The Pragmatics of Reading: Sense Groups in a Second Language Written Discourse

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Two principles--one, cognitive and the other, linguistic--form the foundation of this paper. Human activities are structured in clusters—in meaningful or logical combinations of fragments. Our cognitive perception of human activities, experience, and the world by itself is shaped in clusters. The reality in terms of objects, actions, and phenomena is also perceived in clusters of fragments. Consequently, when it comes to language, which is a mode of representing reality, words cannot exist independently or in isolation, words exist only in collocation, in meaningful combination. Since reading is a mode of perceiving and representing reality, naturally the act of reading too must be structured in logically constructed sense groups. Mastery of many skills and competence is an essential prerequisite for good comprehension of a written text, especially in a second language. This awareness of sense groups at the intra-sentence and inter-sentence level and the ability to identify sense groups make the process of reading comprehension easier and more productive. Therefore, second language learners are to me trained meaningfully (not mechanically) in identifying sense groups within sentences, as a result, the construction of meaning out of reading becomes a joint activity of cognition and language faculty. **Keywords:** Reading comprehension, skill getting, skill using, sense group, meaning construction, cognition.

Introduction

From a pragmatic perspective, this paper positions reading above the level of integrating skills and sub-skills. Making use of much-discussed binary opposites in second language instruction, namely 'skill-getting and skill using (Rivers,1973), this paper tries to put forward the following propositions in the specific context of second language reading instruction: (i) Conventional teaching ends with skill-getting; the social aspect of reading emerges only at a higher stage of skill-using. (ii) As Rivers asserts, there must be a smooth and natural progression from the stage of skill-getting to skill-using. (iii) In an exposure-poor environment, reading aloud is a step towards internalizing the paralinguistic features of the spoken idiom. (iv) Reading aloud in sense groups may lead to speaking in sense groups. (v) Reading silently, in sense groups, may later lead to better and faster comprehension. (vi) Learners may be able to comprehend the contents beyond sentence level through 'noticing' (Schmidt, 1990) the coherence and cohesive devices. (vii) Most importantly, learners learn implicitly, in addition to the contents, the structuring and patterning (syntax) of individual sentences. Each of these points will be discussed briefly in the rest of the paper, and a few suggestions will be made for promoting a pragmatic approach to reading with a focus on sense groups.

Cognition mediating between form and function in language learning

As the child grows, development takes place at various levels, such as physiological, cognitive, psychological, and linguistic, corresponding to one another. While physical growth is observable in concrete terms, others remain in abstract forms, available for perusal only for those who are scientifically aware of the expected changes in the areas concerned. The child's linguistic performance gives partial access to the observer into the

child's competence, which in turn, provides evidence of the child's cognitive and psychological development. For a second language teacher, the connection among these--language competence and performance (Chomsky, 1957)-- on the one hand and cognitive and psychological functioning on the other is crucial since meaning-making takes place somewhere or all over this continuum.

As far as language teaching is concerned, from the late 1970s onwards, in the early days of the communicative approach, 'communicative competence' became the slogan under which various methodological practices which sought to link pedagogy with language use in the real world were united. More recently, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) extended the purely language-based scope of competences to include "general competences," which are "those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities" (CEFR: 9), thus embedding language within human cognition in general and linking it to human behaviour (Newby, D. 2011, p.15).

Devoid of meaning, alienated from contexts, and focused on forms, the linguistic input provided by classrooms naturally fails to ignite learner motivation. As a result, this paper proposes a pragmatic approach to the teaching-learning of reading in a second language. This proposal combines four interrelated hypotheses of learning.

(i) Any kind of activity, that involves voluntary physical exertion or any kind of problem-solving activity that is cognitively challenging, keeps the learner engaged in them subconsciously.

(ii) Such occasions of self-actualization call for adequate language production corresponding to physical or intellectual challenges.

(iii) In the absence of adequate intake for processing into output, the learner seeks more input from peers, adults (especially, parents and teachers), and other knowledgeable persons. As a result, they will be more alert in listening to them in the early stages, supplemented by reading, in later stages.

(iv) The more they get socialized through this interaction, the greater is their need for more and more content to share in their circles. Reading satisfies their quest by providing information in bits and pieces, which they assemble into knowledge.

(v) Real communication takes place as triggered by the interaction among cognitive processes such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration, and is mediated through interlanguage Selinker,1972).

In this context, it is imperative to answer a question that may naturally be raised by a classroom practitioner: How does this interlanguage get matured into normal language? Yet another cognitive device is likely to come to the help of the learner.

'Noticing' as a cognitive intervention

By 'noticing' the linguistic features, the SL learner hypothesizes and predicts the next stage in the text through cognitive intervention. Schmidt (1990), introducing the concept of noticing in theoretical contexts, says that a learner of a second language cannot make considerable progress without consciously noticing the structural properties and special features of that new language. Later, after more experiments and observations, he modifies his hardline version by stating that noticing is not essential if the input is sufficient; otherwise, noticing is advantageous for learning (Hulstijn and Schmidt, 1994). Though the construct of noticing was mainly concerned with the linguistic features of the target language, it can be applied to the formation of sense groups as well in reading.

A study conducted in Columbia as reported in 2020, shows the positive results of introducing cognitive strategies into reading instruction. The five cognitive strategies employed in the study were predicting, asking questions before reading, visualizing while reading, summarizing the story by using graphic organizers, and answering reading comprehension questions after reading The findings revealed that the use of cognitive strategies facilitated comprehension of a text; giving readers the opportunity to activate their schemata, to understand the main ideas and to understand new vocabulary. Moreover, participants were able to construct meaning from the text, identify a purpose for reading and, therefore; increase their motivation to read. (Sua, M.R. 2020).

Poor reading habits, especially reading word by word at uniform speed, in the first language is likely to get easily transferred into second language reading as well; so is the case with reading in sense groups, as well. A reader, well-trained in identifying sense groups in a text that matches his linguistic zone of proximal development (Vygotsky,1978) is likely to look for similar patterning in an additional language too. But, since the structuring or sequencing of words may differ from language to language, the early leader is likely to get misled. For example, the head word may occur in the initial, medial or final position of a noun phrase (NP), but restricted to one of the three positions in the first language. However, a better-informed person's model will enable the novice reader to identify the right units or meaningful segments, as reading progresses.

Background of the study

Despite the flourishing studies and research in reading in second languages, classroom reading instruction still remains non-productive, as it is evident in the performance of the second language learners across the curriculum. One thing special about reading is that it is not language specific; it affects the learner's overall academic performance; therefore, the responsibility of enhancing learners' reading proficiency should not be

entrusted exclusively with the teacher of English, but to the whole teaching community across stages and disciplines. The present system, therefore fails since content delivery is undertaken by general and social science teachers, and language skills are left to be taken care of by one or two teachers of English. The sources of this mismatch can be traced as follows.

From skill-getting to skill-using in SL reading

In the case of first language acquisition, skill-getting and skill-using always go intertwined, not parallel; whereas in the case of learning a second/foreign language in classrooms, the process is almost one after the other, at least in the early stages.

Free, spontaneous interaction cannot be an attractive extra in a program which is rigid and mechanical. We must develop a smooth and natural transition from skill-getting to skill-using (Rivers, W.M.1973. p. 25).

If the concept of natural units (collocating chunks) as they exist in any language is introduced at the early stage of skill-getting itself, the smooth transition takes care of natural production at the skill-using stage. Here it can be pointed out that most of the reading instruction begins with the wrong foot by introducing a countable noun in isolation, of course accompanied by its picture, model or object. Thus, the printed word *apple* is introduced as such to the first level of learners, and practiced through drills and later tested too. The child is later on advised by the same teacher to prefix an indefinite article or definite article, quoting rules. That is to say, what the child is given at the skill-getting stage is *apple*; but what s/he is asked to use at the skill-using stage is any of the following: *an apple* (indefinite article+ countable noun), *the apple* (definite article + countable noun), *my apple* (possessive + countable noun), *apples* (countable noun + plural) , *this apple* (demonstrative + countable noun), *big apple* (adjective + countable noun) or a combination of some of these such as *all my small apples*. It must be noted here that in the early stages of language *use*, rarely does a countable noun go alone, unaccompanied by the morphemes listed above. The same is the case with units such as comparative and superlative degrees. The textbook or the teacher rarely foresees the problem the learner is going to face later in joining bits to sound natural as in *the best school* (definite article+ adjective in its superlative form of a countable noun). Adult speakers most often miss out the article while speaking. Similarly, the word *than* generally goes after an adjective or adverb in its comparative degree such as *longer than* and *faster than*. When the traditional teaching makes the learners repeat the three forms of comparison (*strong-stronger-strongest*), it is forgotten that later in future, the learner-turned-user is expected to use it in collocation or sense group such as *stronger than the tiger* and *the strongest animal in the forest*. Again, the same problem is with a common error even among educated people-- *one of my friend* . This learner was taught phrases such as *one of, some of, many of* and *a few of* in isolation, not in sense group with the countable noun in plural form.

In all the cases reported above, the wrong footing is not just a matter of a faulty step in reading instruction, but a major misconception of the grammar by the teacher and the materials developer. Later, the child is victimized for a wrong construction such as *I ate apple*. The child fails to notice where s/he went wrong; since what was provided at the skill-getting stage was reproduced at the skill-using stage.

The pragmatics of reading: Review of literature

Geffrey N. Leech, an authority on semantics and pragmatics defines pragmatics as the study of how utterances have meanings in situation,… studying language as a communication system,…studying the use of language as a distinct form, but complementary to, the language itself as seen as a formal system. Or more briefly still: grammar (in its broadest sense) must be separated from pragmatics (Leech, G.N. 1983.p.x).

As opposed to the notion of the ideal speaker-listener combination, pragmatics views language as a dynamic system, operating within a social system, and acting as the fulcrum of all social activities. Pragmatics studies language from the point of view of its users--speakers and listeners at one level, and writers and readers on another, especially of the choices they make while trying to communicate, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects of their language use has on other participants in the act of communication.

Reading can be perceived from more than one viewpoint: The standpoints range from the conventional perspective of the reader approximating the writer's intention through the text, the text mediating between the author and the reader, and the modern view of the readers re-creating plural texts, and so on. However, at the lowest level, especially in a second language where the authorial intention still holds good, a teacher is supposed to begin with the traditional mode and then lead the readers to higher complex modes.

Early studies in reading were confined to the processes of an individual making meaning or eliciting message out of the text. Governed by the principles of behaviourism, the research in the 1950s and 1960s focused more on skills and sub-skills that needed practice leading to perfection. Alexander and Fox (2004) in their comprehensive survey of reading research since the 1950s trace the heavy influence of behaviourism in the early stages, which slowly gave way to mentalism and cognitivism. For behaviourists, reading too was a linear process, that can be neatly segmented and tutored, first in bits and pieces of sub-skills, only to be integrated later into a whole.

The task for this generation of reading researchers, therefore, was to untangle the chained links of behavior involved in reading so that learners could be trained in each component   skill. The act of reading consisted of the competent and properly sequenced performance of that chain of discrete skills. Research was additionally concerned with the structuring and control of materials effective in the delivery of environmental stimulation and practice opportunities (Glaser, 1978; Monaghan & Saul, 1987). There was also a concomitant interest in the identification and remediation of problems in skill acquisition, which would require even finer-grained analysis of the appropriate behaviors so that skill training could proceed in the smallest of increments (Glaser, 1978) (Alexander and Fox, 2004. p. 36).

By the 1980s, neurological studies started shedding more light on the mental processes involved in various types of reading with varying purposes such as academic, transactional and so on. When theoretical linguistics witnessed paradigm shift in the mid-twentieth century, repercussions were visible in applied linguistics, as well. However, later research seemed to get diverged in two directions: a scholarly perspective that keeps on redefining reading especially literary work (for example, *The Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes,1967), and a pedagogic perspective that sticks to developing basic reading skills for academic purposes (for example, the schema theory pioneered by Rumelhart, 1980., Anderson, 1978). The pragmatics of reading, if developed with focus on second language reading instruction may narrow the gap between the two streams of thinking and draw resources from both.

Introducing the linguistic notion of pragmatics, Geoffrey Leech (1983) hints at the difference between the meaning making syntactic and semantic processes as 'representation' and the processes of social interaction as 'interpretation'(p.19). Narrowing down further, a pragmatic approach to reading may suggest an open-ended invitation to the reader to join the author in the co-creation of the text. In a classroom situation, students may be overtly assigned the responsibility to fill in the gaps in the text by supplying information occasionally, though such pieces of information may be inferior to the main message being conveyed by the text. In classrooms there is a danger of children approximating the written text with the teacher's uttered discourse. Both have an aura of authority. It is onto this raised platform, occupied by the author (or textbook writer) and the 'all-knowing teacher', a pragmatic approach to reading pushes the second language reader to share the space in between them. Of course, it *is* a challenging task for the teacher.

One of the ways through which a resourceful teacher may enable the SL reader to share the challenge is reading in sense groups. Usually, narrations (real and fictional) occupy the main part of classroom reading materials. Instruction in reading aloud, supported by proper use of segmental features such as pronunciation of discrete speech sounds and accent on individual words, and suprasegmental features such as intonation patterns may help the reader to approximate his reading aloud of the text to spoken discourse. Sense groups play a key role in bridging the gap between natural speech and reading aloud.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Calkins (1983) note that deep reading a narrative text by the use of pragmatics has pave a way to understanding in which may be comprehensible to young children. Myers (1982) maintains that the pragmatic knowledge developed naturally in children's reading can be transferred and applied to enhance comprehension of the function of the language in text. When teachers help children know what [pragmatic language is], they not only foster comprehension of a particular text but also help readers grow in their abilities to use language appropriately and effectively in different situations to make children more competent language users (Danila, E.C, 9019. p.10)

Capturing clues through signposts

Signposts, here refer to words that link ideas such as sentence linkers—*and, but, therefore, so, because, since,* etc., words functioning as adjuncts such as *unfortunately, by that time, and to conclude*, interjections such like *alas*, and so on. Capitalization and punctuation marks also act as clear signposts showing where to pause (comma and semicolon), and stop fully (full stop). Signposts such as capitals and all punctuation marks, italicization and underlining, and the use of the bold font in print—all these can convey quite a few basic notions of the syntax. For example, a group of words prefixed and suffixed by a comma, if properly read out by the teacher repeatedly in varying contexts will give the listener, the right notion of the unit in a syntax called a phrase NP, VP, etc.), above the level of a word, but below the rank of the clause. When such a phrase—a noun/verb/prepositional phrase functions in different positions such as subject, object, and complement, the learner does not feel any problem in comprehending the message irrespective of the number of words in that phrase. For example, if taught by a well-informed reading teacher, the beginner learner may easily be dividing (not explicitly) each sentence below into two parts –NP and VP (VP in italics).

1. Doormats *are cheap*. Coir doormats *are cheap*. Those coir doormats *are cheap*. Those new coir doormats *are cheap*. Those new, designed coir doormats *are cheap*.

2. These labourers in the picture *are really strong*. These labourers in the picture, who *are building* a ship*, are really strong*.

A well-trained teacher may be able to demonstrate how, in a recorded version, the native or near-native speakers pause and proceed (for example, while telling or reading a story), how the punctuation marks go correlating the pauses and gaps in oral production, and how in an audio-video clipping, paralinguistic features in speech go parallel to punctuation marks in the printed version.

Reading aloud in sense groups leads to reading near-native like

One main difference in reading a text by a native and non-native learner is unitization in sense groups. The unitization hypothesis put forward by Drewnowski and Healy (1977) and Healy (1981) as cited in Healy (1994) suggests that children whose native language was English were able to process units larger than letters—syllables, words, and phrases.

English-speaking children expand their processing units as they acquire reading skills which allows the children to read faster and more efficiently and to invest greater processing resources in comprehension (Tao. L. et al, 1997).

The results of the letter detection exercise which the early level learners attempted show that they are able to move beyond the level of letters into syllables and words. A corresponding development can be expected from learners of primary and secondary levels as well—moving beyond the units of words to phrases and clauses, and also to simple sentences. The experiments of Healy and colleagues also suggested the interplay between linguistic and cognitive faculties in simultaneous development.

For the past two decades my colleagues and I have been using a very simple letter-detection task to study the cognitive processes involved in reading text. Our earlier work with this task illuminated the basic processing units used in reading text (see Healy, 1981a, for a summary). Our more recent research with the same task, although continuing to support the importance of processing units, has examined a broader spectrum of cognitive processes and has consequently thrown light on visual, phonetic, and a combination of semantic and syntactic factors that influence letter- and word-identification processes in reading (Healy, A. F., 1994: 333).

This ability to move beyond single word units is likely to help learners in various modes of reading such as skimming and scanning, and various shades of comprehension such as local- global, factual-ideational, critical-evaluative and so on.

Silent reading in sense groups leads to better and faster cognitive processing

As suggested earlier, how to promote simultaneously, the development of language use in general and literacy skills in particular on the one side, and cognition in general and conceptualization in particular on the other is a key point that reading instruction has to delve deep into.

Investigating reading (teaching and learning) implies, among other things, analyzing the contribution of language and speech as cognitive functions. These two functions are the basis on which knowledge related to language is based, and the understanding of this crucial contribution is essential for both research and teaching (Flores, 2021).

When second language instruction mistakenly aims exclusively at language proficiency what goes missing for the learner is opportunities for exploring the world around. Many facts and pieces of information are treated as taken for granted by teachers of first language and subjects. Instruction in first language usually focuses first on literacy skills and later on literary appreciation, punctuated by formal teaching of grammar. Subject teachers in the English medium schools rarely attend to language accuracy; they provide more and more bits and pieces of information, which take care of examination results. Neither the first language teacher nor the subject teacher finds time to promote critical thinking skills. Even if the comprehension questions ritualistically appended to the reading passages do not demand critical and evaluative thinking. Only a resourceful teacher can step in and insert more challenging questions and tasks. The pedagogic construction of teacher intervention has been discussed much these days.

When it comes to reading in a second language, developing critical thinking is possible at the level of methodology, materials and testing. If testing and evaluation gives prominence to critical thinking practices, naturally teachers may pay more attention for promoting those skills. Challenging the well-established notion of transference of comprehension skills from first language to second language, Catherine Walter asserts that comprehending in the second language is a case of access, rather than transfer sine it is a cognitive process more than linguistic.

The work of Gernsbacher and colleagues has supported the hypothesis that listening and reading comprehension are based on general cognitive processes and mechanisms… *Comprehension is a general cognitive skill, working in the same way regardless of the mode of perception.* …So, skill in comprehending texts is not a linguistic skill; rather, it is a general cognitive skill developing at the same time as the L1, but independently from it. It follows that the metaphor of 'transfer' of L1 comprehension skill to the L2 is misleading: what happens is more appropriately characterized as access, via L2 text, to the individual's already- established, amodal comprehension skill (Walter, C. 2007: 16).

Quite often, the second language teacher is not aware of her role as a promoter of cognition in general and critical thinking, in particular. Just imagine the potentials of a small piece of discourse in a primary level textbook.

All the young / and middle-aged men / in the village / used to go to work, / quite often outside the village./ Some women went with them; others worked around the village. Very few children went to school; no girls at all. / The school was far away. / The elder children/ remained at home/ taking care of their younger siblings.

After reading this extract a few times in small sense groups*(as marked in the passage), a resourceful teacher may prepare a task as follows, that may develop critical thinking skills.

Task 1. What did the people in the village do, usually?

1.Young women:.........................2. Middle-aged women: ....
3. Old women: ....4. Young men: ....
5. Middle-aged men: ....6. Young men: ....
7. Elder children: ....8. Babies: ....
Task 2. Two reasons for the village children not attending school: 1........................
2..
*The same passage may be read out to higher classes with longer sense groups, i.e., with more words in each sense group—sentences mostly divided as NPs and VPs.

A seminal volume on reading by William Grabe highlights the 'central role of cognition in reading comprehension'. Each of the following concepts and cognitive systems is critical for understanding the central role of cognition in reading comprehension: (1) Implicit and explicit learning, (2) Frequency, associative learning, co-occurrence, and emergence, (3) Attention, noticing, and consciousness, (4) Inferencing, (5) The role of context in L2 reading (6) The role of background knowledge in L2 reading. The importance of these cognitive concepts for reading cannot be overestimated. They constitute the foundations of learning theory for all cognitive and educational psychology. They provide the basis not only for how reading comprehension works, but also for how it develops (Grabe, W. 2008: 59).

A pinch of paralinguistic features for the SL, from early reading onwards

The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics defines paralinguistics as:
... the study or use of non-vocal phenomena such as facial expression, head or eye movements, and gestures, which may add support, emphasis or shades of meaning to what people are saying. These phenomena are known as paralinguistic features. ...For some linguists, paralinguistic features would also include those vocal characteristics such as tone of voice which may express the speaker's attitude to what he or she is saying Richards, J.C. et al, 1985).

The accompaniment of proper paralinguistic features in speech can be identified as one of the characteristics of native speakers since the same feature (for example, nodding head in a particular way, or humming in a particular tone) may mean differently in different languages—sometimes just the opposite, as well. Likewise, voice modulation, too. Reading out a text like an animal story to the beginners must be accompanied by voice modulation—one mode for narration, and another mode for conversations between characters. Within the conversations again, expressing disbelief, indifference, acceptance, agreement etc. need various shades of voice modulation in reading. The teacher must be employing sense group division to enable the learner to have the support of these additional meaning making devices. This combination of verbal plus non-vocal articulation in reading in sense groups is most likely to result in proper speech manners later.

Conclusion

Instead of the conventional way of reading the word, a pragmatic approach helps the second language learner to read the world, of which he is a part, and from which he draws both reality and language, or better to say, reality-embedded language. This paper has tried to illustrate how reading in sense groups helps (i) achieving better comprehension, (ii) assimilating the structural properties of the utterance without or prior to explicit teaching of grammar, and (iii) reading faster. Fast reading cannot be treated simply as a language sub-skill, but it is an essential life skill for success in career. Reading, being a cognitive process, embeds in itself, meaning-making processes, but at a higher level. It has been concluded that reading instruction in a second language would become more effective if it followed the stages listed below. Of the two receptive skills, listening is natural and non-voluntary, compared to reading; and no need to say, while listening to one's own native language one feels more at home than when forced to listen to a non-native language. Therefore, a combined effort by the teachers of the first and second language, or better, a collective effort by all the teachers together, focusing on reading in sense groups, first in the native and later in the foreign language, is expected to result in the enhancement of the reading skills in both languages, and moreover, in the development of cognitive skills, as well. Teachers should not forget the basic fact that we teach different subjects and languages in different ways, but it is *one* learner who struggles to master all the contents and skills, not a class.

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