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INTEGRATING COGNITION AND GENRE IN THE TEACHING OF READING IN AN ESP CONTEXT

Abstract

The overall aim of this article is to propose a brief reflection upon the implications of cognitive and discursive theories for the teaching of reading. At the outset of the paper, we present a discussion on how the teaching of reading in EFL has developed over the past decades, particularly in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Brazil. We argue that the introduction of novel proposals in this scenario, influenced by recent theoretical insights, does not have necessarily to imply a rupture from previous approaches. On the contrary, an informed articulation between such proposals can be theoretically consistent, having positive effects upon pedagogic practices, regarding the teaching of reading. We firstly focus on psycholinguistic and cognitive-based models of the reading process – and their emphasis on reading strategies – and then on genre-oriented and socio-interactive trends within the same field. It is argued that to privilege one line over the other, on account of a particular current fashion or theoretical purity, prevents one from exploring pedagogically the multidimensional nature of meaning construction, which involves both cognitive and socio-discursive elements. An integrated approach articulating the cognitive and the socio-discursive dimensions of reading within a genre-oriented framework is defended.

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Key words

English for Specific Purposes, reading, genre, cognition, strategies.

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Sažetak

Opšti cilj ovog rada jeste da ukratko razmotri implikacije kognitivnih i diskurzivnih teorija za nastavu čitanja. Na početku rada ukratko predstavljamo razvoj nastave čitanja na engleskom kao stranom jeziku poslednjih decenija, posebno u kontekstu engleskog jezika struke u Brazilu. Smatramo da uvođenje novih predloga u ovom domenu, pod uticajem skorašnjih teorijskih uvida, ne mora nužno da podrazumeva prekid sa prethodnim pristupima. Naprotiv, znalačko spajanje takvih predloga može biti teorijski konzistentno, sa pozitivnim uticajima na pedagošku praksu u pogledu nastave čitanja. U radu se najpre bavimo psiholingvističkim i kognitivno zasnovanim modelima procesa čitanja – s naglaskom na strategije čitanja – a potom na žanrovski orijentisane i društveno-interaktivne trendove u oblasti čitanja. Zastupa se mišljenje da davanje prednosti jednom modelu u odnosu na drugi, zarad trenutne mode ili teorijske isključivosti, sprečava pedagoško istraživanje višeznačne prirode konstrukcije značenja, koje uključuje i kognitivne i sociodiskurzivne elemente. U radu se zalažemo za integrisani pristup, koji spaja kognitivne i sociodiskurzivne aspekte čitanja unutar žanrovski orijentisanog okvira.

Ključne reči

engleski jezik struke, čitanje, žanr, kognicija, strategije.

1. THE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The teaching of reading in English has been one of the most productive areas within the general trend 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP), whose tradition can date back to the proposals developed by the Council of Europe in the 1970s. In ESP there has been a change of focus from linguistic rules to language functions. According to Gillett (1989: 96), this change:

[...] has given rise to an interest in languages for particular purposes, and in a closer examination of the precise objectives of the language learner. At the same time, based on the work of the Council of Europe, there has been a move away from grammatical, and situational syllabuses towards those based on a more functional or notional approach. Taking this state of thinking about language into account, with the belief that more attention should be paid to the purpose for which the language is being studied, then, it is important, in designing any syllabus, to investigate the purposes for which the students use English.

Since its outset, ESP has had a major impact on teaching programmes (syllabuses and methodology), particularly in those contexts where English is used neither as a second language nor as an official language, but as an – undoubtedly important – foreign language.

Although the distinction between a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) is not as clear-cut as it might be thought at first, it acquires relevance in the formulation of aims for L2 or FL teaching. In the former case, the sociolinguistic and political status of L2 is usually part of a national language policy, as this language is normally used either as an official language, a medium of instruction or a national *lingua franca*. This seems to be the case of those countries belonging to the ‘outer circle’ proposed by Kachru (1990), most of them being ex-British colonies: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Malaysia, the Philippines, non-Anglophone South Africa, etc. At the same time, L2 can also be seen from the point of view of the learner or the nature of their exposure to the target language. Immigrants living in English speaking countries, for instance, would probably be learning English as a second and not as a foreign language. In either case, there is no doubt that the exposure to the English language is frequent and somehow context-motivated.

In EFL situations, on the other hand, the learner would not use English on a regular basis in meaningful and purposeful speech events. In such cases, characteristic of the ‘expanding circle’ (Kachru, 1990), which includes countries where English does not have any historical or official role, the exposure to the English language is mostly limited to sporadic encounters with English speaking people (either meeting them as tourists in their own country, or being tourists themselves), television, music, and more recently, the Internet. Needless to say though that, depending on one’s professional lives, the exposure to and need for English may be far greater. This would be the case for those professionals working in multinational companies or attending international conferences, a situation which cannot be considered typical of the average learner in EFL contexts.

At a global level, English is far from losing its lead as an international language (Sharifian, 2009) or a world language (Crystal, 2003) or even the world *lingua franca* (Jenkins, 2007). On the contrary, it seems to be getting more and more widespread daily as a result of globalisation. This fact, however, does not necessarily mean that it has become the ‘intranational’ *lingua franca* in EFL contexts. To have an awareness of this state of affairs seems to be essential when evaluating EFL teaching programmes and trying to come to grips with its not so uncommon low rate of success, which was accurately problematised by Rogers (1982) back in the 1980s and is still true in many contexts, despite the overwhelming internationalisation of English.

In this scenario, ESP has come as a viable alternative to what can be humorously (though to a certain extent adequately) referred to as TENP (Teaching English for No Purposes). Although the instrumental nature of ESP, when introduced as a school subject, has been criticised for not contemplating the

socioeducational dimension of language teaching, but merely its practical communicative use, ESP has been adopted as the main guideline or set of principles for developing syllabuses and materials in varying contexts.

2. ESP IN BRAZIL

An example of a very successful application of ESP at a national level was the Brazilian ESP Project (Programa Nacional de Inglês Instrumental – National Project for the Teaching of English for Specific Purposes), developed by the Applied Linguistics Post Graduate Programme at São Paulo Catholic University in 1980. The project was implemented in 23 universities and aimed mostly at undergraduate students from all areas, who needed to develop reading skills in English to have access to the academic production written in this language in their specific fields.

The teaching of ESP in Brazil (more specifically, the teaching of reading for specific purposes) has, more recently, gone beyond the University campuses to become significantly important in the teaching of English in regular schools all over the country. The focus placed on reading by a group of specialists working for the Ministry of Education who designed formal curricular guidelines was justified by both educational and practical reasons.

On the one hand, reading was described as being potentially interdisciplinary and educationally empowering; on the other, it could cater for the possible characteristics (some may well say restraints) of foreign language teaching in Brazilian schools, especially in state schools. A large number of students in the classrooms, lack of resources, little time allocated to the discipline and unmotivated and underpaid teachers are some of the reasons that could justify the resorting to a reading-based teaching framework as the most advisable one (because more realistic) in such an unfavourable context.

As a result of the ESP project at universities and the adoption of reading curricula in many schools throughout the country, ESP in Brazil has so often been associated to the teaching of reading that both have been used interchangeably; although 'specific purposes' may in principle refer to various types of purposes (specific professional areas and/or skills).

According to Kleiman (1994: 30),

ESP represents, in Brazil, a new student and skill oriented conception that has dominated most of our thinking about learning and teaching in the last year, determining, to a large extent, very productive research in the areas of foreign language learning and teaching, of teacher education, of reading and in research development in general.

The magnitude of the ESP project, coupled with the spread of reading teaching in the educational system as a whole, resulted in a large research agenda mainly directed at the teaching and learning of reading, the skill which represented the 'specific purpose' referred to in the general term 'ESP'.

Before the ESP era, the difficulties involved in the process of reading a text in a foreign language would be mostly explained by the lack of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, characteristic of the alien code. Reading in a foreign language scenario has traditionally been approached as a procedure to teach vocabulary and grammar (the now well-known notion of using the *text* as a *pretext* [Widdowson, 2004]). Once the reader learned the words and the way they are put together, the text, approached as the sum of the meanings of each constituent lexical item, would be, if not totally clear, at least intelligible. As reading was relegated to a secondary position during the hegemony of the oral-oriented audiolingualism, which treated the text as a window to display the words to be taught and learned, it was highly neglected both by teachers and applied linguists as well as theoreticians.

However, as we have seen earlier, the ESP trend has changed this state of affairs by promoting reading to a prominent position in the teaching of foreign languages, particularly in EFL contexts, which required new ways of approaching the reading process and devising new pedagogic procedures for approaching it in the classroom.

In other words, if reading were to be privileged, the very aim of the teaching enterprise would without a doubt require specific conceptualisations (what is reading? what does it involve?) and methodologies (what to teach? how to teach it?). Just settling for 'reading' as an aim does not automatically entail a clear set of pedagogic principles, methods and techniques.

As an ESP approach does not have as its aim language form but language function, the very notions of text, reading, and teaching reading have to be rethought. To this end, theoretical proposals shedding new light on these concepts have been resorted to and influenced substantially the teaching of reading (or ESP, metonymically) not just in Brazil, but also in many contexts where this skill has been given a privileged position in English teaching.

In the next sections these theoretical trends and the way they have influenced the teaching of reading are discussed. At the end of this discussion, we argue in favour of a systematic articulation between the cognitive and the genre-based perspectives to reading and its teaching.

3. DEVELOPING A THEORY OF THE READING PROCESS: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

The theoretical reading models, which were developed in the 1970s, based on psycholinguistic approaches (especially Goodman, 1967), challenged the

reductionist view of the reading process, which prevailed until very recently. A conceptual gain from these cognitive models has become the now classical distinction between bottom-up and top-down processes of reading and their uses and implications for particular pedagogic approaches, which focus either on the former or on the latter. Within the perspectives based on the bottom-up process, that is from text (essentially from its linguistic aspects) to reader, reading is viewed essentially as *decoding* (Nuttall, 2005). So words and systemic knowledge as a whole would prevail. The text, consequently, was approached as a code to be deciphered by readers, who were expected to transfer the one and only original meaning from the text to their minds. Linguistic forms were the tools used to succeed in this endeavour. Teaching them would therefore be the pedagogic aim of a reading programme. This approach is very similar, not to say equal, to the traditional one – it has been simply conceptualised as a bottom-up activity, which introduces a cognitive dimension to the ‘text as a pretext’ notion.

The CONDUIT metaphor, proposed by Reddy (1993) to interpret the traditional (and commonsensical) view of communication, summarises this perspective on reading: the author’s mind (container 1) is full of meanings, which are put into words (container 2); these words are arranged in a text (container 3) and sent through a channel (reading process) to the reader’s mind (container 4), where they are unpacked and decoded. Thus, the reader’s mind/container accesses exactly the same meanings in the author’s mind/container (or the text). In case the meanings in one container and those in the other did not meet, it would be because the transfer failed at some point.

The top-down process takes the opposite direction, that is, readers inscribe their world knowledge (the classic concept of ‘schemata’) and respective expectations in the process of meaning construction. If there was no reader, there would be no meaning construction. Meaning does not emanate directly from the text, which would be merely a room with some bricks waiting for an engineering project and bricklayers to turn it into a construction. A radical view (Fish, 1980) goes as far as proposing that the text does not exist outside its founding relationship with the reader.

A proposal that combines both processes, bottom-up and top-down, in which the dialogic interaction between text (and its formal aspects) and readers (and their background knowledge) promotes meaning construction, has been asserted as an interactive reading framework (Carrel, Devine, & Eskey, 1988), bridging the gap between the two models.

This new view has clearly affected the development of pedagogic approaches to the teaching of reading, which, as it was mentioned earlier in this paper, has become a socially and educationally sound alternative in ESP teaching for specific purposes in many EFL contexts.

The bottom-up model has underlain, mostly in implicit and unstated ways, traditional structuralist reading practices, which either seek textual linguistic structures or focus on the text as container for stable meanings (‘what the author

means', 'what is in the text', 'the content of the text', etc.). Therefore, texts in textbooks have somehow served as glamorous display windows showing grammatical and lexical units to be worked with in the unit.

On the other hand, the strong view of the top-down framework has taken away from words and syntax the primacy of meaning, placing it in the reader, with all their cognitively structured background experiences. The reader as a constructor plays an active role in meaning production: he/she is, at the same time, the engineer, the work supervisor as well as the workman him/herself, who would carry their own bricks and cement (their own 'repertoire' [Iser, 1979]) to the work site. Construction techniques, on the other hand, would be reading strategies, that is, cognitive actions that could make this construction possible.

The key role assigned to readers, regarding their cognitive involvement, has been pedagogically translated into an approach known as the instrumental approach or method – very popular in Brazil. This approach consists of the use of pre-reading and predicting strategies (evoking background knowledge, or choosing the raw material for construction, if we resort to the construction metaphor again), while reading (driving one's attention to general [skimming] or specific aspects [scanning] of the text), and post-reading strategies (exploring the text which was 'built up' by the learner).

From the 1980s up to now many textbooks specially designed for the teaching of reading have been grounded on an instrumental basis and are widely used in Brazil today, especially in reading courses in English at universities (English for Academic Purposes – EAP) and high schools. Cognitive strategies – which supposedly replicate the strategies used automatically in mother tongue reading – have been employed as guidelines for the organization of reading teaching units (teaching procedures to approach the text pedagogically).

4. MAY 'GENRE' BE WELCOME

The concept of genre is much more complex than one might think at first, and we do not intend to discuss it in any depth here. However, for the purpose of this paper it is important to mention the two main trends in genre studies: the Anglo-Saxon and the French schools of genre analysis. The former seems to have directly affected the instrumental approach, being addressed in some contexts as the ESP view of genre. The term refers to the fact that this view was introduced by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) as a result of their studies on the textual and discursive aspects of scientific papers, often used in ESP courses. The notions of 'moves', the macro-organizational elements constitutive of the text; 'discursive community', comprising the producers and users of particular genres, and finally, the 'communicative purpose' of a genre, i.e. its function as socio-discursive practice, have all played an essential role in the adoption of genre by the instrumental approach.

At first, this notion of genre determined the selection of texts to work with. Texts – which had once been pedagogically controlled, simplified and deprived of authenticity and communicative purposes – are now, within this new view, representatives of varieties of genres considered pedagogically relevant. In ESP courses in universities genres such as scientific papers, abstracts, diagrams, tables with figures, calls for papers, book reviews, etc. were selected, while in regular schools, where there had been no specific primary discursive environments to be promoted, the choices were towards multi-purpose genres, from newspaper ads to patient information leaflets and business letters. Currently we may even find texts belonging to digital genres such as electronic mails, blogs, dating sites, etc. in textbooks that teach reading.

However, the diversity of texts to be selected, alone, was found to be insufficient for a proper application of genre studies to the teaching of reading. Teachers and scholars have also been concerned about how these genres could be used for teaching activities beyond the already known cognitive strategies. In other words, how could texts be approached pedagogically as ‘samples of authentic genres’, i.e. as socio-discursive practices with culturally recognized and socially legitimised purposes?

Questions such as ‘what kind of text is it?’, ‘where could it be found?’, ‘who – and to whom – might it have been written?’ and ‘which aspects are essential and which are peripheral, so that the text meets its social purposes?’ have been often raised. In short, there was now the recognition that genres, in order to be explored within their social and discursive dimension, were not to be approached only by means of traditional cognitive strategies.

5. GENRE À LA FRANÇAISE: A DIALOGIC AND SOCIOHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The trend of genre theory/analysis developed in France (Bronckart, 1997, among others) does not have an essentially ‘pragmatic’ character (in the sense of purpose-oriented pragmatic theory) like the Anglo-Saxon view, which has the communicative purposes of genres (rather than their strictly formal aspects) as its chief banner. Greatly influenced by the Bakhtinian tradition (Bakhtin, 1986, 1996), this view has given special attention to sociohistorical aspects of genres and to the dialogic nature of reading. The conditions of production of genres (in which sociohistorical context they were produced, by whom, to whom) could define the underlying ideology at the very core of genres. Within this perspective, therefore, engaging in a dialogue with the ‘many voices’ within different genres is seen as a crucial element in the reading process.

This view has promoted a myriad of studies, which together became part of the overall trend known as ‘critical reading’, which has been explored by English and North-American researchers (Wallace, 1992; Kurland, 1995; Baynham, 1995),

influenced by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 1999) and by critical pedagogy (Pennycook, 1994, 1999; Busnardo & Braga, 2000; Meurer, 2000).

According to supporters of the critical view, mere observations concerning the kind of text, where it was written, to and by whom would not account for what would be considered the most relevant aspects of the text: what has been left unsaid (or said between the lines), underlying ideologies and all the implicit meanings behind what is explicitly verbalised.

Cognitive strategies, within this perspective, have tended to be largely overlooked, for they do not refer to any necessarily or explicitly ideological issues. As a matter of fact, the very concept of 'cognition' (commonly, and mistakenly, associated with generative linguistics) has often been evaluated as an 'alienated/alienating' notion, for it does not directly relate to ideologically relevant sociohistorical aspects. That is, cognition and social criticism have been dichotomised, which, as far as we see it, has brought harmful consequences to pedagogic approaches to reading.

6. SOCIO-COGNITION: ECLECTICISM OR INTEGRATION?

Turner (2001), who, together with Fauconnier (2002), has introduced mental spaces and blending theories, vehemently rejects the separation of cognition from the social context when it comes to meaning production (this is what Chomsky's notion of an idealised language competence implied). Tomasello (1999) claims that cognitive aspects are not innate; he believes that they emerge from the relationships established between the body and the mind, and with the cultural and social environments in which they are inserted.

The concept of culture within the socio-cognitive view is flexible enough to embrace the notion of ideology. This articulation has been systematically developed by van Dijk (2008a, 2008b), who argues that cognition is not restricted to the realm of the individual: it derives from experiences and conceptualisations shared by a common social group and to which the individual would have little conscious access.

In this perspective texts that circulate within shared social environments take part in and dialectically construct a socio-cognitive worldview. Should we set cognition apart in order to tackle ideology? Would cognition be made of a different matter or belong to another dimension of meaning altogether? Or would there be no cognition, just culture and ideology?

Like Turner (2001) and van Dijk (2008a, 2008b), we assume that cognition is historically and socially situated. We believe that this integrated perspective, by allowing the articulation between the cognitive, the genre-oriented and the critical views, can lead to a more dynamic, plural, and therefore more efficient pedagogic approach to reading.

7. BY WAY OF EXEMPLIFYING

From the integrated theoretical framework defended above, some more practical considerations can emerge. As far as reading strategies are concerned, it is our contention that they are not mere independent 'thinking devices' which have been pedagogically translated. They are socially and cognitively interwoven with genres as social practices. Thus, depending on the genre, strategies of a particular kind will be used, and not others. Let us consider, for example, the case of the genre 'advertisements'.

It would not make much sense to try to find an 'overall meaning' of an ad. The strategy of skimming, therefore, would not meet the communicative purpose that has been sociohistorically cognitively related to this genre: what the ad ultimately intends to promote or to sell. In this case, we should consider scanning (what the product is, what it is for, how much it costs, where it is sold, and so on) more appropriate than a 'main idea' (the focus of skimming). Such strategies are not just cognitive, in its orthodox sense: they are social actions involving the production and reception of an ad, discursively embedded and accepted by the readership of that genre.

To be able to identify the problem whose solution is to be found in the purchase of the product is also part of this social practice. The specific problem raised by the ad (e. g. 'have you got a headache?') is not just a rhetorical move (Swales, 1990) in a text; it is one of the strategies to sell a product (a pain killer?): the solution to the problem. This, therefore, involves cognitive, discursive and ideological aspects of meaning; none of these dimensions can be approached in isolation. Knowing how to explore them pedagogically is crucial for the successful teaching/learning of this particular genre.

Other genres require different strategies: newspaper covers – skimming; patient information leaflets – scanning; scientific papers – skimming, move identification and intensive reading. Such associations (genre–strategies) are sociohistorically determined and we learn them in the same way we learn other verbal and non-verbal social practices.

Because such practices are loaded with ideology, critical reading may function as a way of unveiling it. Considering the case of advertisements again, the knowledge that a problem is often raised (or cognitively constructed) so that products can be sold more efficiently would promote some critical thinking about the ad. That would be the case, for instance, of a Brazilian TV commercial of a particular brand of deodorant said to whiten dark underarms. That issue, at the time the commercial was broadcasted, had never been problematised by most women in Brazil; nevertheless, after some time it ended up becoming a clear concern among that group.

To direct post-reading strategies towards those practices which denaturalise implicit meanings and intentions represents, therefore, a way of applying critical thinking within a sociocognitive paradigm. Thus, articulating cognitive strategies

with a particular genre and with critical reading would result in neither theoretical nor pedagogic incongruity. The great emphasis given to sociohistorical aspects of meaning to the detriment of cognitive ones may hide the multitude of variables involved in reading as a social practice. Most importantly, it may re-conduct the reading process back to the search of a single meaning, emerging not as a result of a cognitively dynamic process of meaning construction on the part of the reader/learner, but as a single product resulting from the teacher's own 'critical interpretation'.

8. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In general, dichotomies, especially in the postmodern era, have represented conceptually reductionist alternatives. The dichotomy established between cognition and social/ideological criticism has been problematised for both its conceptual aspects and pedagogic implications, regarding, specifically, the teaching of reading. We have proposed that besides the author-text interaction (which defines the previously discussed interactive reading framework) there is an ongoing interaction between strategy and genre, so that the 'social' (in 'socio-cognition') could in fact represent more than just a crystalised and opaque prefix, falling into linguistic automaticity or oblivion.

To sum up, the claims put forward briefly in this paper have aimed at reflecting upon the ways the pedagogy of reading in English as a foreign language (both in ESP and in general reading contexts) can benefit from multiple but systematically integrated insights into both cognitive and social approaches to meaning production, through a genre-oriented perspective.

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