DESIGNING READING TASKS TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING

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Introduction

What else is there besides multiple choice exercises, questions or true-false statements? What kind of readers do we EFL/ESL teachers, want to develop? Fortunately, there are alternative possibilities for designing reading activities which, besides being more interesting and fun for the students than the traditional tasks, can help develop more active and critical readers.

A search in EFL/ESL reading textbooks has revealed that the most frequently encountered types of reading activities are comprehension questions, multiple-choice exercises, and true-false statements (Tomitch, in press a). These tasks have been used throughout the history of language teaching, and one must agree that they have their merits. However, there are reasons why they should not be used as the only source of activity in the classroom. First, these types of tasks encourage a passive behavior on the part of the reader (Davies, 1995), leading him/her to adopt one mode of processing only while reading—generally bottom-up—and thus failing to build a complete and coherent mental representation of the text's content

(Tomitch, 1996). Second, these reading tasks do not contribute to the development of a strategic reader (Grabe, 1997; Paris, Wasik & Turner, 1991), since they do not easily allow for transferring of skills across texts. Third, as teachers, we know that, and research has shown this, students learn in different ways and, thus, we should provide them with varied types of tasks, so that we are able to reach their learning style. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present alternative possibilities for reading activities that can be used in the classroom, including varied reading tasks which elicit a more active behavior from readers and, consequently, foster a more critical attitude towards reading.

Characteristics of active reading tasks

Davies (1995) groups reading activities into two types: *passive* and *active* reading tasks. Passive tasks are those which, as described above, do not involve readers in a deep reading of the text, usually not requiring readers to go beyond the surface words to fulfill these tasks. Tasks considered passive include multiple-choice exercises, true or false statements and traditional questions (see Davies, 1995 for an extensive list). Active reading tasks, on the other hand, require readers to read between the lines and engage in an interactive reading with the passage in order to fulfil them. Below I describe the main characteristics of active tasks, and in the next section I present some examples.

Active reading tasks have a number of characteristics in common, which make them different from the more traditional passive activities (Davies, 1995). First, they make use of authentic material; that is, the material is selected from naturally occurring texts which were not written for didactic purposes. Although there is a great controversy in relation to what exactly constitutes an authentic text or authentic use of texts (see Tumolo, 1999, for a full discussion on the topic), the perspective of authenticity being adopted here is that of, as mentioned above, texts not written specifically to present, illustrate and/or exemplify a certain linguistic item. Second, active reading tasks contextualize reading. That

is, they allow the reader to see the text not as a mere product on the printed page, standing on its own and having meaning in itself, but as part of a broader social context which includes the writer and also the reader him/herself (see Meurer; Heberle; and Figueiredo, in this volume for a discussion on the social context of reading).

Third, these activities provide readers with a framework for approaching the text. That is, they enable readers to go to the text with some perspective in mind, either in terms of content or in terms of structure. This perspective may facilitate the whole process of reading, since working memory is not overloaded with the processing of individual clauses or sentences (Tomitch, 1996, in press b).

Fourth, they enable readers to look at the text in a more analytical manner and not simply in a way to answer specific questions. That is, readers are invited to detach themselves from the individual propositions in the text and assume a more global perspective taking account of the text as a whole. This procedure allows readers to construct a more coherent and accurate mental representation of the text's content, resulting in better comprehension and retention of the information in the text.

Fifth, the activities encourage students to interact with the text. That is, readers are not seen as mere receptors of text information, but as active contributors to the construction of meaning. In active tasks readers have to anticipate, predict, and look for information not explicitly stated in the passage, having to compute relationships between and across sentences and paragraphs. To do all this, readers have to actively participate in the process, bringing to bear the relevant prior knowledge in relation to both content and structural aspects of the text.

And finally, active reading tasks provide opportunity for students to interact with other classmates, by checking hypotheses they have made and also by discussing possible interpretations, in this way enabling students to see reading not only as a lonely private activity but also as a social and contextualized event.

Some examples of active reading tasks

Davies (1995) presents an extensive list of tasks that she considers active or passive, but she never discusses any of them. Some of the tasks considered active are table completion/construction, diagram completion/construction, transforming tables/graphs into linear texts, text completion, and labeling information units in a text (see Davies for an extensive list of active tasks). I chose to discuss the last two tasks—*text completion and labeling information units in a text*—in this paper.

Text completion involves the deletion of selected words, phrases or sentences from the text, depending on the purpose of the reading task. The general *purpose* of the deletion might be, for example, for students *to identify the famous person a certain article is talking about*, or for students *to identify a well-known object, situation, product in the market, or the like, which is being described in the text.* This activity can be used for beginning students as well as for more advanced ones, since complexity may be introduced in terms of the omitted items (single words, phrases or even sentences) the students have to provide as they read. However, it is especially useful for beginners, who tend to read in a more bottom-up fashion, wanting to translate every single word in the text, and who often miss the global meaning. This activity encourages them to look for *known words* (instead of *unknown* ones), for related content words and cognates, inviting them to read more globally, connecting what they do understand from the text *in order to solve the problem.* This task actively involves the reader in the sense that a problem has to be solved, giving him/her an actual sense of accomplishment at the end of the reading.

In *labeling information units in a text, the teacher provides students with labels for specific units in a text, and they choose the correct one for each of the sections.* This activity might work well for both beginners and more advanced students, depending on the demands the teacher introduces in the exercise. For more advanced students, instead of providing them with the exact number of labels as the number of sections in the text, a greater number of labels can be

provided, so that they have to choose from a range of possibilities. To make the activity even more challenging, the teacher can simply divide the text into units/sections, making sure it is clear for the students where each section begins and ends, and then ask them to provide labels for each of the sections. In order o accomplish this task, readers have be able to detach themselves from the individual words and actually see the text from above, establishing connections among sentences and coming up with an integrated representation of the text's content, the result of this integration being the actual label or matching of the appropriate label provided for each unit. The high cognitive demands imposed by this task take the reader to assume an active and evaluative position, engaging in a deep reading of the passage.

Although not included in the literature explicitly as active tasks, pre-reading activities can be regarded as such, since they usually provide readers with a framework for approaching the text and they also encourage readers to interact with the information provided. One example is the pre-reading activity called "Possible Sentences (PS)" (Moore & Arthur, 1980, in Tomitch,1991). Teacher selects key words from the passage to be read and presents the list of words to students prior to reading, asking them to guess the subject of the text. Then, students select two or three words at a time and make up sentences they think will appear in the text to be read. When the teacher thinks students have produced enough sentences, s/he asks them to go to the text to check their predictions (see Tomitch, 1991, for a complete description of this activity). Although it involves pre-teaching vocabulary, PS is more than just a vocabulary activity. It provides students with a framework for reading, since students read the passage to verify whether the sentences they have produced are somehow included there. And PS also encourages an active participation of the reader in the process, since the reader is the one who comes up with hypotheses about the content of the text. Moreover, when s/he reads to check her/his predictions, s/he has to read beyond the surface words and has to draw connections among ideas, since what is being looked for is *meaning* or *ideas* and not *individual words*.

Another example of a pre-reading activity that can also be considered an active task is the "ReQuest (Reciprocal Questioning) Procedure" (Manzo, 1980, in Tomitch, 1991). Here the teacher gives the title of the passage to be read, or part of the text (e.g. first sentence) if the title is too broad or vague, and asks students to come up with questions they think might be answered in the text (see Tomitch, 1991, for a full description of the steps in this activity). Here readers also go to the text with a framework in mind, looking for answers to the formulated questions. This framework enables them to look at the text with a bird's eye view, assuming a more global perspective, and thus saving memory resources, instead of plodding through individual words in the passage. As in the PS procedure, here readers are invited to dynamically participate in the construction of meaning for the information in the text, since they are the ones who come up with the questions that are going to be answered during reading. This procedure may also involve a significant motivating component, since students answer questions they themselves have formulated, and not teacher-formulated questions, as is traditionally the case in most classrooms.

Although Davies (1995) includes all questions as passive tasks (she does not actually differentiate among them), I would like to contend that there are different types of questions and some may be considered more active than others. It seems clear that *yes/no* questions invite a more passive behavior from the reader than *open-ended* questions. However, it also seems clear that not all open-ended questions may be included as active tasks. To keep up with the taxonomy used in this volume, let us look at the different types of questions and analyze them from the perspective of active versus passive reading tasks (see Oliveira, this volume, for a full discussion of the taxonomy of questions). In Pearson and Johnson's (1978) framework, we find "textually explicit questions" (where the answer is explicitly stated in the text); "textually implicit" (where the information is not explicitly stated but can be inferred from the text); and "scriptally implicit" questions (where the answer can only be provided by the reader's background knowledge).

Applying the active versus passive framework to this taxonomy, one can say that textually explicit questions, commonly called literal comprehension questions, "where the answers are right in front of the readers' eyes" (Oliveira, this volume), can actually be included as passive tasks, in agreement with Davies. However, textually implicit and scriptally implicit questions should be considered more active tasks, since they require the reader to connect different pieces of information within the text and also information from the text with information contained in the relevant schema stored in his/her memory in order to come up with the answer.

There is no doubt that the type of questions included in Heberle (this volume) and Figueiredo (this volume), adding a CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) perspective to reading, can all be included as active reading tasks. First, they presuppose the use of authentic material. There is always a concern about source, purpose and intended audience of the text. Second, they contextualize reading. The text is deconstructed to include the context of its production (the writer) as well as the context of its reception (the audience/the reader). Third, they provide readers with a framework for reading. By placing the text in a broader social context and calling attention to the textual genre, readers are given a perspective from which to read the text and subsume the incoming information. And finally, readers are invited to interact actively with the text, bringing relevant prior knowledge into play, and critically evaluating textual information for the construction of meaning.

Conclusion

The active reading tasks discussed in this paper are just a few among many of the possibilities teachers can choose from, or re-create, or better, use as a basis for creating new tasks for use in their classroom. This paper was just an attempt to offer suggestions that can be altered, adapted, fused, or even incorporated as such, offering alternative possibilities for fostering a more active attitude on the part of the reader. There is no doubt that in helping our students to become more active

and more critical, leading them to analyse, to evaluate, to question, to compare, to construct and to discuss, to mention just a few of the possible actions required in active reading tasks, we may succeed in getting our readers to perform a more critical reading of the text and, thus, contribute to the formation of "discursively equipped" readers (Figueiredo, this volume) who are able to function well and completely in society, fully exerting their citizenship.

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