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## READING AS PSYCHOLINGUISTIC PROCESS

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***Abstract.*** *What is reading? How do you teach someone to do it, especially in a second or foreign language? These are very large questions that, of course, cannot be addressed in much detail in a single article. However, as the Chinese say, the longest journey begins with one step, and I hope that this brief overview of these issues will help current and prospective ESL reading teachers take a new or first step in the right direction.*

***Keywords:*** *decode, movements, converting letters, opaque text, a chunk of text, give a meaning, cognitive structure, schema, networks.*

## ЧТЕНИЕ КАК ПСИХОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ ПРОЦЕСС

***Аннотация.*** *Что такое чтение? Как научить кого-то это делать, особенно на втором или иностранном языке? Это очень важные вопросы, которые, конечно, невозможно подробно рассмотреть в одной статье. Однако, как говорят китайцы, самый длинный путь начинается с одного шага, и я надеюсь, что этот краткий обзор этих вопросов поможет нынешним и будущим учителям чтения ESL сделать новый или первый шаг в правильном направлении.*

***Ключевые слова:*** *декодирование, движения, преобразование букв, непрозрачный текст, фрагмент текста, придание смысла, когнитивная структура, схема, сети.*

## O‘QISH PSIXOLINGVISTIK JARAYON SIFATIDA

***Anotatsiya.*** *O‘qish nima? Qanday qilib odamni buni qilishga o‘rgatish mumkin, ayniqsa ikkinchi yoki chet tilida? Bu juda katta savollar bo‘lib, ularni, albatta, bitta maqolada batafsil ko‘rib chiqish mumkin emas. Biroq xitoyliklar aytganidek, eng uzoq sayohat bir qadamdan boshlanadi va umid qilamanki, ushbu masalalarning qisqacha sharhi hozirgi va istiqbolli ESL o‘qish o‘qituvchilariga to‘g‘ri yo‘nalishda yangi yoki birinchi qadam qo‘yishga yordam beradi.*

***Kalit so‘zlar:*** *dekodlash, harakatlar, harflarni o‘zgartirish, noaniq matn, matn bo‘lagi, ma'no berish, kognitiv tuzilma, sxema, tarmoqlar.*

**Introduction.** Let me begin with a partial definition of reading: Reading is the process of acquiring information from a written or printed text. Therefore, reading is not converting written language to spoken language. That is reading aloud, which is always speaking, but not always true reading. Sometimes the person reading aloud (even in the case of native speakers reading aloud in their own languages) is so concerned with pronouncing the words correctly or reading with expression, that he or she does not pay attention to the meaning of the text and, therefore, by our definition, does not truly read. Many years ago, a well-known linguist trained himself in the phonics of Czech—that is, he learned to match Czech letters with the sounds they represent in that language. He could thus read texts written in Czech aloud. Because he did not know the language, however, he could not understand what he was reading, and no reading specialist today would accept his claim that he could read Czech without understanding. Simply sounding out words is not reading, in this era of communicative language teaching. To read a text successfully is to know the meaning of that text. When asked to read this simple phrase in English, Paris in the spring. Many people fail to read it correctly by failing to see the two thes in the phrase, not because they are poor readers, but because they are good ones who read for meaning (to which the two thes contribute nothing). Common sense suggests that a reader builds up meaning by working through a text left to right (in the case of English), converting letters into words, words into phrases, phrases into sentences. Such a process would require the reader to see everything on the page very clearly in a step-by-step process—similar to doing a math problem. But the reading process is not really like that (common sense also tells us that the world is flat). Studies of the eye movements of readers show that their eyes do not move smoothly over the page. Instead, the eyes move in short, jerky movements (called saccades). With each movement, the eyes take in a chunk of text

(like the one in my example), much as the mouth takes in a chunk of food with each bite. The brain then decodes this chunk of text (i.e., converts the language forms into meaning) on the basis of the minimum amount of visual information needed. Good readers do not have to see everything on the page— just enough to get the meaning. On the other hand, there is more to reading for meaning than simply decoding the words in a text. Many people can decode each of the sentences in the following adaptation of a familiar opaque text (a text that is easy to decode but difficult to comprehend) (Bransford & Johnson, 1973) but cannot say what the text is about, let alone what it means. The procedure is quite simple. First, you arrange the items in separate piles. Of course, one pile may be sufficient, depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities, that is the next step; otherwise, you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run, this may not seem important, but complications can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first, the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but, then, one never can tell. After the procedure is completed, one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually, they will be used once more, and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is part of life.

Even as we are bombarded with an unending supply of visual and auditory media, the written word continues in its function to convey information, to amuse entertain us, to codify our social, economic, and legal conventions, and to fulfill a host of other functions. In literate societies, most "normal" children learn to read by the age of five or six, and some even earlier. With the exception of a small number of people with learning disabilities, reading is a skill that is taken for granted. In foreign language learning, reading is likewise a skill that teachers simply expect learners to acquire. Basic, beginning-level textbooks in a foreign language presuppose a student's reading ability if only because it's a book that is the medium. Most formal tests use the written word as a stimulus for test-taker response; even oral interviews may require reading performance for certain tasks. Reading, arguably the most essential skill for success in all educational contexts, remains a skill of paramount importance as we create assessments of general language ability. Is reading so natural and normal that learners should simply be exposed to written texts with no particular instruction? Will they just absorb the skills necessary to convert their perception handful of letters into meaningful chunks of information? Not necessarily. For learners of English, two primary hurdles must be cleared in order to become efficient readers. First, they need to be ·able to master fundamental bottom-up strategies for processing separate letters, words, and phrases, as well as top-down, conceptually driven strategies for comprehension. Second, as part of that top-down approach, second language readers must develop appropriate content and formal schemata-background information and cultural experience-to carry out those interpretations effectively. The assessment of reading ability does not end with the measurement of comprehension. Strategic pathways to full understanding are often important factors to include in assessing learners, especially in the case of most classroom assessments that are formative in nature. An inability to comprehend may thus be traced to a need to enhance a test-taker's strategies for achieving ultimate comprehension. For example, an academic technical report may be comprehensible to a student at the sentence level, but if the learner has not exercised certain strategies for noting the discourse conventions of that genre, misunderstanding may occur. As we consider a number of different types or genres of written texts, the components of reading ability, and specific tasks that are commonly used in the assessment of reading, let's not forget the unobservable nature of reading. like listening, one cannot see the process of reading, nor can one observe a specific product of reading. Other than observing a reader's eye movements and page turning, there is no technology that enables us to "see" sequences of graphic symbols traveling from the pages a book into compartments of the brain (in a possible bottom-up process). Even more outlandish is the notion that one might be able to watch information from the brain make its way down onto the page (in typical top-down strategies). Further, once something is read-information from the written text is stored-no technology allows us to empirically measure exactly what is lodged in the brain. All assessment of reading must be carried out by inference.

**Reading as Sociocultural Practice.** Although reading may accurately be described (as I have been describing it so far) as a psycholinguistic process, it is also - and in some ways more fundamentally - a form of sociocultural practice. Most human beings learn to speak at least one language and therefore use language to communicate with others, but people must be taught to read, and many never learn to do so. As human beings, we have what could fairly be called a biological instinct to learn to speak, but we must be taught to read in some particular culture that employs written language for some particular purposes. Thus, learning to read is not only acquiring the psycholinguistic skills discussed above; it is also being enculturated (to our own culture) or acculturated (to someone else's culture) in a kind of apprenticeship, which Smith (1988) has

compared to joining a club—the literacy club—composed of those who read and write in some particular language. Reading thus becomes engaging in reading behavior with the help of those who already do so, and, especially in EFL situations, it is usually the teacher who must play this role, who must transform his or her classroom into an English literacy club. Because reading is a culturally learned behavior, and cultures make various uses of reading, the amount and kinds of reading that we learn to do varies along a continuum, ranging from the memorization of sacred or canonical texts to reading purely for pleasure, with stops along the way for reading for information (from simple written instructions to scholarly texts) and so-called critical reading, in which the reader is expected not only to understand the text but to evaluate it for accuracy, insightfulness, and even aesthetic worth. In short, we read different texts for different purposes, and both the texts and the purposes are largely provided for us by a culture— in practice, by the members of some literacy club. Thus, reading from this point of view may be defined as doing the kinds of reading, and reading-related activities (e.g., talking about texts and writing about texts), that the literate members of some culture do.

**Reading as Individual Behavior.** In the final analysis, of course, no human reader is ever just a generic text processor or a simple clone of all the other members of some literacy club (or even a combination of the two), though all of our reading is strongly constrained by the nature of our brains as processing devices and by our social and cultural experience. Within these constraints, however, those of us who read continue to differ in what we read, how much we read, how well we read, and how much we depend on or care about reading. Every reader is, in short, an individual whose attitudes toward reading and reading behavior are, to a considerable extent, idiosyncratic and unpredictable. Moreover, to become truly skillful readers, apprentice readers must read a lot (just as apprentice swimmers must swim a lot to become skillful swimmers). Thus, engaging in extensive reading behavior is a prerequisite for developing reading skills, especially at the level required for most kinds of formal education; and students are most likely to engage in such behavior if they can choose texts to read that are interesting to them and relevant to their individual needs. Reading from this point of view may be defined as developing an individual reading habit by choosing texts of interest and value to yourself and reading those texts extensively.

**Suggested Reading Activities. Promoting Reading.**

• Students make a reading selection from a wide range of available materials (e.g., those commercially produced specifically for L2 learners, including ESL books, magazines, and newspapers, or L1 reading materials such as children's literature and general newspapers and magazines).

• Teachers promote a book or reading.

**Reading.**

• Students participate in extensive reading activities (e.g., shared texts or individual texts). • Teachers give oral readings. Sharing Reactions to Reading

• Students talk about the reading (e.g., in oral reports).

• Students write about the reading (e.g., by responding to questions, reporting, rating/ evaluating, presenting poster sessions).

(Adapted from Day & Bamford, 1998)

**Implications for Teaching.**

Now that I have provided the beginning of an answer to the question "What is reading?," let us consider the second question: "How do you teach someone to do it, especially in a second or foreign language?" In what I have written so far, I have dropped a few hints as to the kinds of things reading teachers might do, but I would like to conclude by addressing this crucial issue directly. The problem for most teachers of reading in an L1 L2, or foreign language is that reading does not generate any product that a teacher can see or hear or respond to. Reading is an invisible process. It is therefore much like listening, but a teacher can ask students to perform tasks while listening (e.g., a dictation), whereas students who are reading must devote their full attention to the text. Most teachers take the process for granted and go directly to the creation of a related product (e.g., asking students to answer comprehension questions orally or in writing). These activities test reading but do not teach it, and this contributes little to improving any student's reading performance. Historically, procedures for teaching reading have often been divided into procedures for teaching intensive reading (working with small amounts of text in class to make various points about the nature of texts and the reading process) and procedures for teaching extensive reading (assigning whole texts to be read outside of class or in a reading lab setting). These are useful categories for structuring programs, but they do not shed much light on the purpose of asking students to engage in either kind of activity—that is, on how engaging in such activities can help them become better readers of English. One good way of addressing this question is to turn the question upside down: How do people learn to read a language? Then, once they have learned to do it, how do they learn to read better? The answer to both questions is surprisingly simple. People learn to read, and to read better, by reading. No one can teach someone else to

read: The process is largely invisible and thus cannot be demonstrated, and it mainly occurs at the subconscious level and thus cannot be explained in any way that a reader could make conscious use of. Nonetheless, anyone can learn to read, just as anyone can learn to draw or to sing at some minimal level of competence. Most human beings are capable of learning to read, given the right opportunity and guidance. Because people learn to read, and to read better, by reading, a major part of the reading teacher's job is to introduce students to appropriate texts—texts that are at the right level linguistically and are interesting and relevant to their needs—and to induce them to read such texts in quantity. In other words, the teacher's job is to motivate students to read texts, either texts that the teacher has provided for them or texts that the students have chosen for themselves. For some students, it may be enough to make appropriate texts available, but for others, more guidance may be required. For the full range of students, the teacher must create his or her version of the literacy club and find ways to persuade as many students as possible to join and become literate—that is, to read texts and respond to them in the ways that typical club members do (see the sidebar, p. 8, for examples of reading activities). The reading teacher has a second important job, which is to make reading as easy as possible for each student. In addition to providing—or providing access to—appropriate materials, the reading teacher must teach productive reading strategies, both for bottom-up processing (e.g., reading at a reasonable rate—which, as we have noted, really means reading in meaningful groups of words—and reading without stopping to look up words in the dictionary) and for top-down processing (e.g., skimming a text before reading and formulating specific questions that the text might be expected to answer). Anderson (1999) provides an excellent survey and discussion of eight useful strategies for teaching reading: "activate background knowledge," "cultivate vocabulary," "teach for comprehension," "increase reading rate," "verify reading strategies," "evaluate progress," "build motivation," and "select appropriate reading materials" (p. 6). For many examples, see Day (1993). In other words, in addition to motivating students, the teacher must facilitate reading for them. The two jobs are obviously complementary: Students who enjoy reading are more likely to read successfully, and students who read successfully are more likely to enjoy it. Because no two classes are alike, however, it cannot be assumed that any reading teacher can know in advance what his or her students' major problems will be. That must be determined by interacting directly with a given group of readers as they read. Good reading teachers read with their students, making use of such simple protocols as asking students to paraphrase what they are reading or to speculate on where the text might be going in order to determine what their real problems are. As a current or prospective reading teacher, you can learn something from articles like this one, but your students can only learn from you if you can motivate them and facilitate their reading of the particular texts in English that they need or want to read.

**Summary.** What all of this suggests is a three-dimensional model of reading that can accommodate the fact that every human reader is, simultaneously, (a) a member of the species (a human reader, as opposed to some other kind of reader— a computer, for example), (b) a member of a network of sociocultural groups (possibly, in relation to the writer, a member of a wholly different culture), and (c) an individual (and thus, within the limits established in [a] and [b], cognitively and affectively distinct, to some extent). For language educators, understanding the reader in each of these aspects is important to a comprehensive understanding of readers and their reading in real-world contexts.

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