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Becoming a Second/Foreign Language Reader

For many years second/foreign language teaching specialists have been involved in an enquiry into the ways in which reading skills develop in a new language when a learner has already mastered the same skills in his native language. Research into L1 reading, which has developed many valuable insights both for L2/FL theory and practice, has often focused on the similarities between L1 and L2/FL learning environments, especially when concerned with the near-fluency stages in the latter case. Nevertheless, the divergence between the two situations has also been frequently pointed out.

The main differences occurring between L2/FL readers and L1 readers can be attributed to the fact that L2/FL learners are already equipped with the command of their native language, its syntactic system and mental lexicon, and – if they are not children – they can use reading skills efficiently, have a rich store of the knowledge of the world and well-developed metacognitive strategies to control their learning. If the positive transfer of any of these elements occurs, L2/FL learners find themselves in a conducive learning situation; a negative transfer, on the other hand, undoubtedly puts them in a disadvantageous position.

The present article will reflect on how and why a positive transfer of the already existent knowledge and skills can be triggered. Special attention will be paid to the constraints put on the application of the many communication and learning strategies already developed in the native language, which can become a real asset for an L2/FL language learner.

L1 reading ability, L2 reading and L2 knowledge relationships. In discussing the issue of developing L2 reading skills one cannot underestimate the way L2 reading skills are related not only to L2 language knowledge in general but also to L1 reading ability. Yet, considering only these two relationships, useful as it may be for rendering the problem clearly, presents merely a partial view of what developing reading skills by a learner struggling to acquire a new language entails. As a consequence, a vital relationship between vocabulary and reading is placed into the background to the advantage of emphasizing a more general relationship between L2/FL reading skills and the first language reading strategies.

Whereas in L1 considerable stress is put on vocabulary knowledge as the best predictor of reading comprehension and on describing the link between the two, vocabulary/reading relationship in L2/FL is generally referred to as a secondary problem, with the main emphasis placed on the role played by the native language reading skills. Yet, undoubtedly, apart from poor L1 reading abilities, insufficient L2/FL knowledge of both grammar and lexis constitute another potent source of difficulty in developing foreign language reading skills.

Since the 1970s the simple question has been posed whether the problems L2/FL learners face in reading concern reading abilities or language proficiency (eg. Coady 1979, Clarke 1980). In 1984 Alderson put forward two hypotheses and their two modifications:

1. Poor reading in a foreign language is due to poor reading ability in the first language. (...)
2. Poor reading in a foreign language is due to inadequate knowledge of the target language."
 - 1a. Poor foreign language reading is due to incorrect strategies for reading the foreign language, strategies which differ from the strategies for reading the native language.
 - 2a. Poor foreign language reading is due to reading strategies in the first language not being employed in the foreign language, due to inadequate knowledge of the foreign language. (...)

After his analysis of three empirical studies (including his own) into the issue, Bossers (1991) concluded that the last of Alderson's hypothesis seems to be true.

Basically, similar reasoning underpins the ideas developed by Bernhardt and Kamil (1995), who, having examined a large body of research point out two differing hypotheses: the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis and Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis. It is significant that these two hypotheses provide different implications for the language classroom. The former implies that developing reading skills in a foreign language requires that some level of the target language command is reached before reading skills are introduced. According to the latter, first language reading abilities help extensively to develop second language skills, which means that fluent L1 readers are able to compensate for a deficiency of L2 knowledge to a considerable degree.

These two researchers tried to estimate to what extent reading and language competence variables contribute to L2 reading. The data collected by them showed that language proficiency accounts for a greater proportion of the variance in L2 reading (30-38 per cent), whereas reading skills make less, although still a valid contribution (10-16 per cent). They also mentioned some other studies into variance in reading, which covered such important factors as: background knowledge, interest, and cognitive abilities (spatial perception, memory and reasoning) whose influence upon the efficiency of the reading process is unquestionable although difficult to discern.

The Threshold Hypothesis and the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis have received both positive and negative responses so far and both of them have turned out to be partially correct. Bernhardt and Kamil (1995:32), however, consider that the basic questions concerning the issue should be reformulated and sound in the following way:

- How first language (L1) literate does a second language reader have to be in order to make the second language (L2) work ?"
- How much second language (L2) knowledge does a second language reader have to have to make the first language (L1) reading knowledge work?

The answers to these questions have not yet been found as they require further research into the quantity and quality of the first and second/foreign language knowledge.

Threshold vocabulary

It is obvious that the problem of the threshold level concerns not only grammar but also vocabulary – an area greatly underestimated so far. It has been noted that in reading natural texts it is particular words that constitute the basis both for lexical decoding and interpreting the contents of a text. This is the reason why bottom-up level processing as well as top-down processing can easily reach their limitations in the language learning process. At the bottom level difficulties may appear as a result of the lack of a fully developed phonological system (Barnett 1990:34) or insufficient amount of sight vocabulary, whereas at the top level they most frequently arise from the presence of too many unfamiliar words, many of which are responsible for lexical patterning at the level of discourse.

When looked at from a broader perspective, attaining threshold vocabulary by an L2/FL learner concerns providing appropriate linguistic input in L2/FL development so that language development is enhanced through the mode of reading. SLA studies, however, have not dealt with the issue thoroughly enough by now, although the value of reading widely in order to pick up new words has been appreciated both in L2 and in L1. Devitt (1997:463) claims that empirical research is necessary into the role of lower-level processes in reading connected with lexis as well as sentence and text grammar. He finds these subprocesses in reading to be critical for increasing L2 learners accuracy and efficiency and for preventing the premature fossilization of particular language forms.

The assumption that only when a sufficient amount of recognition vocabulary is attained can learners move on to developing the skill of learning vocabulary from context and become efficient readers has led some researchers to directly tackling directly the issue of the size of the so-called threshold vocabulary.

L1 language learners beginning formal instruction at school are estimated to know between 5,000 to 7,000 words, which they develop further during the school years of instruction up to 40,000 words. With L2 learners it is approximately 5,000-7,000 words that are assumed to suffice for them to commence academic courses (eg. Grabe 1991:389-391). Behydt (1987:67) also mentions that 5,000 words are needed in order to achieve basic comprehension in L2/FL situations, and underlines the variable difficulty of the L2/FL vocabulary learning task. In his opinion the first thousand words take the least effort to learn as they are the shortest words, the simplest morphologically and also the ones having a high frequency and coverage. Later on informed decisions have to be made by the teacher which words, how and in what learning conditions to present.

Much more precise estimates of lexical items required for efficient reading comprehension were worked out by Nation (1993:124-125), who distinguished four groups. The first group comprises around 2,000 word families which cover over 80 per cent of most written texts. The second group consists of general academic vocabulary – 800 word families, covering about 8 per cent of academic text and 6 per cent of newspapers. The third group is technical and specialized vocabulary – about 2,000 words for a particular subject area covering 4-5 per cent of academic texts. The remaining group covers numerous low frequency words which are acquired through different types of contact with the language. The researcher believes that in order to teach the first 2,000 words, direct vocabulary teaching is advisable, after which learners should be trained in a variety of strategies that would allow them to develop their own vocabulary autonomously.

Research to gain more insight into the size of vocabulary constituting the absolute threshold level, the turning point that ensures that one can start reading efficiently, was set up by Laufer (1991). Her students were divided into four groups reading texts at 4 word levels, containing 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 and 5,000 word families respectively. She found that the transition occurred between 2,000 and 3,000 words, which means that at the level of 3,000 word families (with all the

derivatives of a the target word included, that is, 5,000 lexical items), students' knowledge of vocabulary is sufficient for them to transfer their L1 reading strategies into a second/foreign language.

Another important finding was the fact that an increase of 1,000 words resulted in 7 per cent improvement in reading comprehension and that the threshold effect was so significant that even academically able students did poorly in reading comprehension when they did not reach vocabulary threshold level. In a subsequent publication Laufer (1992) demonstrated that vocabulary giving a 95 per cent coverage of the words in the text was needed by young adults to achieve satisfactory comprehension.

Although absolute numbers have been provided to estimate the threshold vocabulary in L2 reading, in fact, it is impossible to keep them constant as they also depend to a large degree on such factors as task and text difficulty. Taillefer (1996) noted that highly proficient L2 readers with a high L1 reading ability were better than their counterparts with a lower L1 reading ability when asked to perform difficult reading tasks. The difference, however, did not hold when they were administered easier tasks. This points to the fact that although much evidence for the existence and evaluation of the range of vocabulary threshold level in L2 reading has been offered, establishing its firm limits will never be feasible.

It is important to remark that vocabulary level as presented above has been essentially considered from the point of view of young adults facing some academic goals involving L2/FL reading ability. For the purpose of comparison it would be also worth looking at the vocabulary requirements as put forward in general English school courses following the principles of Communicative Language Teaching.

For instance, in The Threshold Level syllabus, the general objectives of communicating in a foreign language are expressed as the six basic functions and notions: getting and giving information, expressing and asking about opinions, expressing emotions, causing specific behaviours of people and verbal behaviour in social situations to be presented and practised in fourteen topics. This inventory of

functions and notions is further defined through an accompanying list of lexical items and grammatical structures. For the whole 3-4 year course the minimum number of words to be acquired amounts to 1,100 with 480 more words to be learned receptively (Komorowska 1984:24-25). The number looks modest as compared with the ones given above.

When attempting to establish the size of the threshold vocabulary for reading as amounting to 5,000 lexical items the researchers do not say explicitly how intensive vocabulary teaching should be. The situation, however, definitely varies as far as general second vs. foreign language courses are concerned. Gairns and Redman (1986:67) remark that 1,000 words to be learned productively during a foreign language course that takes up 125 hours per year, sounds very ambitious in practice when the words are to be taught in low-intensity type of learning conditions in a language class. It can be concluded then that even if only the amount of vocabulary to teach per se is considered, control over learning/teaching so many words in the most economic and efficient way is an impossible task to accomplish.

Despite the fact that threshold vocabulary has received so much attention and its importance for the practising teacher is unquestionable, when considering it from a theoretical point of view one should avoid presenting too simplistic a way of conceptualizing the vocabulary/reading relationship as one of causal nature. Nation (1993:125) claims that subscribing to the view that it is good vocabulary knowledge which primarily ensures effective comprehension means accepting a reductionist view of the reading process. Many other variables such as the already mentioned types of tasks, texts and the abilities of particular readers not only determine the complex nature of the vocabulary/reading relationship but also contribute greatly to the ultimate learning outcomes.

The significance of speed in the reading process

From what has been said so far it emerges clearly that in order to assist the L2/FL language learner in developing reading skills one of the teacher's goals is to create conditions conducive to the gradual

expansion of sight vocabulary. The simplest procedure used in language pedagogy is taking control of the total number of vocabulary items appearing in selected reading passages and the density of unknown vocabulary items in particular.

The basic condition that has to be fulfilled for the reading process to be carried out with any degree of efficiency is keeping the appropriate pace of reading. It has been observed that many L2 learners, regarded as highly proficient in other language skills are not able to obtain the same scores in L2 reading tasks as they do in L1 tasks. Generally, language learners have been found to read 30 per cent more slowly in L2 than in parallel tasks in L1 (Segalowitz and al. 1991).

The problem has serious implications since for the appropriate level of comprehension to be reached, the incoming information needs to be taken in at a minimum rate (80–100 words per min in English) in order to be effectively processed by the human memory. If the input is provided too slowly the human mind is not able to keep a sufficient amount of information in its short-term memory, which gets overloaded and as a result the reading process does not lead to the expected outcome (Perfetti, Lesgood 1979). In other words, if the lexical access in the reading process is not sufficiently automatized and too many words are to be consciously processed, the L2 learner has to slow down too much, which in an extreme case may result in non-comprehension of the text.

Differences of opinion exist as to what the optimal rate in reading should be. Although the rate of 80–100 words per minute was quoted above, the rate of 200 words per minute has also been given as the minimum rate and 300 words per minute are treated as the optimal rate observed in efficient native speakers of English (Anderson 1999:3). More and more methodologists find it beneficial to introduce a variety of classroom activities to increase automaticity of the reading process, although many of them are of a drill or repeated reading type (eg. Segalowitz et al. 1991, Paran 1996, Anderson 1999).

A satisfactory reading rate is an undeniable asset when it comes to independent reading, which will not be taken advantage of by slow

readers as they are not able to read for comprehension or pleasure. In fact, there exists a reciprocal relationship between the speed of reading and comprehension. Faster learners by default read more which helps them to improve their comprehension and as a consequence read more willingly. According to Nuttall (1996:127) poor readers who have to slow down their rate not only do not enjoy reading but they simply give up altogether.

In conclusion, it is worth highlighting that there are a number of variables which play a vital role in developing L2/FL reading skills and all of them should be given due attention to by teachers in order to help their learners achieve their full potential as readers. The relationship between L2/FL language knowledge including grammar and vocabulary as well as L1 language knowledge and reading skills is close knit but very intricate. Not only a high degree of the mastery of the new grammatical system but also extensive vocabulary are needed so that learners can activate reading mechanisms they have already automatized in their native language. The effects of some negative transfer of the L1 language system also have to be taken into consideration.

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Towards the Definition of Language Learning Strategies

The present paper addresses the problem of defining the concept of 'learning strategy', well-established in the field of second language acquisition, as compared with other frequently used designations such as 'technique' and 'study skills'. A suggested inventory of the characteristic features of language learning strategies will be discussed in order to identify the main areas of controversy about the definition of 'strategy'.

Introduction

The main body of literature on learning strategies in second language acquisition (SLA) emerged in the 1970s from an attempt at identifying the characteristics of successful versus unsuccessful learners. The so-called 'good language learner' studies, initiated by Rubin's (1975) pioneering article, *What the good language learner can teach us*, provided support for the postulation that there exists a significant correlation between the use of strategies and success in acquiring a language. The resultant shift in the focus of language instruction away from a teacher and towards a learner has led to an increased interest in the ways individual students process information in order to learn a language. Cognitive operations related to and directed at language learning have been thoroughly examined. Consequently, a vast body of empirical studies has yielded an extensive list of strategies that have been found to display potential to enhance the process of language learning. However, despite the fact that language learning strategy research is already at least twenty years old, SLA specialists have not been able to provide a clear answer to the most basic question of what