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EXPECTATIONS ON READING

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In the past decade research on reading comprehension has investigated the role of background knowledge or schemata on reading comprehension. This interest was initially limited to research on reading in the native language. Lately it has been extended to studies on reading comprehension in a second/foreign language.

The term 'schema' was first used by Kant in 1781, but the literature on reading usually attributes the term to Bartlett, a British psychologist. In 1932 Bartlett published his book Remembering in which he reports the studies he conducted to investigate the influence of schemata on reading comprehension. Bartlett asked several people to read a story 'The War of Ghosts' and to retell it at different time intervals. The analysis of the recalls showed that the subjects modified the original version of the story according to their knowledge of the world.

The notion of shemata has interested scholars in PSYCHOLOGY (Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977; Spiro, 1977; Rumelhart, 1977, 1980, 1984; Adams, 1980) in LINGUISTICS (Fillmore, 1975; Chafe, 1977a, 1977b; Tannen, 1978, 1979); and in ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (Schank and Abelson, 1975). Although their approach may differ somewhat, the underlying purpose for their work has been to investigate how the language user's stored knowledge of the world or how background knowledge comes into action when he tries to comprehend an incoming message. In the current literatures, different terms have been used to refer to the language user's stored knowledge or background knowledge. They are SCHEMATA (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1977, 1980, 1984; Adams and Collins, 1979; Adams, 1980; and several other psychologists), FRAMES (Filmore, 1975; Hymes, 1974; Minsky, 1974; Tannen, 1979) SCRIPT (Schank and Abelson, 1975) and EXPECTATIONS (Tannen, 1978). The theoretical reason(s) for choosing one or the other term may vary significantly but all these terms are under the same "schema-theoretical" orientation.

Studies on reading comprehension of adults and children reading in their L1 have shown that the background knowledge or schema(ta) of the readers influences the way they interpret a written or an oral passage. One line of research has concentrated on the structure of stories and its effect on comprehension

(Thorndyke, 1977; Kintsch, 1977; Rumelhart, 1977; Kintsch and Green, 1978; Mandler, 1978). Mandler and Johnson (1977) observed that stories usually follow the same pattern. They have (1) a setting; (2) a beginning; (3) a development and (4) an ending. Whenever a story follows this pattern, comprehension is more effective than when the structural organization of the story differs from this general organization.

Another line of research has investigated how the readers' background knowledge influences the understanding of the content of a passage. Bransford and Johnson (1972, 1973) observed a different performance of their subjects on comprehension and recall of a text depending on whether they knew the title of the passage, saw a picture illustrating the content of the passage prior to the actual reading or they did not know anything about the content of the passages. The readers exposed to one of these stimuli read better, comprehended and recalled more of the passages than the readers who did not receive any stimulus. Another study following this line was done by Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert and Goetz (1977). The researchers gave readers two texts which could have two interpretations each - either a Card/Music encounter for one text and a Prisoner/Wrestling situation for the other. Two groups of students with different academic training read the texts and the interpretation they gave to the text reflected their personal experience. Female students in music education interpreted one text as being about a music encounter and the other as being about a prison break; in the other group the subjects were male students in physical education and they interpreted the text as being about a card game and a wrestling situation. The results obtained from this study showed a tendency of the subjects to interpret the passages according to their personal experience and belief.

The influence of the role assumed by a reader on retention and recall of a text has been investigation by Pichert and Anderson, 1977; Anderson and Pichert, 1978; and Anderson, Pichert and Shirey, 1979. In these studies the readers were asked to assume the role of a burglar or a housebuyer while reading a text. The researchers noticed that depending on the assumed role the readers remembered different details of the same text.

More recently, the studies which investigate the role of schemata on reading comprehension in the L1 have focused on the interpretation assigned to a text by people from different social background. Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey and Anderson (1982) investigated the reading comprehension of black and white children reading a passage which described and instance of "sounding" or "playing the dozens", an activity common among black children. The white children interpreted the text as being about a physical aggression while the black children interpreted it as being about verbal play.

Lipson (1983) investigated children from two differente religious affiliations -Jewish and Catholic- reading two passages each relating specifically to one or the other religious group. Both groups read faster and recalled more of the text related to their religious group. It was also observed that fewer distorted

inferences were made from the text whose content related to the religious background of the reader. The results of these studies show that both adult and young readers "use prior knowledge to help organize new information" (Lipson, p.450)

In L2 reading research, there has been a growing interest in the investigation of the role of schemata on comprehension. Supported by the literature on reading in the L1, the studies on reading in the L2 have also aimed at investigating the influence of the readers´s background knowledge on comprehension, retention and recall of the content of a text (Steffensen, Joag-dev and Anderson, 1979; Johnson, 1981, 1982; Hudson, 1982; Carrell and Wallace, 1983; Carrell, 1983a). Steffensen et al asked two groups of students - American College students and Asian Indian ESL learners in the United States - to read two passages in English, each describing a wedding ceremony in one or the other culture and to write a summary for each passage. Analysis of the data showed that the students read faster the letter describing the wedding ceremony in their culture, recalled more details of the culturally related text and they made more correct elaborations concerning the ceremony in their own culture.

Johnson (1981, 1982), Carrell (1983a), Carrell and Wallace, 1983) have done several researches on the role of schemata on reading comprehension of native and nonnative speakers of American English. In one of Johnsons studies she asked Iranian ESL learners and American College students to read two stories - one about the American folklore and the other about the Iranian folklore - to write their recalls for each story and to answer comprehension questions for each text. Johnson found out that the students read, comprehended and remembered more of the story related to their own culture.

Carrell (1983a) examined the reading performance of native and non-native speakers of English and she found out that non-natives rely on the text for comprehension while natives do not. Furthermore, among non-natives, difference on reading performance depends on (1) the knowledge of the world brought to the text; and (2) the antecipation of the content of the text via the title of the passage. These and other facts help promote or hinder reading comprehension.

Inspired by the results of the above mentioned studies, and others not refered to here, I decided to investigate the reading behavior of American College students and Brasilians, studying English and living in the United States. The goal of my study was to observe the expectation of the readers when confronted with a text. It was antecipated that the previous knowledge of the readers would be activated during the reading exercise and manifested at the answers to reading comprehension questions. Furthermore, it was expected that both groups of subjects would have the same sort of interpretation for the text rated as neutral but not for the culturally related text. The stimulus passages were a fable by Aesop (´The Stone Soup´), rated as neutral and a text from an ESL book discussing how to face the living conditions of an elderly member of the family, rated as culturally loaded.

The methodology used for accessing the reading passages was the one suggested by Fillmore (1981). In this methodology the text is segmented by sentences and each sentence printed in one page. For example: in the first page the first sentence of the text is printed; in the second page the first sentence plus the second and so on until the last sentence is added and the readers have the whole text in front of them. After reading a sentence the subjects were asked what they expected the next sentence would be. When the students answered the question they would read the segment as it was in the text. The procedure was repeated until the end of the passage. Whenever the students provided an answer to a question and read the sentence in the text they had the opportunity to confirm or change their expectations regarding the follow up of the text.

The expectations of the Brazilian and the American students for the fable were basically the same. Apparently they all had the same kind of schema in trying to understand the fable. They expected the poor man to get some food, they said that it was impossible to make a stone soup and they all agreed that the poor man reached his initial goal of trying to get something to eat.

Although the Brazilian and American readers come from different cultural background, they seemed to share the same schema since they all gave the same set of information about what would happen in the text. This does not imply that the underlying experiences of the readers are the same but, as far as general information goes it seems to be common to both groups of informants.

In the culturally loaded text the interpretation of the two groups of readers differed significantly. In the text the old lady rejects the invitation from her son and daughter-in-law to her move in with them after her husband's death. The Americans took the lady's rejection to the invitation as being normal and the son's invitation as the fulfillment of an obligation. On the other hand, the Brazilians said that the lady would reconsider the invitation, that eventually she would move into her son's house, that the invitation was sincere and finally that the son and the daughter-in-law really wanted the lady to move into their house. For the Americans, the elderly lady turned down the invitation because she wanted to keep her privacy and did not want to be a burden to anybody. The Brazilians, on the other hand, insisted that the elderly lady could not live alone because she needed family protection.

The expectation of the Americans and Brazilians on the second text reflected their cultural differences. Both groups expressed their cultural values while reading the text and both groups expected the text to talk about those values they have learned through life. Apparently, the Americans fulfilled their expectations because the text presented the American way of dealing with the situation, while for the Brazilians the text presented the problem of the elderly people in a very cruel way.

The study has shown that when people from different cultural background read a text which is contextwise neutral, they build up basically the same

expectations and they arrive at the same conclusion. On the other hand, if the text is culturally loaded readers from different cultural background will show different expectations, they will bring into the text the values of their social group and their interpretations of the text will differ.

The distorted interpretation assigned to some texts may be related to lack of appropriate schema to fully understand a passage. When the schema activated for reading a passage does not match with the idea of the author, the readers have to modify the hypotheses they posed for the text while reading the passage, otherwise it will be difficult or even impossible to understand the text.

Despite the limitations of the study the results obtained have several implications for the teaching of reading in a foreign language. The non-understanding of a passage which talks about an aspect of the target culture may be the result of poor familiarity with the other group cultural values rather than a mere incapacity to comprehend the written passage. The words in the text have a meaning out of text only but they do not make sense in the context. The foreign language teachers aware of this fact should be very careful when they select reading passages for their students. At the beginning stages, the language teacher should avoid presenting the students texts which are contentwise difficult for them. If the teachers choose to give the students texts which require beyond text knowledge, they must provide the students with information which will help them to read and comprehend the passage. Otherwise, both teachers and students may get frustrated whit the outcome of the reading exercises.

If it is true in non-culturally loaded texts the cultural background of the reader does not hinder comprehension, ESP students who have a good knowledge of the target language and of their subject of study should not have serious problem in understanding specialized written passages regardless of their cultural and language background. This is, however, a field which requires investigation.

It can thus be concluded that cultural background plays a part in the understanding of a written passage and that it seems to be a serious problem which language teachers and learners have to face. Despite the studies on the reading behavior of Brazilians EFL learners which have appeared in the past few year there is still an urgent need for further reserarch on reading in the target as well as in the native language so that we may be able to better understand the causes of our students' reading problems. It may be possible that our EFL learners have difficulty to read texts in the TL because they have the same difficulty when reading in the NL. Let us investigate more thoroughly the causes of the reading difficulty of our students, share our teaching and research experiences and by this give our contribution to the understanding of the reading behavior of our school population.

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