EFL TEACHING APPROACHES AND THE ROLE OF READING*

Reinildes Dias
- UFMG -

1. Preliminary Remarks

This paper makes a survey of some theoretical issues related to the scientific study of language and their influence on FL teaching methods. We will lean towards historical and interdisciplinary matters by fitting the teaching of reading within the broader context of second language teaching. We will discuss some important issues—linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic—and use them as frameworks to explain the evolution second language teaching has undergone—from a mechanistic approach to a more mentalistic one. This means that language teaching has shifted from a view of language as an automatic phenomenon to a thinking one. In our diachronic orientation—from the 40s and 50s to our days—we mean to show that language teaching has shifted from a formalistic orientation with particular emphasis on language structure to a more communicative one with a primary concern with the communicative features of language.

Attention will be restricted only to the major and more

* This paper is based on Chapter I of my dissertation "The Semiotics of Written Discourse and the Dual Representation of Information in Memory: An Application of Nonverbal Elements to FL Reading Methodology", presented in October 1985 to the Graduate School of FALE-UFMG in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Mestre em Inglês.
recent trends in language teaching since this does not mean to
be an exhaustive survey. Therefore, no reference will be made
to the grammar-translation method. Neither will we make
reference to sub-trends such as situational and notional
syllabuses.

2. Structuralist Linguistics and Behaviorist Psychology

Let us begin by presenting some tenets of Behaviorism —
a school of psychology which establishes the psychological
rationale for Structuralist Linguistics. Behaviorist Psychology
and Structuralist Linguistics, in turn, provide the rationale
behind the so-called audio-visual and audio-lingual methods for
the teaching of languages. The main assumption in Behaviorism
is that observed behavior provides the only valid data in
psychology; it rejects concepts such as consciousness,
introspection, and intuition because they are subjective and
unmeasurable. Behaviorists are committed to what can be observed,
measured, and manipulated experimentally. On the other hand,
the privateness of mental processes make behaviorists assert
that these experiences are not reasonable topics for
scientific study. Behavior they say, "is to be analyzed into
a set of responses that are assumed to be governed by stimulus
conditions in the environment." In a behaviorist view, the
process of learning is seen as the establishment of
associations or bonds between stimuli and responses — little
or nothing is said about the complex reasoning processes which
are an integral part of any kind of learning. In the attempt
to explain human learning, behaviorists thus adopt a strict
empirical position: observable and measurable behavior is the
only data concerning them.
Leaning heavily on the fundamental assumptions of behaviorist theories, the structuralist linguist sets forth his goal the objective description of languages, leaving out consideration thinking and value judgements. For the structuralist, language is a system of forms — elements or items combined in certain regular ways to produce acceptable sentences. The role of the linguist is to build up an objective and comprehensive description of this system excluding almost completely meaning from the linguistic enterprise; the analysis is more concerned with the observable sides of language, that is, the sound system and the grammatical structure rather than with problems of meanings. Speech is the data from which the linguist deduces the system of the language he is describing.

From the point of view of language teaching, Structuralist Linguistics represented a major theoretical landmark: despite its limitations, it supplied the language teacher with more precise and objective descriptions of languages than had previously been available to him.

As pointed out before, the combination of the assumption of behaviorist theories, on the one hand, and of Structuralist Linguistics, on the other hand, gave rise to the so-called audio-visual method and its variants. In other words, this teaching method is an amalgam of the principles of Structuralist Linguistics and Behaviorist Psychology in relation to the nature of language and the nature of the learning process.

The acceptance of the systematic and objective nature of language in the structuralist view led language teaching to emphasize the sentence patterns of the language rather than isolated words as had been done before. The language teaching content is also defined in terms of formal items relying on
the criterion of grading of difficulty. The idea is to present very easy and simplified material at the beginning taking into account the most frequent sentence patterns. Thus, the criteria for the choice of material are based on the everyday use of language by native speakers and not on the learner’s actual needs.

Considering the behaviorist belief that any kind of learning is achieved by building up habits on the basis of stimulus-response chains, the teaching of language rests upon the idea that the learner must be provided with a great amount of practice in order to acquire appropriate linguistic responses. This practice is obtained through repetition—sentence patterns are repeated and drilled until they become habitual and automatic even though this is done in a repetitive or mechanical way. Thus, it does not involve the learner’s reasoning and thinking; memorization of the very structure is the goal. Accordingly, the focus of attention is more on language forms to be learned than on meanings to be communicated. Therefore, the fundamental belief is that an automatic manipulation of different linguistic structures constitutes the real ability to communicate in a foreign language. Drills and exercises are primarily designed for this purpose.

Based upon the maxim that the written system of the language is only an approximation to the spoken form, the emphasis in language teaching is set upon speech; this accounts for the importance given to pronunciation. Thus, a great amount of time is devoted to tasks which emphasize the oral component of language. Reading, for instance, plays a minor role since priority is given to oral communication. Generally, the reading passages are made up in order to fulfil the author’s purpose, that is, the teaching of a particular
grammatical point. The texts, usually presented after oral dialogues and drills, are built up to illustrate the sentence patterns the learner has already memorized. Thus, those texts are not authentic and they cannot be said to be actual instances of written discourse. Those constructed texts neither use nor add to the learner's previous knowledge—in other words, there is no new information. A direct consequence of this contrivance is that the passages do not have the usual layout or text iconography—thus titles, inverted commas, italics, dashes, notes, underlining, different typefaces are not generally present.

It should be pointed out that genuine and actual instances of written discourse usually make use of two main semiotic devices: the verbal text—its linguistic component proper and the graphic language of diagrams, graphs, illustrations, etc. Those constructed texts in the audio-visual methods rely only on the verbal component, that is, one of the two semiotic devices. Sometimes we find illustrations to go with the text. However, the illustration, rather than complementing the text just provides the context of the situation. By providing the context of situation, the teacher does not have to make use of the native language for explanation, something which is not acceptable in this method.

As the sentence represents the unit of learning in the audio-visual method, reading is therefore viewed as the decoding of individual sentences in the text, in the hope that it will lead to a full comprehension of the passage. All the interconnections of a text grammar or discourse are thus artificially excluded from the teaching-learning situation.

Widdowson, for instance, argues that the basic flaw in this approach to language teaching is that
it represents language in a way which dissociates
the learner from his own experience of language,
prevents real participation, and so makes the
acquisition of communicative abilities particularly
(and needlessly) difficult.

3. Transformational-Generative Linguistics and Cognitive
Psychology

The 1950s saw the emergence of this influential school of
linguistics whose main assumptions challenged not only the
prevailing beliefs of Structuralist Linguistics but also the
maxims of Behaviorist Psychology. Rather than holding a
behaviorist orientation, the emergent trend leaned towards a
new rationalism. This doctrine

... maintains that the mind is constitutionally
endowed with concepts, or innate ideas, that were
not derived from external experience. Thus, according
to this doctrine, knowledge is regarded as being
organized in terms of highly specific, innate mental
structures. Knowledge, then, does not depend on the
observation of external facts for its justification,
but on mind processes which are the source of human
knowledge, superior to and independent of sensorial
perceptions.

Thus, language is not seen just as another form of behavior; it
is, rather, seen as a highly complex skill which requires an
interrelated set of psychological processes for its use.

Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
is the leading name in this new trend: Transformational
Generative Linguistics. Since the publication of his major concepts on language, his work has had a revolutionary impact on linguistics and a remarkable influence on cognitive psychology.\(^5\)

It is Chomsky's claim that we possess some innate knowledge about language structure which is part of all possible human languages. At the time a child is acquiring a language, he makes use of this knowledge in order to check his hypotheses about the structure of the language he is learning — he then "only progresses further with hypotheses that do not conflict with universal features of human language."\(^6\)

Chomsky also accounts for the highly productive and creative character of language. He states that every natural language has a potentially infinite number of sentences. Though the components that make up sentences are small in number, the ways they may be combined into sentences are infinite. Another point Chomsky calls attention to is that natural languages are rule-governed. In spite of the fact that a native speaker is primed with the ability to create an infinite number of sentences, rules exist that limit the way he may combine words into sentences. Despite the constraints of the rules of a language, a native speaker is capable of generating and comprehending novel sentences he has never used or heard before.

Another important idea propounded by Chomsky is that language is a mental phenomenon — internal processes occur when language is either produced or comprehended. Language is then considered primarily as a thinking process. Considering only the behaviorist view that language is a mechanical activity which can be controlled by linguistic prompts does not do justice to the complex set of inner cognitive abilities which come into play when one is using language.
In his description of language, Chomsky distinguishes between competence, the abstract linguistic knowledge an individual possesses in order to use the language, and performance, the actual production or comprehension of speech or writing. In setting up this dichotomy, Chomsky makes us realize that language is much more complex than previously believed. Therefore, it cannot be described solely in terms of its own, overt forms as done before; some way of describing the knowledge that underlies it is also needed.

In Chomsky's view, the goal of linguistic theory is to describe and explain competence, that is, our abstract knowledge of the structure of language, while it is the domain of psychology to develop a theory of performance, that is, the actual application of that knowledge in speaking and listening. A theory of competence will thus account for the structure of the language while a theory of performance will study the processes which make use of that structure, namely, production and comprehension processes. Note that Chomsky's theory takes into account the abstract knowledge that underlies language use; it does not describe actual language use.

In developing his linguistic theory of competence, Chomsky considers the relation between syntax, semantics and phonology. The diagram below illustrates how these three elements are related in Chomsky's view of language:
It should be noted, however, that in spite of the fact that phonology and semantics are given some consideration in his theory, Chomsky centers his proposal on syntax. As mentioned before, Chomsky describes competence and not performance — syntax is thus the starting point in his theory. He proposes a transformational grammar which is a device consisting of a set of rules that will account for both the productivity and regularity of a natural language and also for the linguistic intuitions of speakers of a language. The ultimate goal of this grammar is to generate all the acceptable sentences of a language and no unacceptable ones. As Bell points out “a transformational grammar is a logical specification of the syntactic knowledge which the learner needs in order to produce grammatical sentences.”

Two types of rules are present in a transformational grammar: phrase structure rules and transformation rules. The first type generates the underlying deep structure of a sentence and the second generates its surface structure. As
mentioned before, a separate set of semantic rules interprets the phrase structure to generate the meaning of the sentence. Thus, the basis for arriving at meaning lies in the syntactic relations of the sentence represented in its phrase structure.

As with the structuralist view the sentence remains the unit of linguistic analyses; a consideration of discourse as a whole has not yet received any recognition.

There is also a clear change in the focus of investigation. As mentioned before, in structuralist terms, the task of the linguist is to describe language as a coherent system of formal signs leaving out of account any reference to historical antecedents or comparisons with other languages. On the other hand, the focus of analysis in a transformationalist standpoint is on the abstract knowledge which underlies language use—what counts is the nature of the linguistic knowledge that underlies what is said. The logical result of that is twofold: the structuralist is concerned with features that make a language different from another and the transformationalist with the characteristics that are common to all natural languages as universal phenomena.

With these highlights on Transformational Grammar as background, we can say that it has brought about a revolutionary shift of orientation in linguistics and has also shed light on obscure points influencing research in other fields of study as well. Moreover, it has also provided a new way of looking both at language and at language learning. It should be remarked that the indirect influence of Transformational Grammar on language teaching has been quite remarkable.

Thus, from this new attitude different assumptions emerged: learning ceases to be a matter of habit formation to involve the learner’s thinking, creativity and analysis.
It should also be noted that the model for the learning process is no longer behaviorist psychology. The model now is supplied by cognitive psychology whose primary attempt is to understand the workings of human intelligence and how people think and learn. The main concern of this field of enquiry is the understanding of higher mental processes. It deals primarily with mental organization, thought, and knowledge of the world. Montaner puts it in the following way:

Cognitive psychologists ... centre their work around the mental processes underlying responses, concept formation and the nature of human comprehension. They are sometimes called "mentalists" because of their concern for the mental processes and because their theories rest on thought and language.

Therefore, the acceptance of a cognitive view of the learning process makes the teacher realize that important thinking processes are involved in language learning and that learning is not just a matter of habit formation but, rather, a process of hypothesis-testing on the part of the learner. Moreover, the teacher is made aware that the second language learner is not a "tabula rasa" — in fact, not only has he full command of his own language but also already developed cognitive abilities. The task of the teacher is to capitalize on that when teaching a second language.

Another point to mention is that although mastery of linguistic structure remains the focus of attention in teaching, there is some further concern with the creative aspect of language. Thus, the exercises — whose primary
function is still to develop the learner's grammatical competence — seem to be less mechanical than the ones presented under a strict structuralist orientation. Some kind of reasoning processes are also required from the learners when they are engaged in doing the exercises.

It seems we can also add that up to the 70s the teaching of reading remains almost the same as before. The reading material is still constructed around a specific grammatical point and the learner's needs are seldom taken into consideration.

In closing, we should remark that in setting up the distinction between competence and performance, Chomsky takes into consideration what really happens in our everyday use of language: the complex interaction of knowledge of language structure and a set of psychological processes required for its use. Cognitive psychologists set out from the ideas provided by Chomsky to seek an understanding of how these inner processes occur in the production and comprehension of language. Chomsky, on the one hand, provides a conceptualization of our abstract knowledge of language structure. Cognitive Psychology, on the other hand, influenced in part by Chomskyan ideas, conceptualizes human internal mental functioning.

Unlike behaviorist psychology which is entirely engaged in the study of external behavior, failing to take into account any reference to internal processes, cognitive psychology uses overt behavior as a starting point for its theories on the abstract mechanisms of the human mind when it is engaged in the production or comprehension of language. What concerns cognitive psychology is "the nature of human intelligence and how people think."
4. The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

The former prevailing formalistic view in language teaching began to be questioned on the grounds that the ability to express in a given language requires more than just knowing the rules which generate well-formed sentences. Language also performs a communicative function and, as such, involves other elements like the addresser, the addressee, the setting, the code and so on. This means that knowing a language also means knowing how to deal with language in its normal communicative use. Communication entails more than a purely linguistic basis; in its complexity, language came to be regarded as interdisciplinary, involving insights from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

However, as pointed out earlier, for many decades the prime concern in language teaching was towards the development of the learner's ability to handle language structure. Language learning was seen primarily as a question of acquiring structures and lexical items. Widdowson, inter alia, argues that language teaching has given priority to the development of the ability to handle "language usage" rather than "language use."¹¹

Therefore, expressions like This is a book, That is a window were previously used with the purpose of providing a contextual situation for the teaching of grammatical items such as the demonstrative pronouns and lexical items like book and window. However, as Widdowson remarks, although these expressions are meaningful as "sentences" because they indicate the "signification" of grammatical and lexical items, they are meaningless as "utterances" since they do not carry much communicative verisimilitude and do not have any communicative "value" for the individual learner.¹² In short,
they are meaningful as sentences because they carry linguistic and grammatical signification, but are meaningless as utterances because they bear little value as communication. Therefore, the prime concern in teaching was on signification and not on communicative value and the usual strategy works in the following way: the structure is first presented, then it is drilled, next it is practised in context and then, finally, the circle is started again. The predictable outcome is a learner who is structurally competent but unable to communicate appropriately.

Although mastery of language use has not been entirely neglected since it is impossible to completely dissociate form from meaning, it is true to say that in important respects it has not received the required and adequate treatment. There has been a clear imbalance between the teaching of structures and the teaching of use — form rather than communicative use — clearly tended to dominate foreign language teaching for many years. A reaction against this view has been reported by Criper and Widdowson, inter alia, who contend that knowledge of the rules of grammar will ensure that each sentence generated is correctly formed but it will not ensure that the forms of the utterances are appropriate. In other words, grammatical competence does not automatically entail "communicative competence."

As pointed out before, this mode of thinking in language teaching which emphasizes structure runs parallel to a similar concept of languages as structures which has dominated linguistic study. It is clear that although there is an advance from Structuralism to Transformational Grammar in that the latter has so revolutionarily changed the aims and techniques of linguistic study and has shed light on language teaching, both theories deal primarily with the
study of sentence structure to the detriment of discourse and pragmatics. In both analyses, language is almost exclusively seen as a set of structures—the fact that language also carries functional and social meanings is not taken into account. Hymes, for instance, calls attention to the following fact:

... a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events and to evaluate their accomplishments by others.

Thus, a reaction against this prevailing emphasis on form is naturally taking place not only in descriptive linguistics and in applied linguistics but also in language teaching. It is a reaction which is prone to recognize the prime importance of the communicative features of language; "it is a reaction towards a view of language as communication, a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part." It is a reaction against the view of competence as knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language. Widdowson, inter alia, argues that

... some of the features listed under performance are also systematic and form a part of the speaker's knowledge of his language (in any normal sense of knowledge), and should also therefore be considered as part of his competence. It is then part of the
speaker's competence to be able to use sentences to form continuous discourse, as Halliday points out; it is part of his competence that he should know how to use sentences to perform what Searle calls speech acts, Lyons calls semiotic acts, and I call rhetorical acts.  

In language teaching it is the communicative approach which embodies a reaction against the widespread methodology which has primarily emphasized language structure.

The paramount assumption which stands out as the most revolutionary in this approach to language teaching is its prime concern with the communicative features of language. It is an approach which has formulated its aim towards communicative competence — rather than a Chomskyan grammatical competence. Knowledge of language is no longer equivalent to knowledge of syntactic structures, but it means knowledge of how to deal with language in its normal communicative use relating forms with the communicative functions they perform. In expressing doubt, for instance, different linguistic forms may be used to fulfil the same basic function. One might use one of the following alternative ways: I might go, or Perhaps I'll go, or I'll go, I don't know, or still I'm not sure I'm going. Language learning has then been geared to developing the learner's communicative proficiency focusing central attention on "the development of strategies for dealing with language in use", rather than the development of grammatical proficiency. It seems true to add that knowledge of the elements of a language is useless unless the learner is capable of dealing with them creatively and appropriately to perform its social function according to his specific communicative purposes. Widdowson,
for instance, calls attention to the fact that "grammatical competence remains in a perpetual state of potentiality unless it is realized in communication".\textsuperscript{20}

The communicative approach to foreign language teaching is thus oriented towards restoring the balance between grammatical forms and language use - it has thus extended from linguistic structures to communicative activities aiming at developing in the learner the ability to use the language as a means of communication.

It might be appropriate to remark that in this approach the foreign language is taught as a whole. This means that the language is not divided into isolated segments and taught gradually, additively and linearly up to the acquisition of a finite number of rules which, it is believed, will give the learner the ability to use the language appropriately when the need arises. Quite differently, the communicative approach presents language from the very beginning in "semantically-homogeneous" but "structurally-heterogeneous" units.\textsuperscript{21} The result is thus a lack of preoccupation with simplification of materials and situations which dissociates language from its true communicative purposes - in the same piece of teaching unit different grammatical items co-occur allowing for a more real instance of language in use. In other words, authentic samples of language are used to the detriment of graded syntactic structures.

This view of language as communication has further implications when translated into a teaching methodology. A question immediately arises as to the students' communicative needs. It may be for social interaction, for international communication, for the transmission of science and technology, and so on. The analysis of communicative needs is important in the specification of the course content, for, as Candlin
remarks, "a view of language as communication implies teaching materials which relate form, function and strategy." Mackay and Mountford also point out that

... the possession of accurate, objective information about the learner, his specialism and his needs, enables the course planner to narrow down the area of language use and usage — and of course the mode, spoken or written — from which the linguistic items in communicative patterns of language use should be drawn.

This more accurate objective information about learner's communicative needs and a greater concern with them gave rise to the teaching of ESP, a branch of communicative language teaching. Since it is the written communication in English learners often have to cope with, ESP, as it stands now, is primarily concerned with developing the learner's ability to handle written scientific discourse in an effective way. This learner-centered approach represents a movement in the direction of the teaching of discourse as a whole and it aims at developing the learner's "ability to understand the rhetorical functioning of language in use."

5. Final Remarks

This paper has described some major theoretical issues concerning the scientific study of language and their influence on second language teaching in the last 40 or 50 years. This survey reveals that second language teaching has shifted from a mechanistic view towards a more mentalistic one. It has also shown a recent shift from sentence-based materials towards
discourse-based ones, a shift that has resulted from a view of language as communication.

This paper has also shown the place reading has in each of these approaches. If reading held a marginal place in audio-visual and audio-lingual methods, it tends to receive full attention in the communicative language teaching, as the result of accurate needs analyses carried out in order to specify the learner's communicative needs.

A point must also be made about the kind of text used in the teaching of reading. If the audio-visual/lingual methods used texts constructed to exemplify a given grammatical point, communicative language teaching uses authentic instances of discourse, be it written or spoken, regardless of grammatical grading. Artificial texts devised around a specific grammatical point thus tend to be replaced by authentic texts which are not grammar-based but discourse-oriented.
NOTES


2 Gérard Vigner (Lire: du Text au Sens, Paris: CLE International, 1979, p. 117) adds a third semiotic device in scientific discourse, that is, the formal language made up of formulas and conventional symbols.


5 It is not always easy to tell cognitive psychology from linguistics and psycholinguistics since there is a lot of common ground. R. J. Harris in his article “Cognitive Psychology and Applied Linguistics: a timely rapprochement” (in Ensaios de Lingüística, Ano 14, 7. 1982, p. 154) has remarked: “In recent years it is becoming more difficult totally to separate linguistics and psycholinguistics, or, more generally, linguistics and cognitive psychology. To truly understand how language works requires the consideration of psychological factors, such as the intention of the speaker, the context of the utterance, and the knowledge in the mind of the hearer.”


Montaner, p. 33.

Anderson, p. 3.

H. G. Widdowson (Teaching Language as Communication, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4th ed., 1983, p. 18) explains that "language usage" refers to "the citation of words and sentences as manifestations of the language system" and "language use" refers to "the way the system is realized for normal communicative purposes."

Widdowson (Teaching, p. 19) distinguishes "signification" from "value" in the following way: "The term signification refers to the kind of meaning that sentences have in isolation from a linguistic context or from a particular situation in which the sentence is produced. The term "value", on the other hand, refers to the meaning that sentences take on when they are put to use in order to perform different acts of communication."

Widdowson (Explorations, p. 8) distinguishes not only "signification from "value", but also "sentences" from "utterances" in the following way: "Language can be manipulated in the classroom in the form of text-sentences which exemplify..."
the language system and thus indicate the signification of linguistic items. This is not the same as language use — the use of sentences in the performance of utterances which give these linguistic elements communicative value. In the classroom, expressions like "Come here", "Sit down" are utterances because they have a communicative import in the classroom situation, which provides a natural social context for their occurrence."


15 For further discussion of the term see D. H. Hymes, "On Communicative Competence," in Brumfit and Johnson, pp. 4-24.

16 Hymes, p. 15.

17 Brumfit and Johnson, p. 3.

18 Widdowson, Explorations, p. 12.

19 Widdowson, Explorations, p. 249.


24 This approach has been coined ESP (English for Specific Purposes), sometimes EAP (English for Academic Purposes), EST (English for Science and Technology), etc. depending on the teaching situations and learner's requirements.