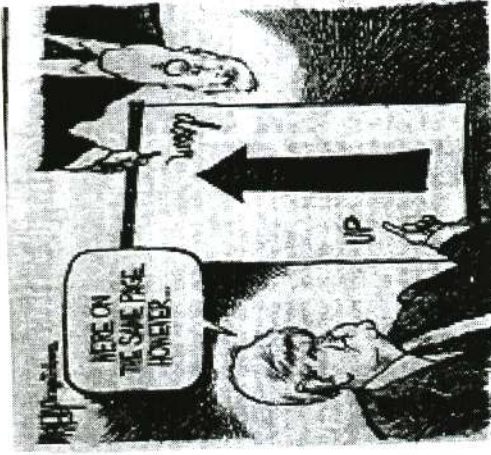


Table 2

Different interpretations X Different perspectives (International Herald Tribune, October 2, 1996)

perceive those relevant points. In the Irish clerk story, my students could not be selective in their allocation of attention as they did not have any schemata related to the context in question.

- a schema enables inferential elaboration® again, the corroboration of Carrel and Eisterhold's quotation that most of the meaning of a text is outside it. This inferential elaboration represents the bridges interconnecting related sub-schemata which are retrieved in order to establish integration and, therefore, understanding.
- a schema allows orderly searches of memory® the story below (table 3) illustrates this orderly search of memory (though in this case with a short circuit at the end!)

years. They chat about old times for a while, and then Max says, "How's your memory Phil? I seem to forget things." Phil says, "Hey, I've got a great doctor for you. I was starting to forget things myself and I heard about a doctor who gives a memory course. And it's terrific. He has you associate things and names with other things. You should see him." Max says, "I'd love to. What's his name?" And Phil says, "It's, er, uh, wait a minute. Let's see... a flower! Yeah, it has a long stem, it smells good. It's usually red but it can be yellow..."

"A rose?" Max prompts.

"That's it!" Phil says. And he shouts, "HEY, ROSE, WHAT'S THE NAME OF THAT DOCTOR I WENT TO?"

(Tony Kornheiser. In: The Washington Post)

Table 3
Schema orderly search of memory

Max comes back to town after having moved to Florida. He goes to visit his old friend Phil, whom he hasn't seen in

- a schema facilitates editing and summarising® schema seems to work with hierarchies. When some sort of schemata are activated, there are decisions taking place as to the

level of relevance the facts should be informed, mentioned, omitted, etc. Our mind usually knows, by some sort of mechanism, what is vital and what is trivial to different contexts and situations.

A schema permits inferential reconstruction® what we already know about a topic or a situation enables us to draw some inferences about missing details. The following story (table 4) is an example of this:

Table 4
Inferential reconstruction

In the beginning, when God was creating the earth, He distributed natural disasters among the nations. To one He gave earthquakes; to another, tidal waves; to a third, droughts. But He gave none of these disasters to Brazil. When the rest of the world saw this, they complained loudly to God that He had unfairly favoured Brazil. "Don't worry," God told the other nations. "Just wait until you see the people I put there."

(Alan Weber, In: Harvard Business Review)

The full comprehension of the text results from the integration of the explicit information presented in the text and the inferences (wh

ether true or false) we make about ourselves (Brazilians) and provided by our background knowledge.

6. Final Comments

Back to basics

This paper tried to demonstrate the pervasive impact of schemata in reading comprehension. As mentioned above,

the cognitive-centeredness of theoretical previous models, mainly of the 1950s and 1960s has been replaced by a more holistic understanding of the reading process, where cognitive, affective, cultural and personal aspects are taken into consideration when interpreting a text. It is in light of such aspects that a schema theory seems to be accounted for.

If it is true, as Goodman & Goodman (ibid.p.116) state, that "Humans have schemata for everything they know and do", then helping the reader construct/activate schemata seems to be of fundamental importance to the processing and instantiation of texts. It is part of our duty, as teachers / material designers to try and find ways of doing so by taking into consideration differences within subcultures, as Anderson (ibid.) appropriately stresses when he questions:

is it safe simply to assume that when reading the same story, children from every subculture will have the same experience with the setting, ascribe the same goals and motives to characters, imagine the same sequence of actions, predict the same emotional reactions, or expects the same outcomes? (p. 480)

It seems there is much work ahead.

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O ENSINO DE PLE EM CUBA

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Resumo: A sociedade cubana, durante as últimas quatro décadas, tem transitado por diferentes fases de desenvolvimento e alcançado lugares de destaque em esferas como a biotecnologia, a medicina, a educação, dentre outras. No setor da educação, o ensino de línguas estrangeiras em Cuba tem contribuído para a comunicação, compreensão e o conhecimento mútuo entre os povos. O objetivo deste trabalho é mostrar como o ensino de português ganhou destaque dentro do conjunto de línguas aprendidas em Cuba.

Palavras-chave: língua portuguesa, ensino de LE, aprendizagem.

Introdução

Cuba, país que em 1959 contava com quase um milhão de iletrados, foi declarado território livre de analfabetismo em 1961. Com esse antecedente, iniciou-se o ensino de Português como língua estrangeira (doravante PLE) em 1962. Este fato, no entanto, foi para os docentes de ontem, e continua sendo, para os de hoje, um enorme desafio.

O interesse pelo estudo da língua portuguesa em Cuba se justifica, pelas

sólidas relações e a colaboração econômica, sócio-política e cultural estabelecidas entre Cuba e os países de fala portuguesa. Cuba mantém um amplo intercâmbio científico e sócio-cultural com esses países, especialmente com o Brasil. O setor turístico é uma das áreas priorizadas em nosso país que está se desenvolvendo com muito sucesso e conta com um pessoal altamente qualificado. Brasil é um dos países que marca presença, pela quantidade de turistas que visitam nosso país a cada ano. Daí a necessidade de atender a demanda com relação à preparação de tradutores e ao treinamento em língua portuguesa do pessoal do setor hoteleiro. Por outro lado, o conhecimento da língua não se restringe à competência lingüística, também requer conhecimentos sobre a cultura-alvo, que permitam aceitar o diferente e estar consciente da sua própria.

A história do PLE em Cuba tem como personagens principais os próprios professores e alunos, que através de todos esses anos têm levado de geração a geração os conhecimentos sobre a língua e cultura dos países lusófonos,