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DISCOURSE STRUCTURE IN READING

by Ron Shook

With the emergence of psycholinguistic theories of reading such as those proposed by Frank Smith or Kenneth Goodman, scholars in ESL have come to realize that an ESL reading program which serves the advanced reader may have to be radically different from one which is geared to a beginning reader. Out of this realization have come a number of excellent suggestions for advanced ESL reader courses. Been (1973), for instance, suggests a two track program: one track more or less traditionally oriented for the reader who uses "mediated recognition" strategies and another track for the student who uses "immediate recognition" of meaning as his reading device. Another excellent suggestion has been made by Eskey (1973), who outlines a flexible but comprehensive program for an advanced ESL reading class. Both proposals are based on the theory that when a person is learning to read he must develop certain perceptual and cognitive habits, but when he is learning to read fast, or for meaning, the beginner habits are not only insufficient to the task, they may actually get in the way.

This paper will focus on the beginning ESL reader, and the anomolous position that our reading programs, and especially our reading exercises, put him in. It seems to me an important but much-overlooked fact that while we can divide native languge readers generally into beginning and advanced, we cannot do the same with ESL readers. At least, we cannot use the same criteria with ESL readers as we do with native readers, nor can we use the same sets of exercises. On the college level, a beginning ESL reader is already a proficient reader in his own language. As such, he will not be helped by exercises designed for beginning readers (and sometimes not too well at that), and made over for ESL purposes. This becomes significant when we recall that reading is not purely a word recognition game, or a phonic exercise, but a complex interweaving of perceptual and semantic processes,

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monitored by the reader's advance expectations of what is in store for him in any printed text. The skills a beginning reader needs to develop in order to be a good reader, the ESL reader already has.

I propose that ESL reading pedagogy, reading exercises in particular, hinder the ESL reader because they ignore the linguistic facts of life. The fact is that reading is an overlaid skill, a cognitive function and the ESL reader has long since developed those skills many reading exercises presume to be absent. The fact is that the ESL reader is unsophisticated in English but not linguistically unsophisticated (A beginning reader may have a well developed grammar, but is still a long way from linguistic sophistication (see Hunt 1970; O'Hare 1973)). The fact is that the ESL reader has a *Weltanschauung* and conceptual store far ahead of what is expected of him in the exercises he is given. The fact is that the beginning ESL reader is not a beginner. Reading exercises tend to ignore these facts in a number of ways. I wish to examine three general patterns in reading exercises and show how they can do a disservice to the cognitively mature but English-naive reader. These patterns are: 1) profusion of detail as question fodder; 2) an oversimplified syntax; and 3) an artificial construction that violates the principles of civilized discourse.

READING AS THEORY AND CONTRACT

Before I begin a detailed examination of ESL reading exercises, I would like to construct a profile of an advanced reader. This may be a native English speaker reading English, a native Thai speaker reading Thai, a native German speaker reading German, and so on. This profile is not a balanced one. On the contrary, it will be built up of elements I wish to examine in the reading exercises, and will serve as a backdrop against which I want to conduct my examination.

A reader reads by outwitting the printed page. He plays what Goodman (1967) calls a "guessing game" with his text. That is, he attempts to guess, on the basis of as little information from the visual array as possible, what a certain word, sentence, or even paragraph might mean. He constructs a theory, then puts this theory to the test, sometimes making changes as he goes (for the best and most comprehensive discussion of this process, see Smith (1971)). He makes these guesses on the basis of his intuitive knowledge of the phonological, syntactic, and semantic constraints on his language. The English speaker knows, though probably not consciously, that the letters *st* will not be followed by *d* or *g* or *f* or *w*, but could easily followed by *r* or a vowel. Similarly, he will know that a sentence beginning, "The black . . . " will almmost certainly not be followed by *white.* These unconscious rules help him eliminate options and confine his guesses to viable alternatives. Thus the structure of natural language helps the reader in the task of "reduction of uncertainty" (Smith, 1971).

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In addition, the reader constructs meaning out of discourse by referring what occurs in the text to what he already knows about the world. Smith maintains that, "the brain—our prior knowledge of the world—contributes more information to reading than the visual symbols on the printed page." He gives as an example of the working of syntactic and pragmatic knowledge the sentence, "The captain ordered the mate to drop the an. . . " The mature reader could use a number of clues to finish that sentence. First, he could predict what letters would *not* occur after it, and from this make an educated guess as to what letters would occur. Second, he could note that the word *an. . .* is almost certainly a noun, and feed this datum into his lexical store. Third, he could ask himself what sorts of things mates are likely to drop at the command of the captain.

Actually, the mature reader almost never uses the first two strategies. He will normally have the word *anchor* in mind before he ever comes to it in the text. His prior knowledge, influenced by the setting, certainly nautical except in reading exercises, will have prepared him for the word, and he will need only the barest hint in order to be able to furnish the world from his own store. This means that he

may not even get the word from the printed page, but may get it from his own knowledge of the world and from the nature of the subject matter he is reading.

If reading is a theory building process, it is also a contractual one. As part of being a reader, our hypothetical person has developed a set of discourse postulates which lead him to expect certain things of the reader. Though the expectations vary from culture to culture, they always form a sort of contract between writer and reader; a set of assumptions about what the writer may and may not do in a discourse situation. These postulates have been given a number of names and forms: speech acts; conversational postulates; implicature; situation frames and a host of others, but they all amount to rules of procedure in sharing information.

On the simplest level, these rules assure mutual syntactic and semantic trust. A reader knows that even a writer who is attempting to cheat, deceive, and mislead him will have to be honest in some of the functions of discourse. Even a liar and a cheat must use verbs and nouns in his writing. Unless a man is insane or playing some outlandish prank, he does not say "calabash" when he means "Buick." He may try to weasel in a new definition of democracy, but one is aware that is still an abstraction.

On a more complex level, the reader and the writer share the knowledge that a piece of writing moves in certain predictable ways. A narration moves in time, a description moves in space. An analysis may move inductively or deductively, but once the pattern is set, it is followed. That the time sequence of a piece of narrative writing can be violated is true, but even this proceeds according to rules, and the reader must be let in on the secret. If the reader is not, because the writer is inept (or terribly avant garde), the result is confusion or nonsense.

Our sense of the contractual nature of a piece of writing is very strong, notwithstanding the fact that it is a very difficult concept to come to grips with and to get concrete about. It's most often discussed under the heading *Coherence* (cf. Winterowd, 1975) or *Form* (cf. Burke, 1953). I will discuss this concept in greater detail later, but for now let me merely remark that the writer who ignores the contractual nature of discourse because he is seeking other ends, such as the teaching of vocabulary, will cripple the reader's ability to abstract meaning from the text. Further, any piece of writing which goes beyond one sentence in length becomes a contract, so that a five line reading exercise is not exempt from the reader's expectations that it cohere.

A college level ESL student, then, comes to the study of the English language with a fully developed set of strategies for deciphering written material, both cognitive and linguistic. He is stripped of his linguistic skills by virtue of being a language learner, but he retains his cognitive and pragmatic expectations because he has no other choice. He cannot become a child again. Yet he is often given material that is childish.

THE MANIA FOR DETAIL

Detail is important to good writing, and therefore to good reading. It gives life, adds credibility, advances knowledge. However, for detail to work for the reader and not against him, it must advance rather than interrupt the flow of information. That is, it must have a reason for existing other than that it is a detail. There seem to be two psycholinguistic reasons for this. First, our capacity to deal with unintegrated information is extremely limited (cf. Miller and Isard, 1964). Any stray bit of information that is not part of the pattern must be held in short term memory, constantly recirculated, till a place can be found for it. Second, the evidence suggests that should that information be recalled, it will not necessarily be in the same form as originally presented by the writer (cf. Savin and Perchonock, 1965). The meaning may be the same, but the form may well be different (passives reported as actives, etc.). A superfluous detail will be simply dropped from the information store.

I have the distinct impression that much detail is added to ESL reading exercises because something is needed to ask questions about. Consider the following sentences, from a typical reading exercise:

> Bob was sitting on the bank fishing. A pail for the fish he was not catching was at his left side.

(continued on page 15)

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(continued from page 3)

There is a subtle use of an embedded negative in the second sentence that would make a good comprehension question, but it was not included. What was included was the question:

Where was the pail for the fish?

And the correct answer was, "At Bob's left side" with "At Bob's right side" as an incorrect alternative.

The location of the pail was completely unimportant to the advancement and meaning of the story. It would not have hurt the story at all - might have improved it - to have left the word "left" out altogether. A mature reader would realize this and exclude the detail from his information retention processes, since it adds a superfluous and complicating spatial dimension.

What such details do is encourage students to develop new reading strategies based on details as important fixation points. It encourages them to read backwards. Imagine the following sentences as part of a reading exercise:

> There was a hole about five feet from the tree. They buried the treasure in it.

'he most neatly concrete and specific noun hrase in those sentences is "five feet," and so .t is an ideal place to hang a question. So, we would not be surprised to see:

> About how far from the tree was the hole? a) three feet, b) five feet, c) eight feet, d) ten feet.

Again, the mature reader notes that "five feet" is a relational noun phrase, and exists to establish the position of the hole relative to the tree. That is, the distance, five feet, is important only in relation to the other two NP's *hole* and *tree.* Once this information has been extracted from the syntactic configuration it becomes part of the relationship and the notion of distance, especially any specific distance, would be very hard to recover.

Faced with the problem of recovering non-recoverable information, ESL students, who are not dummies, sometimes develop methods of working the exercises that are productive in terms of answers correct, but counterproductive in terms of learning to read English. Where the reader has both the text and the questions before him he sometimes reads the questions first, then searches the text for details to supply his answers. Since he is prepared for certain choices, those choices jump out at him. This is an especially effective method for timed exercises. Those students who haven't stumbled onto the backwards method cope by underlining details as they read, a form of digital subvocalization.

Please note that I am not against underlining, and not against details in prose material. Obviously, the college student will have to underline material and take notes. Just as obviously, some materials are a lot more detailed than others, and will take correspondingly longer to read. But material designed to foster the skill of reading, rather than to transmit information should flow as smoothly and painlessly as possible, and should be as spare of superfluous detail as possible.

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