

THE SEARCH FOR AUTONOMY: A CHALLENGE FOR THE  
STUDENT READER

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In this paper we discuss aspects that are linked to the treatment given to the text in classrooms, namely the selection of texts, the relationship between reading and text writing and the particular qualities of the literary text. We will also deal with a central issue related to these aspects: the development of the student's autonomy as a reader and text writer.

Despite the multiplicity of theories about textuality, reading and text production, whether in the domain of literature and linguistics or in pedagogy, it is clear that the learner's autonomy as a reader and text producer, both in mother tongue (MT) and foreign language (FL) contexts, has generally been overlooked in the work developed in classrooms. Autonomy is certainly made more difficult to attain within the different learning stages by attitudes which range from the teacher's excessive authoritative interference, assuming there is one single ideal interpretation derived from pre-established models and meanings, to almost no interference at all from those teachers whose major cause of concern is to avoid imposing meanings and conducting the students to the teacher's own interpretation.

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In contrast to these extreme views, we defend the idea that, considering the type of activity and the role of the individuals, it is through classroom interaction that more efficient contributions to the gradual construction of differentiated and progressive stages leading to full autonomy may be brought about.

It is the student's autonomy as a reader and text writer that has constituted one of the main goals of the research which we have been carrying out with undergraduates.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, we are particularly interested in analysing how autonomy develops as well as to what extent and in which ways the teacher aids the student's learning in this process.

### **Autonomy and Text Selection**

We are in the process of analysing the data collected during the intervention stage of our research, but our classroom observations have already shown that the literary text may help to enhance the progress of autonomy, since it may serve as a starting point to the re-creation of experiences, perceptions and opinions. That is why we have started to implement its use in 'instrumental' classes which originally favoured the journalistic text.

This initial option for using newspaper and magazine texts is due to the fact that, at first, these texts appeared to be more related to the themes which had been most cited in the questionnaires applied at the beginning of the term and in oral inquiries. These themes referred to national and international facts and events, and to popular reports on scientific work in various fields. The foreign language students have also shown interest in matters related to different cultures. It might be worth mentioning that these themes have been more often pointed out than the presumed interests in the student's specific area of study.

### **Active Comprehension: the Germ of a Response**

At the present stage, our research work has focused on some pedagogic limitations of the 'instrumental' approach (Language Teaching for Specific Purposes) which restricts text reading to a mere recognition of pre-established meanings and linguistic units in journalistic, literary or other types of texts used in classroom. For this reason, we chose a plan of action based on active comprehension which, according to Bakhtin (1990: 131), 'must hold the germ of a reply'. This assertion allows us to consider, in comprehension activities, that oral and written text production is a natural way of achieving this response germ. Hence, we have emphasised the connection between reading and written production, obviously respecting the existing differences between MT and FL text production.

We must point out that we do not disregard, especially in FL, the fact that written production might not be the main learning goal, and we have to deal with the difficulties in obtaining from the students, texts which are progressively more autonomous and less deficient in textual quality. In spite of this, we have noticed that establishing a balance between reading and regular written activities has provided the students with broader opportunities to experience, in a more authentic way, the language in context.

Our project finds support from the considerations of a great variety of scholars who study the language from the point of view of the utterance, and who call attention to the necessity of directing studies to language uses in specific contexts, so as to avoid reducing this language to its internal structure or, as Bakhtin (1990: 99) says, to the 'isolated, closed, monological utterance'.<sup>2</sup>

According to this author, reading as a passive act sets its priority in recognition alone, excluding *a priori* any active response (op.cit.: 99). Thus, considering that it is in the learning process that meaning is set up, we have sought to foster, in the classroom, actions that favour interaction among the individuals participating in the work with the

text, namely the author of the source-text and the individual readers — the teacher and the students.

Alongside these issues, we must make clear that our views of the reading process approach the social and historical aspects in a broader scope, and at the same time, in a more immediate dimension, consider the situational aspects. Both instances are linked to cognitive, affective, linguistic, extralinguistic, textual and extratextual aspects, so as to account for the complexity of the reading act. This view of reading allows us to base our work on more than one theoretical approach, in an attempt to harmonise the contributions that each theory brings to elucidate the phenomenon that we are studying. For this reason we could rely on the work of authors who favour a socio-historical view of the reading process, such as Bakhtin (1990) and Maingueneau (1995) alongside others who emphasise the textual and cognitive aspects, namely Cicurel (1991) and Péry-Woodley (1993). Both perspectives are not incompatible if the language definition supporting them in the given instances is wide and complex, that is, a concept of language which, as Maingueneau (*op.cit.*: 06) states, 'is at the same time a system of rules and locus for psycho-social investments'.<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely this view of the language that enables us to consider reading and writing productions as interrelated activities which evolve from the interlocutor process in the classroom context. Different researchers and theoreticians have emphasised this interrelationship, but the actual teaching and learning situation still maintains a gap between the reflections that emerge from the theoretical discourse and the pedagogical action, requiring less general and more operational approaches. The consequences of this disjunction are clearly seen in two opposing classroom tendencies: (1) practices that are completely bound to the mechanism of the methods and (2) practices that are mismanaged by the 'solutionism' of ready-made strategies and techniques.

## **The Literary Text in the Classroom**

Although we are fully aware of the necessity of attending to the students' most immediate interests and needs, at the present stage of our research, it is our conviction that, within the perspective of moving beyond a strictly utilitarian approach to the reading task, the literary text has been a most important contribution to a more complete and less fragmented education of a reader who will not limit him/herself to a single text type, specific themes and lexical items.

In order to move beyond the boundaries imposed on learning disciplines by the educational institution, which determines divisions between literature and language teaching, between utilitarian goals to some students and broader general objectives to others, as well as between different 'competences', we have focused our attention predominantly on a comprehensive educational perspective that encompasses both general and linguistic knowledge, thus making way for classroom practices that encourage autonomy and critique during the reading and text writing tasks.

In the light of these considerations, we work with various thematic interests, as for example, the above mentioned news and cultural issues, associating different types of texts amongst which are the canonical literary texts. However, even if the teachers satisfy the demands for these thematic interests, they should, at the same time, try to raise other motivations which, in Brazilian contexts, the less privileged pupils do not have, owing to a lack of opportunity to get in touch with the diversity of subjects which are available to students who are better positioned in social status.

The basis for the work with literary texts is founded upon an approach which integrates different types of texts, in such a way as to take into consideration the inherent differences of each type, with special concern for the uniqueness of the literary text. In order to attain this goal, the text must be regarded both in terms of the conditions required for its production (in which the interlocutors, the situational

framework, the discourse objectives and the social, historical and ideological elements are included) and the language system itself.

As regards the specific qualities of the literary text, it may be useful to emphasise that the experience of reading this type of text differs from that afforded by reading the journalistic text "which is not memorised, which is discarded, forgotten, hidden by the next article" (Cicurel, 1991: 127).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in the relative timelessness conferred to the literary text, its 'meaning does not remain static (...) [but] can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader in another country or a different period of history' (Collie & Slater, 1987: 03).

It should also be noted that reading a literary text to fulfil a task assignment is far removed from the reading perspective envisaged by Cicurel (1991: 126), as an 'affective and intellectual experience'<sup>5</sup> that goes beyond the objective of reading for information or knowledge acquisition, to a particular stage in which it is an act of fruition.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning that, perhaps, on account of a possible lack of an adequate treatment that may promote a pleasurable interaction with the literary text, teachers run the risk of disfiguring the text through an approach that is based only on 'peripheral' activities such as cross words, identification with one or another character, role-playing and others (Lajolo, 1993: 15).

Although we agree with Lajolo's (op.cit.) ideas, we do not deny the possibility of integrating, in a MT or FL course programme, activities related to the specific aspects of the canonical literary text with those related to the language system itself and its interrelationship with the extralinguistic factors. On the contrary, *whatever the nature of the text*, we believe that it is important to think about the numerous regular and unpredictable features of the language without reducing it either to a strictly linguistic formal analysis or to a peripheral study.

### **Facing Different Text Types: the Construction of Positive Attitudes**

In order to implement students and teacher's approach to a reading activity, without establishing false distinctive standards between texts, it should be noted that most of the qualities usually credited to literary texts alone — as for instance, the multiplicity of meanings and a greater presence of subjectivity — are aspects which also exist in other genres. An advertisement, for example, has many metaphors and a simple letter written to a friend may also offer occasion for the expression of subjectivity. What is particularly relevant when we compare texts is that aspects such as 'metaphorization' and subjectivity take different forms both quantitatively and qualitatively, according to the text type. Besides this, it is interesting to observe that, within the same text type; for example, there are oscillations in the individual's concealment or remoteness and to a greater or lesser degree of 'metaphorization'. These oscillations are revealed through linguistic markers and are connected to the conditions required for text production as previously mentioned.

In our analysis, we have also observed that, compared to other types of text, the higher instances of metaphors present in the literary texts represent one of the greatest difficulties in the interpretation and in the writing process. This might be justified by the fact that, in our country, since the first school years the student undergoes lessons that seldom bring about creativity, but rather favour linear reading and repetition. In fact, the more the students reproduce meanings, the more they are rewarded. Thus, the quality of reading and text writing is jeopardised: comprehension does not reach the level of the metaphor and text writing does not go beyond the imitative level.

In the specific case of the FL, these difficulties add to those which are faced when reading all kinds of texts because of a lack of knowledge of linguistic and extralinguistic elements, the latter related to usage contexts and to the FL culture.

Another deficiency that all students usually present, particularly when reading a literary text, is that they are forced to read texts which are completely alien to their interests and to their reality. This may be the reason why very early in their school life they learn to hate reading. As we have argued before, we do not intend to favour the idea that all the texts brought to the classroom should have a direct relationship with the students' life, but it is hoped that each reader's preferences and motivations are respected, so as to provide agreeable interactions during the reading task.

In order to overcome, or at least gradually lessen, these difficulties, the teacher's role is essential in providing space for awareness and creation through selected activities as well as to guarantee, through her/his action, the qualities of the interactions brought about in the classroom.

In our work with the language system, we intend to study the different text types, and the diversity within the same types, expressed on linguistic and extralinguistic levels, so as to contribute to the student's improvement as a reader and a text writer. In this sense, it may be worth adding that according to the research methodology, the exploration of a certain linguistic aspect must occur when demanded by the classroom work. The reason for this attitude arises from the fact that we defend an interactionist view of teaching and learning in which the teachers adjust their contribution to the classroom events, instead of suggesting a ready-made and imposed intervention.

One more thing to be remembered is that the existing studies about text typology present a great variety of classifications (cf. Péry-Woodley, 1993) and that, before these classifications become manageable for classroom use, they must be re-examined and adapted to practical purposes.

Some of these classifications may prove to be excessively complex and, depending on the categories introduced, they might have hardly any practical use for the classroom work. Others, in spite of their potential applicability, need to be re-examined in the light of the work



to be done and not inversely, i.e. as a starting point for thinking about the matter. It is useful to stress that, whatever the cases and origins, when the aim is not linguistic descriptions but learning, the adoption of large amounts of terminology has often brought about additional obstacles to the student. And further, they do not always lead to improvement in reading and writing abilities.

### **Basic Guidelines for Classroom Activities**

Summarising our basic proposal for classroom intervention, we will proceed to outline actions which we recommend should be implemented in a non-fragmented way and according to each learning situation and their particular features.

- Discussion and selection of possible themes with the students;
- Selection of texts in the above mentioned interest areas, with space for the introduction of thematically similar texts (unfortunately, few students have available a selection of texts and themes other than those supplied by the teacher);
- Work with the selected texts:
  - a) reading and various productions — oral and written — role-playing, pictographic representations, music etc. interrelating them with new texts;
  - b) awareness about the language (depending on the issues arising during the activities).

### **Flexibility and Mobility: the Essential Qualities of a Productive Syllabus**

In contrast to authors such as Cicurel (1991), who anticipate stages in an interactive approach, we propose that the above mentioned items be integrated in such a way that there are not pre-determined phases during the work with the text: it is possible to start with a reading task

which leads to a written activity which in turn may point to other readings. Conversely, one may start with a written activity which may take the student to one or more text reading and then return to a written task. As for the reading activity itself, we do not support the idea of specific, well-delimited, constrained stages, that is, starting from prediction tasks (pre-reading) to more detailed reading. These stages will be put into practice (or not) depending on the reading texts and on the actions proposed by the individuals involved in the activities. For example, after discussing about a certain subject and a specific text, the individuals decide what to produce next be that an oral, written, pictographic, etc.

In fact, we have noticed in our analysis that, in spite of the undeniable usefulness of the pedagogical approaches derived from the cognitive and text studies, the latter loses ground in creativity and in the search of autonomy, with the adoption of pre-established sequential phases. This procedure is similar to the well-known phases of the class which have always been present in several forms in the history of MT and FL teaching. Suffice it to say that this type of conduct has crossed the traditional methods, continued to exist in the audio-visual methods and are present even in some so-called communicative and interactive approaches.

The attempt to release the study of texts from traditional approaches such as reading aloud and linear comprehension often results in new constraints imposed on the interaction established both among the different readers and between author and reader, hindering, therefore, the possibilities of creating favourable conditions for interactive actions which would otherwise promote creativity and autonomy in classrooms.

This autonomy is not considered in its ideal form as an expression of total independence from the text, from the language system nor from the socio-historical elements, but rather, as a gradual assertion of independence from the institutionalised power which is often present in the classroom.

In accordance with our concept of the teaching-learning process, emphasised throughout this paper, the activities presented in the classroom take into account the development of autonomy even though this approach remains a challenge when working in the context of the Brazilian educational system.

### **Notes**

- 1 Our research, "Reading and text production in MT and FL classrooms: the making of a student's grammar" focuses on the question of how grammatical work intervenes in the student's autonomy, without neglecting, however, other aspects involved in reading and writing texts. Research Team: Rita M<sup>a</sup> D. Zozzoli (leader), Marcia Rosetti de O. Albuquerque, M<sup>a</sup> Stela T. B. Lameiras, and Lúcia de Fátima Santos.
- 2 (transl.)
- 3 (transl.)
- 4 (transl.)
- 5 (transl.)

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