

Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives in Teaching FL Reading Skills

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss theoretical perspectives which have exerted most impact on empirical research and education concerning foreign language literacy. Two theoretical orientations are the foci of the article: a psycholinguistic perspective, which views reading as a mental process during which the reader constructs his own representation of the text and a socio-cultural orientation, which emphasises the importance of varied social and historical contexts in text production and text reception. In relation to each theoretical perspective, the role of the text, the reader and the writer in the reading situation is discussed. The presentation of the two theoretical positions leads to a discussion of teaching implications suggested by each theoretical perspective. Examples of didactic materials and teaching activities applied in contemporary educational contexts are discussed. The paper argues for viewing literacy as a complex concept and suggests an extended conceptualisation of reading as an interaction of cognitive and social factors.

Keywords: teaching reading, critical reading, socio-cultural perspectives

The importance of developing reading skills

Developing reading skills is the main aim of all education systems, also the one in Poland, as demonstrated by the Core Curriculum (MEN, 2017), a document issued by the Ministry of Education, which provides guidelines for school syllabi and coursebooks. It recommends that education concerning both native language and foreign languages prepares learners to develop subject knowledge as well as equips students with competences necessary to appreciate literary works and other texts of culture. Developing effective reading skills is also emphasised in the *European Reference Framework: Key competences for lifelong learning* (Council of Europe, 2007). Reading competence “includes the abilities to distinguish and use different types of texts, to search for, collect and process information, to use aids, and to formulate and express one’s oral and written arguments in a convincing way appropriate to the context” (Council of Europe, 2007, p.3). Along with numeracy and ICT skills, it is the fundamental skill on which an individual can build learning to learn skills.

Reading as the object of psycholinguistic and socio-cultural investigations

As an object of scientific investigation, reading has been widely studied and held the interest of many disciplines, not only education and psychology, but also philosophy, artificial intelligences and linguistics. Not surprisingly, it has gathered many different definitions and interpretations. In the discipline of education and applied linguistics, the most influential theoretical perspectives have been psycholinguistic and socio-cultural. The two orientations differ in how they see the role of the text, the reader and the writer in the reading situation, which is reflected in the way reading is researched and taught. To understand the difference between them, let us discuss theoretical principles characteristic of each perspective and look at didactic techniques each orientation recommends.

Psycholinguistic perspective – theoretical considerations

In a psycholinguistic perspective, reading is viewed as a cognitive process, a set of mental operations during which the reader creates his own representation of a text. Theoretical models conceptualise reading as two levels of mental processing: “lower”, which involves letter identification, word recognition and syntactic parsing; and “higher”– which entails discourse processing and activation of the reader’s knowledge concerning text characteristics and the topic of the text. Processing the text at the two levels enables the reader to construct his representation of the text.

A good example of the psycholinguistic perspective is the model of van Dijk and Kintsch (1983). According to van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), text information is represented in memory at three levels: surface form, propositional text base and situation model. Reading at the surface form results in the representation of the exact wording and syntax of the text, whereas the product of reading at the propositional text base is a multileveled, locally coherent propositional network of semantic text information. When processing the text at the situation model, the reader depicts real-life situations presented in the text, which leads him to interpret the text in his own way. In other words, the surface form processing results in understanding words and sentences in the text, the propositional text base processing enables the reader to reach a literal level of understanding the text and developing the situation model facilitates constructing the reader’s individual evaluation and interpretation of the text.

Socio-cultural perspective - theoretical considerations

To understand a socio-cultural view on reading, it is necessary to discuss the concept of literacy. Johns (1997) defines literacy as a complex concept, more inclusive than

the ability to read and write, which integrates “the many and varied social, historical and cognitive influences on readers and writers as they attempt to process and produce texts” (1997, p.2). It elucidates the importance of the social context in which a discourse is produced as well as the roles and purposes of communities of readers and writers. Socio-cultural perspectives imply that in constructing his representation of the text the reader should take into account not only information expressed in the text and his background knowledge (as suggested in psycholinguistic theories) but also historical and social factors that could have influenced the process of writing this text.

It is worth discussing the McCormick (1997) model of reading as an example of a socio-cultural perspective. Reading is viewed as a cognitive activity that occurs in social contexts. It is an interaction of the reader and the text, with both readers and texts ideologically situated. The reading situation is an interaction of the reader’s repertoire and the text’s repertoire. McCormick (1997) defines repertoire as “the particular subset of discourses, the combination of ideas, experiences, habits, norms, conventions and assumptions, which the text draws on that allows it to be written and take the shape it does” (p.70). The term “ideology”, although often associated with propaganda, is used in cultural studies to indicate common values, ideas and assumptions of a particular society. McCormick (1997) explains that:

Ideology helps to tie us together by giving us seemingly coherent representations and explanations of our social practices, and in particular by giving us the language by which we describe and thus try to perpetuate them. Thus general ideology acts as a kind of social glue, binding us all together. (p.74)

McCormick (1997) notes that both processes of writing and reading balance between autonomy and determination, which means that both readers and writers consciously and unconsciously draw on aspects of the general and literary repertoire of their particular social situation. Reading and writing are never individual acts of readers and writers. Comprehension of the text is influenced by the reader’s place in a particular social situation. It may happen that the interaction between the reader’s ideology (i.e. his worldview) and the text’s repertoire (i.e. ideology implied in the text) are in conflict.

Didactic implications of psycholinguistic approaches

Since the 1970s, psycholinguistic approaches have been the most influential in foreign language pedagogy concerning reading. Reading texts is preceded by exercises which aim to pre-teach new vocabulary and revise grammar. These tasks facilitate students’ efforts to construct the surface form of the text. To practice comprehension of the text at the literal level (i.e. construction of the propositional

text base), FL learners do a number of reading exercises, such as answering multiple choice questions, open ended questions, etc. This stage should lead students to the next stage – developing their own interpretation of the text, i.e. the situation model. During my work as a FL teacher I have observed that unfortunately no sufficient attention is paid to this stage of reading comprehension. Course books do not show students how to develop their own evaluation of the text. A popular follow-up task introduced after the reading comprehension stage requires students to express their own opinion about the issue raised in the text. However, such activities are usually treated as speaking practice, not as tasks that would instruct learners how to look at the text from a distance. Often no training is provided to encourage learners to venture to take a more critical stance at the text. This missing element of instruction is offered in socio-cultural perspectives, which will be discussed below.

Another important change that psycholinguistic perspectives introduced into literacy pedagogy is the shift from work mainly on linguistic and textual form to the reader's mental processes. Therefore, considerable importance is put on the role of schemata. As schema theories, e.g. Anderson (1978), claim, we comprehend new information only when there is a match of this information with something we already know, i.e. with existing schemata. In the process of reading, schemata enable the reader to make inferences on the basis of the information drawn from the text and the schemata that the reader "brings" to the text. This idea is often implemented in coursebook pre-reading tasks, which help student readers to develop or activate their background knowledge about texts. For example, students can be asked to exchange their views about the topic of the text or write questions that they would like to ask to the author of the text concerning the issues discussed in the text they are to read.

In the psycholinguistic approach, the aim of the teacher is to enhance learners' individual search for meaning and students' interaction with texts. Psycholinguistic perspectives stress the role of the reader in the reading process. Due attention is devoted to training learners to be skilled and fluent readers. Students are taught to master reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning or guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context. They practise the ability of observing, monitoring and evaluating the process of their reading.

To sum up, psycholinguistic approaches emphasise the role of the reader and his mental processes. In pedagogy, reading practice entails facilitating the reader's reception of the text by means of extending his background knowledge and equipping him with useful cognitive and metacognitive skills. However, as Johns (1997) argues, "texts are primarily socially constructed" (p.14) and failing to take into account social and cultural factors influencing text production and reception may not provide adequate support especially to those "who are culturally, socially, or linguistically distant from English academic language and discourses" (p.13). Techniques of achieving these important aims will be presented below.

Didactic implications of socio-cultural approaches

As it has been explained earlier, the sociocultural perspective claims that when constructing his representation of the text, the reader can draw not only on his background knowledge but also historical and social factors that could have influenced the process of writing this text. This conceptualisation of reading promotes a critical approach to texts. According to Dechant (1991), “critical reading demands that the reader evaluates, passes personal judgment on the quality, logic, appropriateness, reasonableness, authenticity, adequacy, value, relevancy, timeliness, accuracy, completeness, and truthfulness of what is read” (p.453). To be able to read texts in a critical way, the reader should be aware of his own beliefs and convictions, which in the process of comprehending the text may interact with those that expressed in the text.

Many literacy researchers and reading experts, e.g. Alderson (2000), Giroux (1983), Johns (1997), McCormick (1997) consider developing critical literacy an important aim of reading pedagogy. Alderson (2000) describes a critical reader as the one who reads intelligently and is prepared to take control over and responsibility for his own readings. He is also aware of the consequences of decisions that he can make in relation to his interpretation of the text. This does not involve only a skilful use of metacognitive strategies (as recommended by the psycholinguistic perspective) but developing a more mature understanding that texts do not exist in themselves but rather should be treated as “texts in use”.

To recapitulate, the aim of socio-cultural approaches is to show learners that both the process of writing and reading are social phenomena. Thus, sensitising learners to social factors that influence both the writer and the reader is of paramount importance. Developing a critical approach to texts is considered the most important aim in reading instruction.

A combination of both perspectives as an optimal solution for teaching FL learners

It seems that both perspectives presented above, i.e. psycholinguistic and socio-cultural, can offer ideas that can be successfully implemented in FL reading didactics. An approach that would draw on the principles suggested by both approaches can be named socio-cognitive. The twofold nature of reading is underlined by Bernhardt (1991), who views reading as a cognitive and social process. She claims that texts have two different components: “seen” elements that the reader can see in black and white, and “unseen” elements that reflect the intention of the writer and which carry implicit sociocultural elements. Regarding reading viewed as a cognitive process, Bernhardt claims that when reading the text, the reader constructs the internal representation of the text, which is not the duplicate of the text itself. This process is generalizable, i.e. to a large extent the same for all readers. However, the

product of this process, i.e. the internal representation of the text, is individual and unique to every reader. In regard to a view on reading as a social process, Bernhardt (1991) explains that texts are “manifestations of cultures” (p.10) and in contrast to cognitive processes involved in reading the text, the processing of the text cannot be generalised since readers from different cultural contexts will read the same text in a different way.

Treating reading as a social phenomenon offers important implications for FL reading didactics. This view implies that well developed linguistic skills are not sufficient for successful comprehension. In other words, to be successful the reader has to understand not only words and sentences, but also implied message shared by the members of the social group to whom the text is addressed. His final comprehension should depend on both the linguistic data and his language and reading skills, and his ability to respond to the text in a culturally specific way.

This “interdisciplinary” approach to teaching FL reading skills has become the focus of critical literacy studies and has been promoted by a number of teaching experts. As regards research studies, Park (2011) and Zyngier and Fialho (2010) identified students’ difficulties in reading texts in a critical way and their poor understanding of sociocultural issues implied in texts. Kaura and Sidhub (2013) on the basis of their investigation concluded that learners tend to accept authors’ opinions and find it difficult to question them. Weninger and Kan (2013) attributed students’ inability to read in a critical way to school curricula, which give priority to teaching English as a tool for every day communication and often fail to show students how to critically interrogate language use.

As regards promoting a socio-cognitive approach to teaching reading to FL students, let us discuss Dakowska’s (2005) conceptualisation of reading comprehension as a model that lends itself to addressing both aspects of reading, i.e. cognitive and social, in a foreign language situation. This model comprises three levels: semanticising, comprehending and evaluation. At the level of **semanticising** the reader is the decoder of the text. “Semanticising is the least subjective stage of comprehension because [readers] are confined by the language code” (Dakowska, 2005, p.193). The outcome of this stage of reading the text is literal comprehension of the text at the level of words, phrases and sentences. In performing reading tasks, the reader draws on his knowledge of alphabet of the target language, grammar and vocabulary. Dakowska (2005) explains that “[p]roviding the learner with prompts and feedback at this stage is inevitable in view of the language learner’s deficits” (p.193). In the case of a foreign language learner, these deficits relate to the knowledge of the target language and its culture as well as automaticity necessary to skilfully process FL reading tasks. It is crucial to emphasise the facilitative role of the teaching situation, created by the coursebook task and/or the teacher, in enabling FL readers to compensate for the above-mentioned weaknesses.

At the level of **interpretation**, the reader reconstructs the message expresses in the text by the writer. The reader can be called “comprehender”. His main aim

is to identify the main ideas and integrate them into a coherent whole. In the attempts to achieve global understanding of the text, the reader draws on various sources of information he considers useful in a given reading situation. Dakowska (2005) underlines the importance of the following sources of information helpful at this stage of reading: the text itself, its environment and the reader's memory. It is vital that the reader is sensitive to how the text is organised, its typography and illustrations that accompany the text. An understanding of the communicative environment of the text, which is demonstrated e.g. in the genre of the text, leads to the reconstruction of the communicative intention of the writer. The most significant source of knowledge lies in the reader himself: his knowledge of the language (both the native and the target language), factual knowledge of the topic, knowledge of discourse genres and the learner's reading "experiences". In a school situation, it is the teacher who should equip learners with the skills necessary to activate sources of knowledge useful for the reading task at hand.

Reading at the level of **evaluation** involves looking at the text message from the point of view of one's values, convictions and ideas about the topic. The learner reads from the perspective of the addressee of the writer's intention and responds to it in his own manner. This stage of reading comprehension is the most subjective one and encourages the reader to develop critical approach to the ideas expressed in the text.

At this stage of discussion, it is worthwhile emphasising that developing critical reading strategies has recently attracted the interest of many academic investigations, those that focus on theoretical considerations and those that present practical implications. For example, Skopinskaja (2009) describes a variety of techniques conducive to enhancing FL learners' critical literacy. An interesting activity is "questioning circle", which encourages FL learners to interrogate the text on the basis of the information found in the text, the reader's experience, ideas and values, as well as his knowledge of other cultures and other pieces of literature. The intersection of these areas of information should help the reader to evaluate the text and arrive at his own interpretation.

Conclusion

Reading has been an object of investigation of various disciplines and gave rise to a number of conceptualisations of what reading is and what functions it can serve in the context of FL education. In this paper, two perspectives have been discussed: psycholinguistic and socio-cultural, each offering a slightly different view on the role of writer, text and reader in the process of reception and production of texts and consequently resulting in different implications for reading instruction. It seems that for contemporary educational purposes it would be beneficial to respect a complex nature of reading as an interaction of cognitive and social factors.

Narrowing teaching reading in a foreign language just to the mastery of grammar structures and extension of vocabulary would not be sufficient. Instruction that would aim at developing basic reading strategies, such as skimming and scanning, and training learners in comprehending texts at their literal level seems promising for beginner learners, but would not satisfy the needs of more advanced students. This traditional way of teaching reading skills should not be abandoned but enriched by techniques that draw on the principles of socio-cultural perspectives. It is important that learners are aware of their active role as readers and prepared to research and critique texts. They should learn that there are many different readings of the same text and therefore their own reading of the same text may change when, e.g. they change beliefs and opinions concerning issues discussed in this text. Only by equipping students with FL competence, appropriate reading strategies and awareness of a social nature of reading and writing can we successfully prepare learners to interpret an enormous amount of information that they face in the present era of globalisation.

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Bio-note

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