

## READING STRATEGIES – FROM L<sub>1</sub> TO L<sub>2</sub>.

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*ABSTRACT: This paper intends to present a selection of the most useful reading strategies for the typical ESP students in Brazilian universities, showing whether the readers use them in their native language or not, the way the teacher should develop these strategies in the classroom, the problems involved in their use and the reasons for using them.*

*KEY-WORDS: Reading strategies; native language (L<sub>1</sub>); foreign language (L<sub>2</sub>); ESP (English for Specific Purposes).*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world reading in a foreign language is often required for academic studies, professional or personal progress. It is common to hear though, especially from English teachers, that most students can not cope adequately with their reading tasks in a foreign language (L<sub>2</sub>). Their understanding seems to be less and their speed slower than in their first language (L<sub>1</sub>).

Researchers have discussed about the relation between first and second language strategies and they have come to different conclusions. Alderson claims that “only moderate to low correlations have been established between reading ability in the first language and reading ability in the foreign language, and that proficiency in the foreign language may be more closely associated with foreign language ability” (1, p. 20). Sarig goes deeply into the topic showing the results of Hebrew (native language) reading process transferred to English (foreign language) reading. She classifies the learners’ strategies and analyzes them according to four general types of moves (responses) made by the readers in both languages: (a) technical aid, (b) clarification and simplification, (c) coherence detection, and (d) active monitoring of one’s text processing (9, p. 111). Sarig concludes that the process of reading in the

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native language appears to transfer to the foreign language as far as main ideas analysis and overall message synthesis tasks in academic texts are concerned. She also states that the individual's reading moves are unique, that is, there is a personal reading strategy and there is no easy formula for making the right moves.

For the purpose of this paper, I will make the assumption that the students have some reading strategies in  $L_1$  (Portuguese) and that it is possible to transfer these strategies to  $L_2$  (English).

I will also make the assumption that there is a set of strategies that seems to be most useful in  $L_2$ , as far as the typical ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students in Brazilian universities are concerned. By typical ESP students is meant false beginners who have usually taken a general English course for four years on average. They do not have a good knowledge of the language structure and their vocabulary repertoire is very restricted. English is a compulsory subject in their curricula.

Therefore, this paper attempts to present a selection of the most useful strategies for ESP students, showing whether the readers use them in  $L_1$  or not, the way the teacher should develop these strategies in the classroom, the problems involved in their use, if there are any, and the reasons for using them.

## **2. SELECTION OF READING STRATEGIES**

It seems that direct instruction on reading might be helpful for two kinds of students: (a) students who possess efficient reading strategies in their language but do not use them in the second language or (b) students who never developed efficient strategies in their first language (Krashen, 6, p. 138). In this way an analysis of the selected strategies is relevant here in order to check the possibility of transferring these strategies from  $L_1$  to  $L_2$  and the importance of their use in reading comprehension in  $L_2$ .

### **2.1. Skimming**

The teacher can show the readers that they use skimming while looking at a magazine or newspaper, in their native language. Therefore, students should be encouraged to transfer this strategy to  $L_2$ .

Skimming consists of a rapid look over a text in order to extract some general ideas from it. In this way a page can be covered in a matter of seconds. Since skimming requires an overall view of the text, the teacher can develop this strategy by training the students to look at some prominent parts of a passage, i.e. titles, sub-titles, first and last sentence of each paragraph and non-linear information (if there is any). As skimming is related to speed, the teacher can fix a time limit for a given activity. However, students "should be motivated not to compete with one

another, but to show some progress of their own reading speed” (Nuttall, 8, p. 41).

In order to motivate the students to use this strategy, the teacher should make them aware of its importance in reading comprehension, showing them that skimming can help them decide whether an article or a research paper relevant to be read. Therefore, it helps the reader to select a text or part of it, that is worth spending time on.

Teachers may face some problems while training skimming, especially at the beginning of the course. The most usual one seems to be that students feel insecure about the general ideas of the text because they are used to looking at every word. One way of minimizing this problem seems to be the use of texts with a great amount of non-linear information and cognate words. Also their knowledge on the subject of the text predictions on the topic appears to help students to deal with skimming more successfully. The other strategies mentioned, i.e. use of non-linear information, cognates and prediction will be analyzed further in this paper.

If students take the text “Visual Display Units” (see appendix), they should be encouraged to make some predictions on the topic of the text, before reading it. Also, they should be asked to look at the cognate words while skimming the text. So, the skimming exercises can be:

- (a) What is the text about?
- (b) What devices can be included in a visual display unit?
- (c) Which of these topics are dealt with in the text?
  - storage of data
  - shape of visual display units
  - application of visual display units
  - the use of visual display units in the past decade

## 2.2 Scanning

When the students use a Portuguese monolingual dictionary, they are scanning. So they can also search for a piece of information in a foreign language. It is vital to make the students aware of the use of this strategy (and others as well) in real life. They should realize that scanning can be used in order to search for a name or a date, or to check if a certain text is suitable for the purpose they need it. The teacher should point to the students that if they read all the texts in the same way, they are wasting time. The process of teaching how to use this strategy is similar to that of skimming. Students should be invited to glance rapidly over a text in order to look at the table of contents of a book and check whether a certain topic is dealt with in it.

Students should be taught that scanning can be used together with skimming. One can skim through an article to get the main ideas and then read it more careful if it is of interest. After that it is possible “to scan the same article in order to note down a figure or a date which is relevant” (Grellet, 2, p. 19).

Regarding the teaching of this strategy, it seems that it is easier to deal with scanning than with skimming. Students usually link scanning to authentic situations, such as looking for some information in a encyclopedia or an ad in a newspaper, they soon internalize the use of this strategy.

In the text “Visual Display Units” the students can be asked to run their eyes over the text in order to search for some specific points. The exercises can be:

- (a) Find out the type of camera that can be used in visual display units.
- (b) Does the text have any information on light pens?
- (c) Does the text comment on the application of visual display units?

### 2.3. Predicting

A great part of compulsory subject ESP students have no particular desire to read, when the course begins. In order to attack this attitude a good strategy is a sort of “warming up” session before reading the text, as an attempt to motivate the students. This strategy can be developed in the form of predictions as Scott (1981) and Holmes (1982, a) have proposed. It seems that the students are not used to this strategy in L<sub>1</sub>. So, the students can be asked to predict what topics might be discussed in a certain text. The teacher gives them some back-ground information such as author, date and source of the text. The points brought up by the students are written on the blackboard and they may be checked either after the first reading or at the end of the whole reading process.

Grellet calls this strategy anticipation. She sees it as “a psychological sensitizing aimed making the students think about the subject of the text and ask themselves some questions” (2, p. 18). It is a form of consciousness-raising in the reading process, because the point is to make the students aware of what they know, what they do not know and what they wish to know about the topic.

Another way of dealing with this strategy is to give the students “unfinished passages to complete or going through the text little by little, stopping after each sentence in order to predict what is likely to come next” (Grellet, 2, p. 17). The students enjoy these types of exercises, because they keep them motivated, trying to guess what is going to happen next.

One may argue that the problem with prediction is that students might get frustrated when they realize their predictions are not in the text. However, they should understand that prediction by itself can not elucidate the whole context. It is one of the ways of reducing uncertainty. The students should be aware that there are other strategies they can use to detect meaning. The object of prediction is “to encourage the reader to think about the text before reading it intensively, to form some kind of hypothesis about the text and to measure the text content against constantly changing hypothesis” (Holmes, 4, p. 13).

In the text “Visual Display Units”, the students should be encouraged to look at the title and from their background knowledge predict what topic(s) might be discussed in the text. In such a specialized area, i.e. computing, the students can easily anticipate the text topics. In this case the students’ predictions might be:

- (a) features of visual display units;
- (b) uses of visual display units.

The teacher can also give the students a list of words and ask them to predict whether these words will occur in “Visual Display Units” or not:

teleprocessing  
light pen  
image  
tapes  
screen  
manager

Afterwards, the students can discuss the reason for their choices and then check the words in the text.

#### **2.4. Looking for cognates**

Within an ESP approach it is vital to rely as much as possible on what the learner already knows. When an ESP course begins, a great part of students are not aware that English and Portuguese have so many words in common. They do not look for cognates in L<sub>1</sub>. Thus, “it can be very encouraging to realize that one knows a lot more English words than on initially thought” (Moreira, 7, p. 37). The students usually question about the danger of marking false cognates, because that was what they were usually taught in high school. The point is to concentrate on the cognates (or transparent words), trying to guide the learners so that they can “see through” what at first looks like a foreign word.

Before starting using cognates, it is important to stress that there are some degrees of transparency. Looking at the text “Visual Display Units”, the reader might see that “visual” and “camera” are exactly the same in Portuguese, whereas words like “form” and “future” are nearly the same, “temporary” and “applications” present some more marked differences, “receiver” might require some guessing to be recognized as “receptor”. This strategy can be dealt with in conjunction with affixation so that “-tion”, “-er”, for example, can become clearer and connected with the corresponding Portuguese affixes. The teacher must stress the high frequency of these words in technical/academic texts, which make great use of Latin and Greek words, showing the students the value of cognates in building vocabulary. In “Visual Display Units” 59% of the content words are cognates. It can be classified as a very accessible text because ESP teachers share “the opinion that

about 30% of content words in a text must be cognates in order to make the text accessible for a student beginning an ESP course” (Holmes, 5, p. 23).

A good reason for working with this strategy is that it motivates students, since it makes possible for them to get to the main points of the text, even if their vocabulary repertoire is restricted. “It helps students to augment their vocabulary rapidly and painlessly” (Holmes, 5, p. 19).

One problem in dealing with cognates is that students make some misrecognitions regarding morphology or syntax. In this way they can translate a cognate word as a noun when it is a verb in the text, for example. However, they can be trained to take some advantages of morphological and syntactical clues in the text, as the course progresses.

As to the text “Visual Display Units”, after an explanation about the degrees of transparency, the students can be asked to:

- (a) read the text and underline all the known words;
- (b) separate those that have a similar word in Portuguese.

## 2.5. Looking for non-linear information

The students usually try to read the text word-by-word, and only later begin looking at the tables and graphs where most of the information can be found. If they are students of human sciences, they may never think of looking at the graphs. The teacher should comment “on the relationship of the non-linear information and the main aim and content of the text” (Holmes, 3, p. 5). The students must be aware that in some types of texts, such as instructions for operating machines or descriptions of biological structures, the non-verbal information is in fact fully integrated with the rest of the text. The text explicitly refers to it and it can not be understood without it.

According to Nuttall (8, p. 53), the ability to interpret diagrams, graphs, etc, is largely independent of language, so that this strategy can readily be transferred from  $L_1$  to  $L_2$  contexts. To encourage this transfer is to stress the positive contribution that the students bring to the task of making sense of the new language. It seems, however, that Brazilian students are not taught this strategy in  $L_1$ . There is even a tendency to skip all the information presented in the form of graphs, tables and diagrams.

The non-linear information is useful for the teacher because it makes possible a number of techniques for promoting and checking comprehension. Transfer of activities can occur in relation to other texts that do not have non-linear information, as is the case of “Visual Display Units”. If the students are trained in looking at graphs, tables and charts, they can easily express the text content through non-linear information. They can build a chart as follows:

<b>Visual Display Units</b>	
general feature	tubo de raios catódicos
details	1. caneta seletora 2. câmera de 35 mm
uses	1. atualização de contas bancárias 2. correção de desenhos gráficos 3. consulta a arquivos 4. sistema de reserva de lugares

Other types of exercises can be developed with different kinds of texts as, for example, matching texts and diagrams. The teacher gives the students a number of texts and their diagrams, separately. The students are supposed to say which text relates to the diagram. They feel really motivated during this activity.

## **2.6. Looking for repeated words**

It seems that Brazilian students do not use this strategy when reading in  $L_1$ . The teacher should ask the students to look at the text and make a list of words which are important in their opinion (not cognates). Thus, the repeated content words can be taken as key words in the text.

One way of making students familiar with key words is to use the same type of texts frequently, e.g., texts on computing. Looking for repeated words may be difficult at the beginning, but after some practising, it will be easier to locate and understand these words. One problem that may arise is the attitude that certain words in a text are key words and others are not. This may lead to an empty discussion. The teacher should make the students aware that in some texts certain words will occur frequently and they must be prepared for this. Therefore, "if a headline gives clues as to the content of a text it is useful when predicting probable content to make a few predictions as to probable key words" (Moreira, 7, p. 27).

Regarding the text "Visual Display Units", an exercise on key words can be:

- (a) Examine the title of the text and then predict 4 key words in English or in Portuguese.
- (b) Skim the text for main points comprehension.
- (c) Which key words are more important for understanding the text?

In the case of the exercise above, the students are using, at least, three strategies together – looking for key words, skimming and predicting, one complementing the other.

## 2.7. Flexibility

“Research has shown that one of the main characteristics of a good reader is his flexibility. He will vary his speed, and his whole manner of reading, according to the text and according to his purpose in reading it” (Nuttall, 8, p. 34). One may say that Brazilian students have some flexibility in reading order in  $L_1$ , when they read the newspaper, for example. They make their choices regarding sections and they spend more time reading some articles than others. People do not have time to read everything and students must be aware that flexibility can also be used to save time in  $L_2$  reading.

Of course, this process needs training, but such flexibility that the readers already have in  $L_1$  can be developed into the strategy of looking at a specific section (e.g., graphs and tables) and then decide on what they are going to read. In this way the students should be motivated to improve their reading speed in  $L_2$ . Their progress depends on their understanding of the reasons for what they are doing.

Flexibility can also be taken as flexibility of reading strategies. The teacher may assume that students tend to read all texts in the same way. It is obvious that being aware of the function of a passage is vital to its comprehension. Therefore, the students should be led to find out whether the text aims at convincing the reader, giving him information, asking him for something, etc. If they are able to detect the right kind of text, they will probably know the adequate strategies to tackle it.

The way the text is presented (print, layout or source) may give some hints of its function, and the students should take advantage of these non-linguistic features in reading comprehension, as emphasized above,

The students can also be led to looking for rhetorical functions such as definitions, descriptions, classifications and exemplifications in order to get to the function of a text, and then select the appropriate strategy to deal with it. A description is normally used for objects or situations. In “Visual Display Units” the process of description is corroborated by the usual use of verbs in the present tense as “vary”, “have”, “are”, “include” and so on, since the purpose of this text is to inform the reader about specific devices in the computer field.

In this way, the students should be guided to notice that, if the description of a visual display unit interests them, they can opt for detailed comprehension afterwards. If not, a skimming done at the beginning will suffice. In case they are only interested in knowing the type of camera used in visual display units, for example, they will make use of scanning. Thus, the reader will vary his strategies according to his purpose for reading a text.



## 2.8. Selectivity

Students may not be able to select the appropriate parts of a text in order to grasp its meaning easily, unless they are trained to do so. The teacher can ask the students to skim first and then re-read carefully the more important sections as, for example, the introduction, the conclusion, the first sentence of each paragraph, the headings and sub-headings. Selectivity is also related to the reading of articles in a magazine. The students may use selectivity in order to choose an article and then skim it or read it in detail. This is how they act in real life, while reading in  $L_1$ .

This idea of selectivity can be explained to the students in the form of a metaphor in order to make them aware of the importance of this strategy in reading comprehension. The text can be compared to a supermarket. When one goes to a supermarket nowadays, one can not buy everything he wants, since the prices are extremely high. So, the buyer has to select the goods which are really necessary. Thus, an analogy can be drawn regarding the reader. He should select the main parts of the text in order to grasp its meaning. The metaphor mentioned above can be expressed in a drawing shown to the students on the blackboard or as a picture (see figure below).



### 3. CONCLUSION

The discussion presented here does not attempt to cover all the items related to reading strategies in  $L_1$  (Portuguese) and in  $L_2$  (English) and to the possibility of transfer from one to another. It simply analyzes a selection of strategies taking into consideration the assumptions that Brazilian students may (or may not) have some of these strategies when they enter an ESP course in a university. There is an enormous open field for research in the area regarding the transfer of reading strategies from  $L_1$  to  $L_2$ , as Sarig herself has pointed out.

In regard to the analysis made here, one may conclude that 50% of the selected strategies for  $L_2$  do not occur in  $L_1$  reading process, as shown in the table below.

Selected reading strategies	$L_1$	$L_2$
1. skimming	X	X
2. scanning	X	X
3. predicting		X
4. looking for cognates		X
5. looking for non-linear information		X
6. looking for repeated words		X
7. flexibility	X	X
8. selectivity	X	X

This means that the teacher should work intensively in order to (1) motivate the transfer of strategies from  $L_1$  to  $L_2$  and (2) develop reading activities to train the strategies students do not possess.

It seems relevant to make students aware that the strategies analyzed here are not used in isolation. They form sets of abilities required for coping with reading tasks in a foreign language.

There is one point that seems to be valid in every situation involving reading strategies: the importance of discussing them with the students, so that they can make their choices individually, become conscious of their own reading processes and try to improve them. The role of the teacher is to stimulate the development and use of efficient meaning-getting strategies in reading.

## APPENDIX

### VISUAL DISPLAY UNITS

They vary in design, but all have a cathode ray tube on which to display the output in temporary form. The simplest units have a fifteen-character keyboard enabling the user to enter coded messages to the computer system; the responses to which are displayed on the screen. More sophisticated units include a 35 mm camera, for permanently recording data displayed, and the facility to use a light pen. These light pens enable the user to display an image, say, a drawing, on the screen and to alter the drawings by moving the pen over the surface, erasing the existing lines and inserting the modifications. This application is of use to designers who may express a design in digital form by using the co-ordinates and amend any aspect which is not satisfactory.

Companies are designing and running systems using these displays for applications such as the display and updating of customer's accounts, the retrieval and amendment of drawings and graphs, immediate interrogation of files, seat reservation systems, and a number of others. Much of the information nowadays presented to managers in printed form will, in the future, be obtained by the use of visual displays. The manager of the future will come to regard a desk-top television receiver as having the same importance as today's telephone.

(Taken from *Computers for Commercial Students* by E. A. Bird. In: *Inglês para processamento de dados* by T. P. Galante & E. M. Pow)

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*RESUMO: Este trabalho propõe-se apresentar uma seleção das estratégias de leitura mais úteis aos alunos de Inglês Instrumental em universidades brasileiras, mostrando se os leitores as usam em língua materna, como também a maneira com que o professor deve desenvolver estas estratégias em sala de aula, as razões de seu uso e os problemas daí decorrentes.*

*UNITERMOS: Estratégias de leitura; língua materna ( $L_1$ ); língua estrangeira ( $L_2$ ); Inglês Instrumental.*

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