# Towards a Textual Approach for Teaching Reading Comprehension

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## Abstract

In teaching reading comprehension (RC), the traditional methods of teaching English as a foreign language focused on the notion of extracting the meaning of individual words or sentences found in the reading text. In other words, the notion of text as well-organized construct that exhibits lots of thematic and textual relation has been- unfortunately- largely ignored.

The present paper advocates an opposite attitude. Recently, linguistic research in general and discourse analysis studies in particular have increasingly demonstrated that awareness of text structure has a lot to do improve reading instruction. In more clear terms, the writer believes that the features of text have a large effect on comprehension. Thus, comprehension does not occur by simply extracting meaning from text. During reading, the reader constructs different representations of the text that are important for comprehension. These are the underlying principles that would care for suggesting a textual approach for teaching RC. The outline and implications of this approach will be displayed in the course of the forthcoming presentation. Also a comparison between this approach and the traditional methods of teaching RC is going to be held in favor of this approach .

1. Introduction :

RC can be simply defined as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. We use the words *extracting* and *constructing* to emphasize both the importance and the insufficiency of the text as a determinant of reading comprehension.In this process, the reader extracts the required information from a written text as efficiently as possible. Readers, for example, apply different reading strategies when looking at a notice board in search for a particular type of flat and when carefully treading an article in a scientific journal. In each instance, different purposes are to be fulfilled. In the first case, a competent reader will quickly pick up the relevant information and reject the irrelevant one. In the second a case, a more detailed reading is required. It might be that all parts of the text are important, though in different degrees. Thus, readers use different strategies to read different texts for different purposes.

2. What do People Read?

There are so many kinds of texts that people usually come across while reading. People may read:
- Novels, short stories, tales,; other literary texts and passages such as essays, diaries, anecdotes, biographies, etc.
- Plays
- Poems, limericks, nursery rhymes

- Letters, postcards, telegrams, notes,
- Newspapers and magazines(headlines, articles, editorials, letters to the editors, sop press, classified ads. ,weather forecast, radio/TV/ theatre programs)
- Specialized articles, reports, reviews, memos, essays, business letters, summaries, précis,, accounts, pamphlets(political and others)
- Handbooks, textbooks, guidebooks
- Recipes
- Advertisements, travel brochures, catalogues
- Puzzles, problems, rules for games
- Instructions, directions, notices, rules and regulations, posters,
- Signs, forms, graffiti, menus, price lists, tickets
- Comic strips, cartoons, caricatures, legends of maps and pictures
- Statistics, diagrams, flow/pie charts, time-tables, maps
- Telephone directories, dictionaries, phrasebooks

3. Why do we Read?

   Two main reasons can be stated for a person to read:

- Reading for pleasure ( out of this paper's concern)
- Reading for a purpose, e.g. finding  information in order to do something with it.

4. How do people read ? (Strategies)

There are lots of strategies (active mental processes) that people employ when they read. The following is a list of these strategies ( mostly exhaustive)  taken from Munby (1976) *Communicative Syllabus Design*:

- Recognizing the language script.
- Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items   and words.
- Understanding Explicitly sated information.
- Understanding information that is not explicitly stated.
- Understanding conceptual(literal meaning).
- Understanding the communicative value of sentence s and utterances.
- Understanding relations within the sentence(micro relations).
- Understanding relations within the parts of the text  (macro relations established. by lexical and grammatical cohesion  devices).
- Interpreting the text with reference to the outside world.
- Identifying and  recognizing discourse markers found in the text.
- Identifying the main ideas and subtle one in each part of the text and the text as  a whole, i.e. main ideas vs. supporting ones.
- Extracting salient points to summarize the text.
- Basic reference skills.
- Skimming.
- Scanning.
- Providing graphic representations for the texts.

The above list of macro strategies can be included within the three stages  of  reading, namely:

- A Pre-reading stage where readers> *Preview, Skim, Expect , Assume, Anticipate, Speculate, Ask, Hypothesize, Search*

- A While-reading stage where readers> *Identify, Scan, Underline, Refute, Answer, Infer, Reject, Find, Discover, Join, Compare, Recognize, Identify, Attribute ,Interpret, search locate, classify,*
- After-reading stage where readers> *React, Respond, Evaluate, Imitate, Assess, Transfer, Use, Apply, Learn, Follow, (Dis)Agree, Expand, Tabularize, Conclude, Draw(diagrams, charts ,graphs, etc), generalize*

## 5. Text Structure as a Reading variable :

Over the past 15 years, research on discourse analysis and language comprehension has increasingly demonstrated that text structure awareness has a strong impact on efforts to improve reading instruction. In an early review of the impact of text structures on reading , Pearson and Camperell (1981) discussed the potential of story grammars and expository prose structures for reading comprehension. In other words , the features of text have a large effect on comprehension. Comprehension does not occur by simply extracting meaning from text. During reading, the reader constructs

different representations of the text that are important for comprehension.These representations include, for example, the surface code (the exact wording of the text), the text base (idea units representing the meaning), and a representation of the mental models embedded in the text. Texts can be difficult or easy, depending on factors inherent in the text, on the relationship between the text and the knowledge and abilities of the reader, and on the activities in which the reader is engaged. For example, the content presented in the text has a critical bearing on reading comprehension.A reader's domain knowledge interacts with the content of the text in comprehension. In addition to content, the vocabulary load of the text and its linguistic structure, discourse style, and genre also interact with the reader's knowledge. When too many of these factors are not matched to a reader's knowledge and experience, the text may be too difficult for optimal comprehension to occur. This necessitates the clarification of the notion of 'text ' so as to be incorporated in this model.

## 6. The Notion of 'Text' :

It is a well-know fact that texts are not mere collection of sentences gathered randomly in one space. Rather, these parts exhibit a variety of logical, semantic and syntactic relationship collectively call ' Text Structure' or ' Text Grammar '. These relations constitute an integral part of the message conveyed by the text, which readers have to understand. For this reason, understanding the sequencing of these sentences can shed much light on the reading process itself. Recently, researchers have been showing greater interest in text structure and the integration of its ideas and the effect of this structure on the amount of readers' recall or what they learn from the text.

With reference to the notion of text structure, text analysts usually talk about various levels of text structure instead of one level of analysis (cf. Kintsch and Vipond, 1979 : 326 ) . Research in text structure can provide lots of contributions in the field of teaching RC. Text structure represents one of the parameters in the light of which texts are chosen for reading. It also enables

those working in the field of teaching reading to determine the amount of information the reader can recall in addition to the pattern of this information and its form. This means that only those that encourage more recall or those that activate more cognitive processes will be chosen for RC activities. This has lead to classify texts in terms of their readability in terms of sentence length, word length and ideas density. However, this process has many potential controversies that could only be overcome by analyzing the text from the writer's point of view instead of the reader's, which vary from one to another and from one text to another (cf. Dawes,1966: 77-86 ) (Frederiksen,1975: 139-166) (Meyer, 1975: 44 )Away from the complexities of text analysis models scattered in the linguistic literature, it seems that the majority of these models view texts in terms of a hierarchy of three levels of text structure, namely: Microstructure Level, Macrostructure Level and Top-Level Structure (Halliday and Hassan, 1976: 323 ), ( Haviland and Clark,1974: 512-521 ), ( Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978: 363-394). I shall talk about these three levels of text structure in brief only as much as they are relevant to the suggested approach for teaching RC.

6.1. Microstructure level : This level caters for the intra-sentential relationships that hold the parts of individual sentences together. Such relations are realized by a set of sentential rules of well-formedness and grammaticality,( e.g. subject-verb concord, word order, embedding, nominalization, sentence type, etc.). This level represents the lowest-in-rank level at which a text can be approached.

6.2. Macrostructure Level : This is a level where the logical ideas (propositions) can be tackled. It goes beyond the sentence boundary up to the paragraph level. In terms of length and size, the unit of analysis is larger in size and longer in length. One might expect some syntactic inter-sentential relations to be diagnosed at this level such as the relation of reference, conjunction, substitution, and the like.

6.3. Top-level Structure: As the name suggests, this level goes beyond the boundaries of the two preceding ones to deal with the textual relationship that are realized by the text as whole unit. Clearly, relations of such kind are to be sought within the various parts of the text regardless of its size or length.

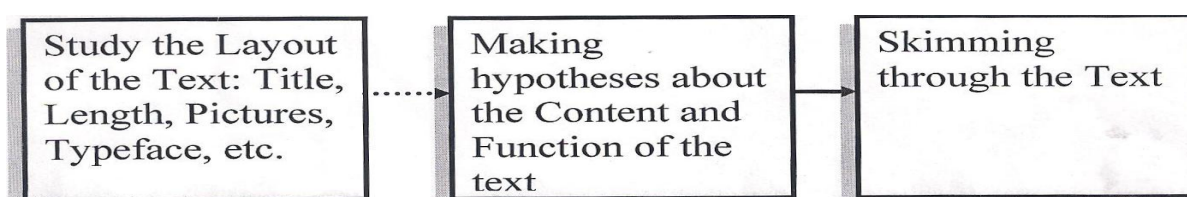What I am interested in here is the implications which this common classification of textual structures brings about to the task of RC teaching. It might be useful here to refer to Meyer's (1975) views about text structure and organization. Myer's model of text analysis basically builds on six assumptions which I find supportive to the Con-textual approaching I am asking for. These assumptions are:
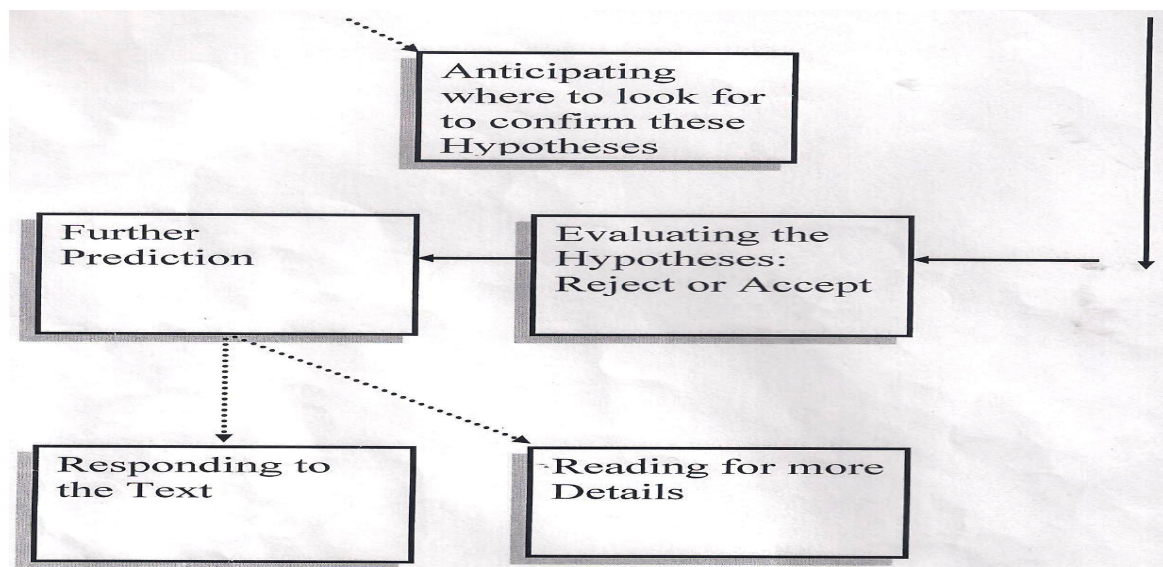
- Ideas that are presented at the top-level structures of the text are easier to remember and recall than those presented at low-level structures ( Sawnson, 1979 ).
- Information presented at the top-level structures can be better stored in memory than that presented at the lower-level ones (Walker and Meyer, 1980 : 263-275).

- The kind of relations holding these ideas and propositions has a great positive effect on the amount of recall when these relations are established at the top- level structures in comparison with those established at the low-level structures (Meyer,1975: 44 ).
- Different kinds of relations have different positive effects on the amount of recall even when they are established at the top-level itself ( Meyer & Freedle , in press,2002: 329 ).
- Students who are able to identify top-level structures and use them can remember much more of the information implied in the text than their peers who lack this ability ( Brandt & Bluth,1980 : 54 ), ( Meyer,1979: 109-117 ) , ( Meyer, 1980:72-103 ).
- Training on how to recognize top-level structures and how to use them can improve the reader's understanding and increase the amount of their recall (Bartlett , 1978).

The assumptions above, which have been proved to have empirical evidence, bring further evidence – may be stronger than ever – to the adoption of the con(textual approach for teaching RC.

One crucial question here has to be answered before proceeding to the other – and last – argument in favor of this approach. This question reads as follows: To what extent should the teacher go in his analysis of a reading text? Should he account for every single word or expression whenever he is involved in the activity of teaching? As a matter of fact, it is not the length of the unit that the teacher and his students should worry about. Rather it is the objective of analysis that imposes which unit is to be chosen at which level of analysis. If a detailed understanding of each part of the text, for example, it would be natural that the smaller units of analysis will be sought at the lowest level of text structure. That is to say, there is one and only one procedure of analysis preferred for all types of texts and even parts of the same text. Different units of analysis at various levels of text structure might be dealt with even for one single text. However, it should be mentioned that the teacher should be careful to lead his students to the right procedure of analysis that is compatible with the objectives of the reading task. Clearly, readers will find themselves moving along a continuum of reading strategies with the pre-reading activities and expectations on one end and careful reading and reacting to the text on the other.In addition to the text-proper variables, there are contextual variables involved in the process of RC. These are also worth-taking when carrying the task of teaching RC. Below each of these variables is discussed briefly:

| Study the Layout of the Text: Title, Length, Pictures, Typeface, etc. | Making hypotheses about the Content and Function of the text | Skimming through the Text |
| --- | --- | --- |

Finally, and in the light of the above discussion, I would like to supplement my argument in favor of this approach with some instructive remarks which I found essential to the successful implementation of this approach for teaching RC. These remarks are meant to be further guidelines for better teaching of RC and I shall put them in the order in which I believe they should be practiced.

One : Stop and Watch:

At this stage, the teacher is advised to introduce some introductory remarks in the form of questions and inquiries which serve as symptoms for the actual process of reading.  These may include:

- What we want to take from the text?
- What does the text look like? A newspaper article? An essay? A story? A Conversation? A list?
- Are there any pictures? Diagrams? Graphic illustrations?
- Look at the main and sub-titles within the text!
- What do you expect the writer want to say?
- Do some ' eye-reading'. Go through the text quickly.
- Choose the appropriate reading style with reference to:
  - form of the text
  - length of the text
  - time available for reading
  - reasons for reading the text

These factors will dictate whether the reader will read every single sentence in sequence or will jump around, whether he will start at the beginning or  in the middle.

Two: Scanning: Ask the students to scan through the text very quickly to find out specific names of people and places (if any) (usually there are). Here the students will need to "read around the word" to learn about these  names .

Three:  Budget your time! Set a time limit for the reading task. This is the only way to increase reading speed and efficiency. Do not let the task be time-free.

Four:  Reading without reading. Ask the student to look for keywords that help them answer some of the questions raised, e.g. *What color(s) are the taxis in London? What means of transportation are used in Delhi?*

Five: Reading for gist. Ask the students to read for gist to get the several ideas of the topic of the text. They need not to understand these ideas in full.

Six: Stop and Read. Here students are directed for a single slow reading or many reading in different styles.

Seven: Linkage: Students are directed to link the text to the graphs, pictures, drawings, etc. If none of these supplied, students should be at least directed to notice the typeface, the layout, or any special features of the text and link them to text content.

Eight: Topic Sentences: Students are directed to pick out the topic sentence of each paragraph .

## 7. Implications for teachers and course designers :

The postulation of these strategies and stages entails that there must be different exercise and question types to develop the strategies and to be compatible with the three stages mentioned above. In other words, a given exercise should use a certain type of question(s) and serve a certain function to develop a certain reading skill or strategy. Of course, such types should be linked to both the *form* of the text and its *function*.

This leads us to the implications of the textual approach in the area of material development for a RC course and teaching it.

## 8. Implications for the material and course development :

- Suitable for the learners' level (readability and difficulty)
- Compatible with their academic and psychological needs, interests and background
- Graded
- Authentic
- Text analysis should be part of the curriculum in terms of consistent exploitation of reading texts for this purpose

## 9. Implications for teaching :

- There is a correlative relation between the reader's recognition of the macro structures and the amount of his recall
- Readers should be encouraged to apply different approaches of analysis to different text: deal with each text in a different way.
- Readers trained according to this approach would be more competent to communicate in real life situations and to produce more authentic-like texts in writing.
- Readers will be more capable to appreciate the aesthetic features of the FL.
- Teachers should help their students to :
  - identify the important words and concepts;
  - signal out the *textual devices, summary statements, headings, connectives , introductory statements ,* etc; and
  - notice the typographic clues: *italics , boldface , underlining , etc.*
- Students should not read the text for its explicit ideas only but also for its inferential ones as well.

- Students should think about what they are reading before, during and after the act of reading.
- Students should be trained to utilize various reading strategies for reading different text types:
  *( Reading Strategies are tactics or procedures which competent readers utilize to interact with a written text and to understand it on the literal, inferential, critical and creative levels)*
- There is a considerable support for the direct instruction of textual organization as a way to improve reading comprehension.
- Text structure instruction has also been shown to improve students' content learning in many academic subjects. In other words t serves both language skills and academic content learning.
- Teaching different text types will help learners recognize various *textual structures.*
- When students are made aware of these organizational formats and patterns, they will (a) be able to understand better the coherence and logical information being presented and (b) be able to locate the main ideas and distinguish them from less important or peripheral information.
- Before reading a text, students should look at the *form* of the text; is it a list, a conversation, a newspaper article, an essay, a story, etc. in order
- to decide on the appropriate reading style in the light of:
  a. form of the text in hand,
  b. length of that text,
  c. time allocated for reading the text, and
  d. reasons for reading the text(slowly or quickly)(every sentence or jumping over sentences) ( start from the beginning or the middle) etc.
- Reading should be linked to other activities and skills, i.e. reading stories aloud by the teacher for listening or asking readers to expand a short reading text for the sake of a writing session.

10. The significance of graphic representations :

This can be interpreted in terms of various types of graphic display to raise the students' awareness of text structures. There are Pre- and post-reading graphs. Among the graphic organizers are hierarchical tree structures, classification tables, time lines, descriptive arrays, and cause and effect tables.Since reading is an active skill advising reading exercises should seek to develop students' skills of inference by advising exercises in which there is no single straightforward answer. Another aspect of reading being a skill lies in its communicative function. Exercises should be meaningful in the sense that they correspond to what one is expected to do with the text. i.e. writing an answer to a letter; using the text to do something (e.g. solve a problem, make a choice, etc; compare the information given to some previous knowledge.

Consequently, students should be taught how to approach and reflect about texts so as to become independent and efficient readers.

11. Impact of text authenticity :

It's mandatory to advise authentic material for reading comprehension activities. This rule builds on some practical and logical principles:

- Ironically, 'simplifying' a text often results in increased difficulty because the system of references, repetition, and redundancy as well as discourse markers on which readers usually rely on while reading are often removed or at least dramatically changed. In other words ، *simplification* often means:
  a. Replacing difficult words (or those thought to be so) or structures by others with which students are familiar! Making explicit the rhetorical devices and semantic relations which were otherwise implicit!!
  b. Changing the layout of the text, which is part of its message.
- Difficulty does not depend on the text itself but what students are asked to do with it.
- Simplification not only reduces the students' interest and motivation, but also increases the difficulty of the text. This time because of deleting pictures, figures and all other editing and formatting, which represent integral part of the message.
- Students will think themselves learning but they are not; teachers will assume they are teaching but not !

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