

An analysis of the problems Magisterio Students of English have when reading texts in English

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Abstract

The problems students of English have in processing when reading texts is quite unknown. One can argue that processing aspects are difficult to measure as it is difficult to find a good instrument to analyse what is happening in the mind of the reader. In this paper, I want to show that the analysis of summaries made by the students after reading a text is a good instrument to measure the type of problems they have in reading. My study shows that it is grammatical and textual, rather than lexical problems, that create understanding problems, together with too much reliance on top-down processes. If that is the case in further research, we might argue that the students need more instruction on grammar and textual cohesion in relation to reading

comprehension before they can rely too much on top-down processes. Otherwise, this type of processing could be misleading.

Key words

Reading processing, Reading comprehension mistakes, English as a foreign language, Magisterio students of English, Pedagogical implications

• 1. Introduction

This study intends to analyse the type of mistakes first year Spanish students of Magisterio (Lengua Extranjera) made in reading and understanding different newspaper and magazine articles in English. The students were asked to read a newspaper/magazine article in English and they were told to make a summary of it, in order to analyse their reading problems in the summaries.

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The aim of the study was to identify different problematic aspects in the reading process and to determine the areas of difficulty related to schema, syntax, lexis, coherence, register and genre. The aim was also to try to find the possible pedagogical applications to prevent or solve this type of mistakes in EFL reading.

• 2. Methodology

The students chose the articles they wanted to read, and they were recommended to choose the ones they were more interested in and/or knew something about. They were not asked the reasons why they chose a certain article. Nevertheless, we could expect other reasons for choosing an article than the ones mentioned above, especially when we find reading problems related to unknown genre. These other reasons could be short text, appealing picture or photograph, etc...

The analysis compiles eight summaries of eight different articles read by eight students of first year Magisterio (Lengua Extranjera). Two of these summaries do not seem to reflect problems of understanding, but the other six reflect problems of various different degrees. The purpose of the study is not to discuss all types of writing mistakes but only the ones related to comprehension.

• 3. Analysis of the summaries of reading articles

3.1. Writer/reader shared interpretation

The summary of the article «Megadeft on the Nile» shows a good understanding of the text. Although the amount of dictionary use and the number of times this text has been read were not controlled, the general

understanding shows that there is a knowledge of the genre, «a newspaper article», and the topic is not unknown. The article deals with strict Islamic laws and it is clear that there is a certain background knowledge on this topic. The text is also related to music trends and young people so we can expect the topic to be of some interest for an eighteen year old student.

As C. Wallace (1992) points out, the writer establishes here a relationship with the reader, anticipating particular responses. But, we as readers do not need to submit to the writer's intended meaning as we find it in the text and the reader is free to take up whatever position suits his purpose on the dominance/dependence scale. The student seems to have added a personal interpretation to the text in his summary : «Although all these young people dress in a strange way with leather jackets and have their hair cut differently, they're not at all violent people or Satan devotes as Egyptian authorities try to prove». We can consider this an individual interpretation in the reading process but the writer is also biasing the objectivity as we can see at the end of the first paragraph in the article: «Something Egyptian authorities apparently consider to be even worse: Heavy metal...». The writer is engaging the reader into a certain type of interpretation which, if it works out, involves the second one in a shared vision of the text from the beginning of the article, and this is supposed to help overcome difficulties in the understanding process.

3.2. Lexical problems

The summary of the article «Shanky Chicks» shows that the reader hasn't really understood the text.

In first place the writer does not provide sufficient clues for the reader to



use a bottom-up process to activate schemata. And, on the other hand, the reader does not really seem to differentiate between the first group of stars: Sandra Bullock, Michelle Pfeiffer, etc... and the second group including Jennifer Jason Leigh and Juliette Lewis, who are considered more sexy by the writer of the article. She could have been helped by the schema of stars to overcome the difficulty of understanding the meaning of some words from the text, but she does not seem to have that knowledge.

The misunderstanding of the discourse marker «even» is also clear in the second paragraph of her summary. She considers it adversative (which would be «even though») instead of an emphasising adverb. This aspect comes together with the not understanding of «ivory» as the typical «perfect woman». The text is full of content words, so it is much more difficult to store the information, especially as most of them are idiomatic and she does not seem to be familiar with the type of genre of the article, coming from Internet. As the Goodmans (1977) say a high conceptual load is a very clear origin of miscues.

In this article we can see several problems related to vocabulary, syntax, lack of schema and possibly unknown genre. Even though the article might seem easier to understand for someone lacking the confidence to read in English, as it is a very short text, the article was obviously not chosen appropriately and the picture does not help very much either.

3.3. Grammatical problems

The article «One small step closer» about the crash of the TWA Flight 800 seems to show no problems of interpretation. The topic of this text is familiar to Spanish people in general as

it has been very widely spread through the news, so the background knowledge of the topic and details must have helped in the understanding and, therefore, there don't seem to be many problems in the interpretation of it. There is a proof for this as in the personal comments to the topic of the article, the student writes about her opinion about the accident being caused by a mechanical failure as «there are not any terrorists who have claimed the attack». This comment does not appear in the article at all so it must have been brought to it by the student and her knowledge of the subject through other sources.

However, there is a mistake which could be related to what Berman (1984) calls «heaviness». In the following sentence of the article there is a lot of information to be stored as part of the nominal group: «A senior U.S. Justice Department official told.....» The appearance of an indefinite article together with a word which is obviously not known and its phonographic similarity with the Spanish noun «señor» might have led the reader to interpret it as a noun and not an adjective and to ignore the rest of the words forming part of the nominal group and the function of all of them as modifiers of the noun «official».

«Senior» seems to be one of these low frequency words that Nation and Coady (1988) consider to generate problems of understanding. There is here a mixture of lack of grammatical knowledge of the English use of several nouns and/or adjectives modifying the head and, probably, the lack of the schema of authoritative ranks and hierarchy with the same word in Spanish: «senior». The other words within the nominal group are ignored. The student summarises: «However, a senior has told ...». As Bartlett (1932) points out, when



something appears incomprehensible or «queer» the tendency is to omit it or explain it. This student omits it.

The summary of «The nutty biographeer» also shows reading miscues that come again from prediction and the lack of analysis of the clause structure given in the article, which is about a «book» written on the life of Jerry Lewis and not on Jerry Lewis himself. Again we find that «heaviness» causes misunderstanding and encourages to make a wrong prediction. The article says «(One of the goals of Shawn Levy's astute and absorbing *King of Comedy: The Life and Art of Jerry Lewis*) is to remind one that for almost two decades,... Lewis was a virtually unprecedented force in American popular culture». The summary says: «He made as well: The Life and Art of Jerry Lewis...» referring to other achievements of the actor.

After mentioning Lewis's work as a director and actor it seems to be difficult for the reader to realize, when reading the previous paragraph, that the subject of the text is not Jerry Lewis anymore, but the author of his biography Shawn Levy, whose surname, by the way, is very similar to the one of the famous actor. This follows what the Goodmans (1977) view in respect to oral reading: «what the mouth reports in oral reading is not what the eye has seen but what the brain has generated for the mouth to report».

Prediction and grammatical heaviness given by such a long noun phrase are here again clear causes of the reading miscues. The writer of the article introduces the author of the biography towards the end of the article (on the third line of the third column): «Levy, a film critic for the Portland Oregonian, does a skillful job...». The reader expects the important character of a text at the beginning, so it is again understandable

that the reader predicts the subject of the previous paragraph to be Lewis and not Levy. So we have here a misleading prediction of the text interpretation.

There are further problems, such as at the end of the first paragraph of the third column: «Levy readily acknowledges the sloppiness and indulgence of much of Lewis' movie work, ...» which the student summarises as: «Levy,.... which sloppined Lewis' movie work». The reader seems to have invented the verb «sloppine» and interpretes the verb «acknowledges» as if Levy was responsible for it. The lack of knowledge of the genre of the text (a book review) is causing the reading miscue in this case.

Another reading problem appears in the summary of the last lines of the second paragraph in the third column. Presenting the attributes of the actor, the article says: «not to mention, as his career progressed and then faltered, an underlying rage», which the reader summarizes as follows: «His career progressed, and then faltered, underlying rage». The amount of information given before getting to the attribute «an underlying rage» with the use of a subordinate sentence introduced by «as» creates serious problems of understanding. «An underlying rage» is the direct object of the verb «exudes», four lines above.

In the reader's personal opinion about the article she points out the difficulty in reading it. She says that she would have liked to have read something about his life, and not his work. The lack of knowledge of the fact that it was an article about a book on certain aspects of Jerry Lewis's life, mainly the professional ones, makes the reading quite hard, also because this type of reviews tend to expect the reader to know something about the topic. The expectations of the activation of the reader's specific schema are very high here.



3.4. Textual problems

In the summary of the article «Megadeth on the Nile» itself we have a textual difficulty that can create problems of understanding. We have a problem of what Berman (1984) calls «transparency», in relation to grammatical structures. The use of pronominalization as a way of substituting a noun causes difficulty to interpret:

The summary says «...Egypt is suffering from the same crisis we did in Spain when the government realized that there were too much people with this American thoughts and started to hunt them down, but the difference is that they're living in an Islamic culture which makes them more aggressive with new movements and thoughts». We do not really know if these «they», «them» refer to the authorities or the society in general, represented by these groups of young people.

A summary that does not show problems of interpretation is one on an article titled «Belly Dancing». There is, however, some important information from the article missing in the summary. The article presents a description of the dancing and then presents the interest of this dancing nowadays to keep physically fit and as a therapy to fight tension and depression. This second type of benefit is not mentioned by the student and one reason could be that the reader has inferred a continuity within the same aspect of physical fitness. There is no clear paragraph division between the two benefits, so punctuation might have been misleading. Therefore, the relatively chaotic organization of the article, which is quite common in British popular press, might have originated the fact that there is some missing information. The first paragraph defines belly

dancing and introduces the origin of this dancing which continues in the second paragraph. In the third and fourth paragraphs we are explained the benefits of this dancing and the fifth and sixth paragraphs go back again to the ancient times. The last paragraph refers back to this dancing today. So we have a mixture of information about the dancing and the origins of it which might have caused some problems to organize the summary and include all important facts. The words «tension» and «depression» are quite high frequency words which have a very similar equivalent in Spanish, so the absence of this idea can't be due to lack of understanding of key lexical items but rather to problems in structuring the content or finding that this aspect is not so important to be included in the summary.

The layout and pictures of an article can be quite helpful for the reader to have some expectations of what the article is going to be about. In the article with the title «Cheating migrant's grave fiddle» we can see the picture of a man and a woman and, taking into account the type of articles you can find in English popular newspapers, we can predict the topic is going to be about some kind of problem connected to the couple.

The summary of the article shows a good understanding. However, there seems to have been some problem of interpretation based on the change of the logical chronological structure the reader expects to find and that could help them interpret and predict. The article starts telling the story of how Valentina went to England and claimed asylum pretending her husband had been killed, but when her husband came to England she asked him to leave her alone so that she could



continue getting money from the State. He even found out that she had a new partner.

The paragraph that causes confusion comes immediately after. The husband says: «She sent me a fax saying she thought the children would have a better life in London and asking me to pay for a flat, which I happily did». The student linked this fact with the previous idea and it came out as follows: «So she asked for him to let her alone, but he must pay a flat for them, and he did it». It is understood as if the husband had decided to pay her a flat after finding everything out but, in the article, it actually refers to the time when he was still in Tanzania.

As in the case of the summary of the article «Belly Dancing», too much reliance on prediction, together with the lack of knowledge about the somehow chaotic organization that is sometimes characteristic of this type of genre show us again the importance of the bottom-up process. As Eskey (1988) suggests, second language readers should rely more on bottom-up techniques, too much reliance on top-down processing could be misleading.

The same happens in the summary of the article «Brain Food for Babies». The title and the picture that come with the text are very clarifying to help predict what the text is going to tell us. But in the summary that the student made of the article we have a clear example of the problems caused by adding too much of the experience to the interpretation of the text. Fillmore (1981), in the experiment he made about «real readers and ideal readers», talks about the good reader (who interprets and makes inferences from the text) and the bad reader (who uses a lot of the experience upon the text).

The summary says «Clinton based his campaign on this experience putting books in the hands of children». The schema the student has about politics in America makes her link the words «Clinton» and «campaign» and interpret the text as talking now about Bill Clinton and his political campaign. We know she must be talking about him because she uses the pronoun «his». Referring to Eskey (1988) and his article «Holding in the bottom...», we have here a clear example of the fact that top-down strategies at the word level can suggest a failure to decode properly. This article is actually referring to Hillary Clinton, and not to her husband.

In the article «The nutty biographee», about a book on the life of Jerry Lewis, we can also find textual problems of interpretation. The beginning of the second paragraph in the third column says that Levy conducted a series of interviews with «his profane and grandiloquent subject», referring to Jerry Lewis, and he included one of Lewis's jokes: «John F. Kennedy was one of the great ... of all time. Except for me». This was summarized by the reader as follows: «Interviews, above all of F. Kennedy...». The «substitution», which is one of the sources of difficulty that Berman mentions, of Jerry Lewis with «his profane and grandiloquent subject» may have contributed to confusion. Therefore, we have here again the difficulty of the reader to interpret cohesive devices in texts.

In the article «Destination: Romania» about visiting this country, the reader has no problem to identify the genre as it appears at the top of the page, which says «Special advertising section». This seems to have been well-understood by the reader. However, the first problems already arise with the first two paragraphs. The first paragraph includes the recommendation to travel



to Romania by plane. The second paragraph also uses words referring to means of transport: «Just a five-hour express-train ride from Bucharest is the Danube Delta, with its simple cottages on the water» and «a short flight from Bucharest are the beautiful beaches of...», but in this case they do not refer to ways to travel to Romania and not even means of transport within the country. They rather refer to the time it would take for tourists to travel to different places within the country.

The first of these quotations was summarized as follows: «We can go to Romania taking the express-train or simple cottages on the water». The meaning of the word «cottage» seems to have been guessed from the context as a means of transport because of the nearest context: «train», «flight», «water». Here again we have the point Eskey made saying that top-down processes at word level may create a lot of confusion. Another source of problems when guessing the word «cottages» from the context is the wrong understanding of the referent «its», a very common anaphoric cohesive tie that should not have caused many problems. Williams (1983) presents anaphoric reference as the most frequent and easiest to recognize. However, this student does not seem to see it.

Within this same extract the reader predicts that the article is still presenting the different ways people can travel to Romania, when the article is actually talking about travelling from Bucharest to the Danube Delta, within Romania. The wrong prediction can also have to do with the lack of the schema of Geography (where and what the Danube and Bucharest are).

In the middle of the third paragraph, the article says: «The charms of Bucharest, known as 'little Paris' in the

'20s and '30s, include candlelit churches with gleaming silver icons and a treasure house...». It was summarized: «The charms of Bucharest are nice, too». Here again we can see that the previous context, talking about the different things you can visit in Romania, makes the reader predict that the word «charms» must have an equivalent category to «mineral springs», «curative muds» and «painted monasteries», so it must be a specific word. The lexical cohesion between «charms» (general noun) and «candlelit churches», «a treasure house» is, according to Williams (1983), one of the most difficult to comprehend by the second language reader. There can also be ambiguity on the non-defining relative clause as it could refer to charms or Bucharest if the meaning of the first word is not known. We also have lack of «transparency», as Berman points out, because there is elision of the relative pronoun.

The last reading miscue we are going to discuss appears on the second paragraph of the second column: «The taste of Romania can be enjoyed abroad: the wines of Cotnari were shipped to the French court and to Venice... The major exporter, Vinexport, is a joint venture of Romanian wineries and private shareholders with British, Danish, Dutch and German importers». The summary says: «We can enjoy Romania for several aspects: The wines of Cotnari, Vinexport, and private shareholders with British, Danish and several countries more.» Neither the cataphoric reference of «The major exporter» nor the explanation of what this major exporter, Vinexport, really is are understood. The reader understands «the wines of Cotnari», «Vinexport» and «private shareholders...» at the same level. The schema of commerce should have helped the reader to see that «the major exporter» refers to the wines and the



understanding of «a joint venture» would have made clear that «private shareholders» is part of a more general word, which is «Vinexport».

• 4. Conclusion

After analysing these summaries of articles we can get to the conclusion that too much interpreting or predicting making use of the schema or top-down process alters or damages understanding. This is perhaps due to the fact that the level of English of these students, whose summaries have been chosen, is still too low. Nation and Coady (1988) talk about the danger of relying on form and not context but if vocabulary knowledge is too poor, they cannot interpret the surrounding context. The lack of the meaning of key words together with syntactic and cohesive problems encourages the reader to predict and the problems appear. A possible solution could have been to provide some background information to the reader before

reading the article. As we have seen in the comments to the different miscues, some of the articles expected the reader to have this background. Asking them to manipulate both linguistic and cultural codes is asking too much at this level. Another possibility could have been to present specialized vocabulary and difficult structures or to explain a key concept. The students could have also been given set types of reading according to what they know but as Silberstein (1994) claims: «It would be a disservice to rob students of the opportunity to learn through reading».

It seems important to work on strategies for guessing words, as the ones Nation and Coady suggest. However, my analysis shows that it is the grammatical and especially the textual aspects of the language that students need to be trained at, already from the secondary school levels. There is a need to work on cohesive ties having a look at texts, especially the ones they have read and have shown difficulties in these areas.

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