



UNDERSTANDING MEANING EFFECTIVELY: PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE READING SKILL

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Abstract: Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, communicative approach to teaching and learning English has developed significantly and, at present, it is used worldwide in teaching and learning English, especially, in EFL and ESL situations. This approach is also recommended by NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) in Bangladesh. Instead of grammar-based approach, practice-based learning is considered important in recent theoretical approaches. This practice covers training of all four basic skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Success of the teaching of English through communicative approach which mainly serves the purpose of communicative competence depends entirely on the practice of these skills. Among the major skills, reading as a receptive skill has a significant role as far as teaching of English in Bangladesh is concerned. Reading approaches and reading pedagogy, being important areas of EFL and ESL, have been subjected to change- change in attitude, outlet, and, overall teaching method- coping with the latest experiment in this field. So, it is time for us to meditate over reading in order to make it effective and classroom friendly. The present study has tried to evaluate reading as a means of exploiting meaning of a text, and at the same time, it intends to deal with current pedagogy of the reading skill. To make reading effective some indispensable requirements closely related to this study are also discussed in a small canvas. Finally, approaches to reading are intensely addressed.

Key words: Reading, approach, skill, meaning, discover, text

Introduction

As the vast majority of the world's library resources are in English, and the biggest publishing industries of the world publish books in English, it is the number one library language of the world. Therefore, it has become quite impossible to pursue meaningful higher education without reading skills in English. In Bangladesh, though Bangla is the official language and the medium of instruction and examinations in mainstream education, most library resources are still in English. Therefore, it is impossible to achieve effective higher education without English reading skills. Moreover, today's world is increasingly becoming globalized; a graduate is produced today not only for the local, but also for the global market. So, graduates should have education of international standard, which is not at all possible without English reading skills.

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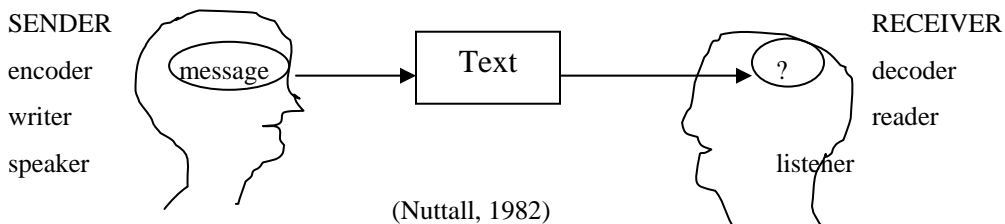
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This is also the age of the Internet, the best and swiftest medium of getting information and being acquainted with the world. As the language of the Internet is English, a fair level of reading skill in English is necessary to use or browse the Internet. Reading is, therefore, a very important English language skill needed in this present competitive world.

Reading is also necessary to know the answers about any particular thing on which someone is studying. To satisfy our thirst for knowledge, we need to read books most of which are in English. This being the reality of the present world, approaches to teaching reading demands more attention from experts, and it is particularly important in the present context of Bangladesh.

Since the main objective of reading is to reach and exploit the meaning of a text, success of reading depends on the skill of discovering the meaning a text conveys. So, the target of the current approaches is to focus mainly on how the maximum meaning can be exploited.

Reading is an active process in which the reader is all the time involved in getting at the message. This is called decoding (so, the reader is decoder) of what the writer (the encoder) has put (or encoded) in the written text. The message of the text is accessible to the mind of the reader only after it has been decoded, and communication takes place. The following diagram exemplifies this process of communication:



As it is clear from the diagram, reading involves an active participation of the reader in understanding the message.

Discovering the meaning of a text

Since a text is a unit of language in use— a semantic unit, a unit of meaning— it is necessary, and at the same time, important to decide why students are made to read. Is it to develop language or to improve the power of understanding meaning a text conveys? According to Shahidullah (1995-96), reading is basically concerned “with meaning of a text, which is embedded in the language of the text”. A text is a ‘physical manifestation’, and the reader’s purpose is ‘to construct meaning’ with the data a text supplies. In short, discovering the intended meaning of a text should be the sole purpose of the teaching of reading since language skills develop naturally with the development of reading skills.

Now the question is how students will construct the meaning of a text. For this, they need to know the process of structural development of meaning; it starts from the ‘single morpheme’ of a text, develops gradually to the text as a whole and then conveys a full message to the reader (Nuttall, 1996). To ‘produce discourse’, he has mentioned four consecutive categories of meaning according to the combination of meanings of particles (‘single morpheme’, ‘word’, ‘phrase’, ‘clause’, ‘sentences’, ‘context’ etc.):

- Conceptual meaning;
- Propositional meaning;
- Contextual meaning;
- Pragmatic meaning.

Conceptual meaning: This kind of meaning is embedded in ‘a word’. Every lexical item embodies a concept— simple or complex, and “the whole books are written on complex concepts” (Nuttall, 1996). This refers to Saussurean definition of language as a ‘sign’ system that includes ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’*.

Propositional meaning: The meaning ‘a sentence’ has of its own is a propositional meaning. A single word does not inherit this type of meaning because “we cannot affirm it, deny it, question it” (Nuttall, 1996). For example ‘playing’ as a single word in isolation may have a conceptual but not a propositional meaning. If it is used in a proposition, such as, *Boys are playing in the field*, the sentence will be subjected to denying, doubting, questioning and so on. Thus the word (playing) becomes propositionally meaningful.

This is the only category of meaning that can be interpreted without the reference of the ‘context’.

Contextual meaning: Contextual meaning occurs when ‘a sentence’ or ‘proposition’ or even a word is used in a context. The use indicates the writer’s intention of and reason for using it. The value of its use in a text becomes explicit from the relationship between it and the other sentences or elements before and after it in the same text.

For effective reading it is crucial to interpret the contextual meaning.

Pragmatic meaning: The meaning that ‘a sentence has only as a part of the interaction between writer and reader’ is a pragmatic meaning in that context (Nuttall, 1996). It reflects the writer’s feelings, attitude, purpose, tone and so on. Pragmatic meaning is the product of the unified whole text, and it offers variations in interpreting the meaning because of the fact that every reader comes to the text with his/her individual concepts and experiences that largely affect the meaning of the text. Grellet (1996) states that each reader brings his own meaning ‘to what he reads based on what he expects from the text and his previous knowledge’.

Manipulation of meaning

The process of manipulating the meaning of a text starts from lexical or conceptual meaning and it gradually proceeds towards the pragmatic achievement to develop a unified interpretation. So, in order to reach the pragmatic meaning of a text, it is important to understand the meanings of every part of the text and then to amalgamate them to produce successive and coherent unified meaning of the text as a whole since a text is a piece of communication, parts of which relate to each other to create a meaningful whole (Shahidullah, 1995-96).

Requirements for effective reading

The first and foremost thing required for reading is the ability to recognize the written forms of the words. Then come the perception and internalization of the meaning or message a text contains. Thus reading is regarded as a ‘two fold process’. Dechant (1982) gives an elaborate description of the process:

First, it requires *word identification* (visual discrimination of the word, and recoding or ability to pronounce the word), which is generally effected by configuration cues, phonic cues, morphemic analysis cues, and sometimes by picture and context cues. Second, reading requires *comprehension* (decoding or associating meaning with the symbols that comprise the words). p: 288.

Reading is not just an act of looking at the written words. It involves certain attitudes and reactions towards the text a reader is reading. According to Grellet (1996), reading “constantly

* Saussure viewed language as a system of ‘sign’ which is made up of ‘signifier’ i.e. the sound-image or graphic equivalent and ‘signified’ i.e. the concept or meaning of it (Eagleton, 1996).

involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions.” Rauch and Weinstein (1968) observe that reading involves ‘more than the ability to recognize and pronounce words correctly’. Goodman (1967) argues that syntactic, semantic and pragmatic knowledge is a must in the reading process. Urquhart and Weir (1998) argue that reading being a language activity involves ‘inferencing, memory, relating text to background knowledge, as well as decoding, and obvious language aspects as syntax and lexical knowledge’. Reading is also a process of ‘forming’ images produced by the printed letters, and increasing vocabulary (Shaw, 1959). It requires organizing and retaining ideas and impressions gained from the printed page.

Dechant (1982) seems to be more distinctive in this respect. According to him, a ‘complete reading’ involves *four steps*: recognition of the written symbols, understanding the meaning or message of the text, reaction of the reader after completing reading and integration of the whole process.

Efficiency of a reader largely depends on the pre-requisite knowledge and sufficient experience about facts and happenings in real life and on proper schemata.

Knowledge and experience: Pre-requisite knowledge may accompany a reader when s/he goes to a text, or s/he may be entirely a stranger to the content of the text. Pre-experience about a text enables a reader to pursue its meaning effectively because a good reader brings a variety of experiences and meanings to the printed symbol and so “the more vital experiences one has the more opportunities he has to observe and participate in the many-faceted world about him, the more meaning he will bring to the printed word” (Rauch *et al.*, 1968).

If the reader brings more experience related to the textual content with him/her, s/he can share, support or oppose the information s/he obtains while reading more successfully; otherwise s/he has to depend totally on the information the book supplies. Williams (1996) has suggest that a reader brings the following elements with him/her:

- i. knowledge of the writing system
- ii. knowledge of the language
- iii. ability to interpret
- iv. appropriate knowledge of the world as assumed by the writer
- v. a reason for reading that determines his style.

Schemata*: It is to be noted that no writing or text presents every detail. There are certainly some lacks of information in the writing, and it is assumed that the reader will fill up those lacks with the assumptions which are shared by both the writer (encoder) and the reader (decoder). The more the shared assumptions are, the more effective the reading will be. They are abstract ideas of certain experiences, and influence largely in interpreting a text more precisely. Again, the knowledge people get from experiences is organized in a variety of ways depending on the individual mind. For this reason, people have different experiences of the same incident, and consequently, different interpretations of the same text.

If students possess sufficient and/or similar schemata of the writer and the text can activate them properly, they will be able to interpret the text successfully and meaningfully. On the other hand, students of weak schemata cannot penetrate into the thought and message of the writer and will remain in a state of darkness and spend much time groping for the meaning of the text.

Nuttall (1996) has illustrated this issue using an example. The first sentence from the example is, *The bus careered along and ended up in the hedge*. In this text of a single sentence, the ‘bus’ schema can be used to illustrate the idea. It is to be noted that there is no mention of road in the

* The assumptions or experiences shared by both the writer and the reader (‘schema’ is the singular form)

text, but the reader does not face any difficulty in understanding the elaboration that the bus was running along 'a road'. It means that our road schema is already with us, and it is hovering at the back of our minds in case of need; the road schema for some readers may include components such as walls, hedges, fences which mark the limit of a road. However, if the reader's road schema does not include 'hedge' along the roads, s/he will be in difficulties to understand the meaning of the text, and will, perhaps, be in a puzzle as to where the bus actually stopped! Thus, reading makes use of our existing schemata, and if necessary, modifies it (in the above example, the reader may check and learn the word, 'hedge', which will add knowledge to his/her existing schemata).

So, schemata of a student play a vital role in exploiting and understanding a text. According to Shahidullah (1995-96), "teaching of reading concerns mainly with schema activation and schema availability". Social, cultural, historical or even mythical or religious schemata are all important to understand a text properly.

Target reading

Students may come across books of various types (for example, the longer ones and the shorter ones) with various purposes: to know the content of the text, to know what there is in the text in detail etc. Moreover, a reader's purpose of reading may be to extract information from a text, or he/she may want to share his/her own view and experience with the views and information provided by the text.

Reading includes a variety of processes depending on the purpose of reading, readability of the reader, the size of the text, availability of time etc. So, the precondition of being an efficient reader is to determine which type of reading s/he is to follow.

Intensive reading: This is a process for reading shorter texts in order to extract specific information. Grellet (1996) terms it "an accuracy activity" that involves reading in detail. Bright and McGregor (1970) remark, "...it is not whole lessons but parts of lessons that may properly be so divided. In the middle of a chapter, we may stop to dwell on one word. This is intensive study".

Teachers may influence intensive reading because they are the part of the process, and it is largely a classroom activity. It is sometimes called *local* reading.

The aim of intensive reading, according to Nuttall (1996), is:

to arrive at an understanding, not only of what the text means, but of how the meaning is produced. The 'how' is as important as the 'what', for the intensive lesson is intended primarily to train strategies which the student can go on to use with other texts.

Intensive reading is very effective for the development of the reading skills of students since "most of the reading skills are trained by studying shortish texts in detail" (Nuttall, 1996). Barry (2002) argues that through intensive reading students make their reading 'meditative, reflective, and personal'. He goes on to say that "nothing of any interest can happen in this subject ['English Studies'] without close reading". He has also suggested the SQ3R* method for the students to make intensive reading a success.

Extensive reading: Extensive reading or reading for fluency involves reading of longer texts for pleasure and not necessarily, for minute details. It is a fluency activity in which students can read on their own.

Davis (1995) defines extensive reading as:

* SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, Reading, Reciting and Reviewing. It was introduced by Robinson in 1962 (Robinson, F. 1962. *Effective Reading*. New York: Harper and Row.)

...a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouraged, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as are only competing against themselves.

Williams (1984) describes extensive reading as the “relatively rapid reading of long texts”. According to Nuttall (1996), extensive reading is essentially a *private activity*, and students dwell in their private world of reading for their own interest.

Nuttall (1996) has pointed out two reasons for extensive reading. The first reason is that extensive reading is the ‘easiest and most effective’ way of improving the reading skills of the students, and the second reason is that being an educational tool, extensive reading not only serves a favourite atmosphere for the students but also provides them with enjoyment. As a result, students feel interested, and they acquire their desired progress in developing their reading skills.

However, the purpose of extensive reading is solely to enjoy a text, and in this reading programme students need not answer questions on the text they have read. Moreover, they can select their own books and read a great deal at their own pace. In order to make extensive reading really enjoyable and fruitful to the students, they should be encouraged to read easy and interesting books and to stop reading a book if it is too hard, too easy, or boring (Day, 2004).

The importance of extensive reading lies in the fact that it helps to increase students’ vocabulary to a large extent (Nuttall, 1996). Nation (1997) supports it, and explains that in an extensive reading students come across the same words repeatedly, and can pick up their meanings from the context. Day (2004) states that when EFL students read extensively, ‘Good things happen’ to them. According to him extensive reading not only makes the students fluent readers, but also enables them to learn new words and expand their understanding of words they knew before. It helps them to write better and improve their listening and speaking abilities to a large extent.

As extensive reading is an open programme for all types of students and their choice is free, they can read any types of texts they like. All kinds of books, magazines, etc. especially written for EFL and ESL learners are the most suitable reading materials for them.

Pedagogical approaches to reading

According to the size of the text, the purpose of reading, time allotted etc. there are three major approaches to reading

- Top-down approach;
- Bottom-up approach;
- Interactive reading

Top-down approach: It was proposed by Goodman (1967). Since it is a reader-driven approach, the reader ‘comes to the text with a previously formed plan, and perhaps, omits chunks of the text which seem to be irrelevant to the reader’s purpose’ (Upquhart and Weir, 1998). Nuttall (1996) observes that

We draw on our own intelligence and experience– the predictions we can make, based on the schemata we have acquired– to understand the text. ... We make conscious use of it when we try to see the overall purpose of the text, or get a rough idea of the pattern of the writer’s argument, in order to make a reasoned guess at next step.

Expectations of the reader play ‘a crucial, even dominant, role’ in this process. The reader brings his/her personal experiences and views with him/her, and those aspects largely affect the way of interpreting a text. Goodman (1967) characterizes this approach as viewing reading as ‘precise, sequential identification’.

This approach is precisely suggested by most thinkers and researchers because of its direct relation to readers' schemata— their personal knowledge and experiences. Its importance can be stretched from Nuttall (1996)

This enables him to predict the writer's purpose, the likely trend of the argument and so on, and then use this framework to interpret difficult parts of the text. The top-down approach gives a sense of perspective and makes use of all that the reader brings to the text: prior knowledge, common sense, etc.

Bottom-up approach: It was proposed by Gough (1972). It begins with the stimulus, i.e. the text, or bits of the text. In the bottom-up approach, 'the reader builds up a meaning from the black marks on the page: recognizing letters and words, working out sentence structure' (Nuttall, 1996). When students are confused with an initial reading they use this process consciously. In this approach, a reader entirely depends on the contextual meaning, and s/he does not need any background knowledge since it is text-driven.

Interactive reading: Experts argue and explain that none of these approaches (namely, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up') stands alone for an effective reading. The proper combination of these two— known as interactive approach— is actually appropriate, and an efficient reader uses both these processes and shifts from one approach to another according to the demand of the reading strategy (Carrell, 1988). Nuttall (1996) comments that a reader should continually shift from one focus to another, "now adopting a top-down approach to predict the probable meaning, then moving to the bottom-up approach to check whether that is really what the writer says".

According to Shahidullah (1995-96), an interactive process requires the use of background knowledge, expectations, context and so on. For better output students need to carry out three factors: conceptual abilities, background knowledge, and process strategies.

Conclusion

It is now obvious that a reader cannot reach the proper meaning of a text if s/he solely depends on what there is in the text, because 'text itself does not carry meaning' (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Better understanding of a text depends on both cues supplied by the text and schemata of the reader. At the same time, a reader has to be able 'to relate information from the text to already existing background knowledge' (Shahidullah, 1995- 96). A text becomes a meaningful discourse only when its graphic display is reconstructed properly by the reader. The success depends on the skills a reader possesses and his/her ability to apply them in interpreting a text.

So, to reach the meaning of a text, a reader should and must read with a basic intellectual ability. This ability is used to make a proper relation between the textual information and his/her existing schemata, proper knowledge of the world and reading strategies including familiarity with the phonology, graphemes and lexicon of a language. Because reading is not just a decoding of symbols but an interaction between an individual's background knowledge and the text, McKay (1988) has suggested to 're-evaluate' the traditional activities of a reading strategy. Thus through gearing up external experience and making schematic activities more dynamic, meaningful reading can be ensured. At the same time, students should be made to know which approach to reading is to adopt and at which level. If they develop the power of selecting the right approach strategically, they will be able to be efficient readers. And once they are adept in reading pedagogy, not only their vocabulary and knowledge but also their language skill will be developed satisfactorily. Consequently, they will be the true learners and, in the real sense of the term, become the efficient users of English language through exploring books of different branches for they know how to exploit maximum meaning from a given text.

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