

PEDAGOGIC ALTERNATIVES TO EXPLICATION DE
TEXTE AS A PROCEDURE FOR TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION ¹

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Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to (i) examine the shortcomings of 'explication de texte' as a procedure for the teaching of reading comprehension and (ii) suggest alternatives which, in our experience, are more successful especially when dealing with students who are required to read for information as is the case at the tertiary level (University and Polytechnic) in Mexico.

1. - "Explication de Texte "

This is a commonly used technique in reading instruction in which a detailed reading of a text is followed by a detailed linguistic analysis. The approach, as employed originally in France, consists basically of four stages: (i) a consideration of the context (la situation du texte) (ii) the gist and structure (la composition du texte), (iii) the detailed analysis (etude analytique) and (iv) a conclusion.

Its successful and appropriate use in ESOL teaching seems to be associated with the teaching of English for literary purposes or where there is a strong literary bias to the English language programme. However, with correspondingly less success, the method is also applied to reading texts of a non-literary nature particularly with higher intermediate and advanced learners of English. It involves the teacher in going through a selected text word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence, explaining vocabulary and points of grammar which are either new or are expected (by the teacher) to cause the learner difficulty in comprehension. Thus, it involves taking a text apart through analytical scrutiny, dismantling its syntax, and unravelling its meaning in an effort to see as much as possible about what the writer has written, what he is saying, and how he says it.

2. - Our observations in a dozen countries including Mexico indicate that the method is widespread at the intermediate/advanced level of ESOL instruction, (especially with university and polytechnic undergraduates in the sciences and technology) and is associated with the notion of intensive reading comprehension for special purposes.

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The materials used are often collections of texts or excerpts from books or journals more or less related to areas of specialist interest of the students, such as, engineering, the physical sciences, medicine, etc. Such lessons are often labelled text appreciation or textual study, "translation" or, plainly, reading comprehension.

More often than not, it is left entirely to the teacher's discretion to decide what features of the text should be explained. This results in an indiscriminate "going through" the passage, after an initial reading aloud, or silent reading. The procedure usually takes up a whole period, which is convenient, and a multiplicity of linguistic points may be "covered" i. e. pointed out, explained and further illustrated, during the class hour. Unfortunately, the procedure leads to something of a virtuoso oral-explanatory performance on the part of the teacher, for which the student is required to use his ears far more than his eyes.

3. - The shortcomings of explication de texte in ESOL instruction are not hard to identify. They can be summarized under three headings: psychological, linguistic and pedagogic.

1. - Psychological:

a). - The method involves the minimal participation on the part of the learner.

This is a clear result of the technique being teacher-oriented.

b). - The method is based on no clear principles of teaching or learning.

As a method of literary criticism, it is justified by the ability of the interpreter to empathize with the writer, to interpret the writer's use of language for an aesthetic purpose from the standpoint of artistic judgement. This is hardly relevant where the texts are scientific in tone and subject matter and where the reading purpose is information-gathering as an auxiliary to vocational, academic or professional studies.

2. - Linguistic

The language points to be explicated are justified on the grounds that as part of a text, they are "contextualized". However.

a). - The selection of such points of grammar and usage is haphazard and arbitrary, governed by their sequential occurrence in the text, and by the limitations of the teacher's mastery of a description of English.

- b). - The repeated contextual explanation and practice of such points must come outside the passage in exercises. Thus, there is little justification in claiming that the text itself brings out, in any full sense, the linguistic usages to be acquired:
- c). - The points that are treated are generally NOT those that make the passage text, i. e. the features of cohesion. Commonly pointed out are special vocabulary, sentential patterns of some complexity, tense usages and sequences, or nominal and verbal groups within sentences.

We are not claiming that such points do not cause difficulty or do not require explication. However, discussion of them during an "explication de texte" kind of reading comprehension lesson often lacks orderliness and priority, and is cursory and, moreover, confusing to the student.

3. - Pedagogic:

- a). - The technique often seems to lead to an equation of reading with translation, reflected in the kinds of tests and examinations associated with the method. An example of such a test might be instructions to the candidate to translate a text taken at random from those covered in the class, together with an unseen text similar in style and theme to those previously studied.
- b). - The point already mentioned about the reading lesson becoming an exercise of aural comprehension is surely a confusion of language skills and pedagogic aims. Little actual reading comprehension seems to take place at all. Where the method is employed its very detailedness seems to lead to slow reading speed and poor comprehension in silent reading. The method itself hardly enables the student to develop reading ability when the time spent in class is occupied by the teacher talking. Actual reading is often relegated to homework, the rest of the text prepared, or exercises done, on what has been explicated. The unstructured nature of the lesson, and the lack of clear preparation of the material for the student to learn from, result in the student learning very little from what he has "read". There is hardly any indication by the teacher as to what the student is supposed to get out of the text, or to the student as to what he is supposed to learn.

4. - An alternative approach should suffer from as few of the short-comings discussed above as possible. It is to suggest such an alternative to explication de texte that we now wish to turn our attention.

We may start by examining critically the notion of 'teaching reading comprehension'.

"Comprehension" cannot, in the usual sense, be taught; it can only be exercised and tested. For most ESOL students, the skill of reading with comprehension has already been acquired, and is, furthermore, frequently practised in their own mother tongue. Thus, what we teach is not reading comprehension but the transfer of skills already possessed to material in a foreign or second language. The ability of the student to comprehend a foreign or second language depends upon (a) his having acquired a knowledge of many (if not most) of the rules governing the language system (i. e. its syntax), (b) his having built up a large enough store of vocabulary meanings and relationships (i. e. the semantics of the language), and (c) his having become accustomed to the ways in which the language's syntactic and semantic properties are exploited in the creation of meaning in actual communicative use. What we teach, then, is not the ability to read, nor really the ability to comprehend, but the strategies that will enable the transfer of skills already acquired in the mother tongue to interpret meaningfully the syntactic, semantic and rhetorical patterns of the L₂ *

Developing such a reading strategy has been described as basically a matter of developing in the reader the ability to make predictions as to meaning on the basis of syntactic, semantic and rhetorical clues picked up and accomodated during the reading process (Goodman, 1967). It is thus a synthesizing skill, not, as in explication de texte, an analytic skill.

It is, moreover, a discriminating synthesizing skill. The experienced reader (which presumably includes the students we are teaching) does not read with the kind of precision or close attention to detail which explication de texte and many courses in comprehension demand.

* Our experience indicates that this is an over-generalization. In some cases in S. E. Asia and in Central America, students' ability to read with comprehension in their mother tongue may be seriously limited. The development of that skill in English (their L₂) may, in such cases, actually have a beneficial effect on their use of their mother tongue. This observation would point to the serious need for courses in reading improvement in Spanish in Mexican educational institutions.

5. - We need now to consider what these syntactic, semantic and rhetorical clues might be. They have to do with features of textual cohesion, which until recently * have been neglected in the design of reading comprehension exercises. They may be conveniently considered under three headings: equivalence, connection and thematization.

1). - Equivalence (or co-referentiality)

Two kinds of equivalence or co-referentiality are important in the structure of text: (a) lexical cohesion and (b) syntactic cohesion.

a). - Lexical cohesion is an aspect of the broader problem of vocabulary **

Poor vocabulary is rightly often regarded as a major factor contributing to reading difficulty (Paulston and Bruder, 1976). Lexical cohesion is achieved by the repetition of a lexical item or of its synonym or hyponym.

EXAMPLE:

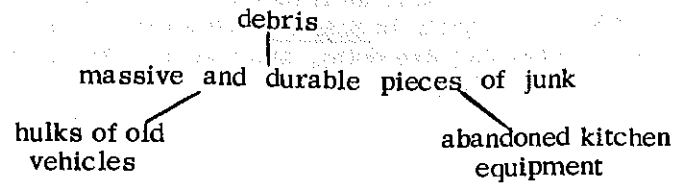
The dumping of massive and durable pieces of junk, like the hulks of old vehicles and abandoned kitchen equipment has become a nuisance. This debris is a menace to the farmer, destroys amenity and costs money... to clear up. This problem cannot be allowed to expand... Dumping of waste in this way is already illegal... Local authorities have established and advertised the existence of tips to which people... can bring bulky objects for disposal.

* In Mexico, they have been incorporated as part of the instruction and practice into a reading comprehension course for undergraduate students in the Facultad de Medicina Veterinaria y Zootecnia, see: R & D Unit Report No. 2, Mackay R. et. al. UNAM 1975.

** For a discussion of how vocabulary is handled in reading comprehension text books, see: R & D Unit Report No. 5, Alvarez G. UNAM 1976.

The Lexical relationships in this text can be identified as follows:

Hyponymic:



Synonymic:

- i) debris : waste
- ii) nuisance : menace : problem
- iii) massive and durable pieces of junk. : bulky objects for disposal.

It should be emphasized that such co-referential relationships are valid for these lexical items only within this text. For example, debris and waste, though having semantic features in common, are given equivalent values in communicative terms only as far as this text is concerned. Of course, dictionaries do make use of hyponyms and synonyms in defining the meaning of words. But more often than not the contextual use of a word establishes a particular reference in relationship to the other lexical items in the same text, which modifies or extends its meaning beyond that given in the dictionary.

b). - Syntactic cohesion means the system of anaphora (backward reference) and cataphora (forward reference) within text. These are grammatical devices employed to bind the sentences of a text into a unified whole. They include pronominal substitution, he, she, it, etc., demonstrative pronouns etc., the, this, that, one, so, such, etc., and the pro-verb substitution do.

EXAMPLE:

Ants seem to be able to carry food back to their nests with uncanny accuracy, as if they were following invisible roads. A report in Science shows that this is in fact just what they are doing, and that the "roads" are of their own making.

(Mountford 1970)

(Ants) their: they: their own

(following invisible roads): this : doing

2). - Connection

Connection can occur intra-sententially (within sentence units) or intersententially (across sentence boundaries). We shall be more concerned with the latter, as it is this feature of textual cohesion that relates to the communicative value of units of information in the discourse as a whole.

It is, therefore, not a grammatical feature as such, but a marker of rhetorical value, that is how sentences are being used by the writer.

EXAMPLE:

- 1). - The pollution by chemical waste of our seas is increasing daily.
- 2). - If pollution reaches a certain concentration, marine life will cease to exist.
- 3). - Therefore, its essential that legislation be passed banning the dumping of toxic chemicals in rivers, waterways, and in the open sea.

The semantic value of Therefore introducing sentence (3) is to mark the final sentence function (or act) as a logical conclusion or deduction based upon the information presented in sentences (1) or (2). It is this category of connective which provides the reader with clues as to how to interpret the development of the argument as opposed to the interpretation of the facts themselves. We are, thus, moving from comprehension to which the grammatical elements contribute most to interpretability, to comprehension in which the rhetorical value of markers of relationships within the discourse as a whole are of crucial importance.

In other words, we are moving from grammatical cohesion of text to what Allen and Widdowson (1973) call rhetorical coherence of discourse. Examples of inter-sentential connective relationships are as follows:

Rhetorical value or function

Enumeration:

Listing first, second;
Time sequence in the beginning, next;

Addition:

(AND)

Reinforcing moreover, furthermore;
Similarity similarly;

Logical sequence:

(SO)

Summarizing overall, thus;
Result / consequence consequently, as a result;
Deductive / inductive therefore, hence

Explication

(OR)

in other words, that is;

Illustration

for example;

Contrast:

(BUT)

Substitution in other words
Replacement alternatively;
Antithetic conversely;
Concessive however, nevertheless;

It should be noted that coordinators (in capitals above) are frequently used as "primitive" inter-sentential links for many of the above relationships.

3). - Thematization

The third aspect of cohesion is thematization. This concerns the organization of word order in sentences as a consequence of the order of sentences and the deployment of information in the text as a whole. The choice of first words or sentence subject is usually, after the first sentence, governed by what has been said previously. Thus, in continuous text, or discourse, we frequently have a non-normal word order, non-normal from the point of view of sentences studied in isolation. For example, adverbial and prepositional groups are frequently placed first in a sentence; subordinate clauses often precede main clauses; the use of passive voice; these are all matters of thematizing particular elements for emphasis, or for getting the important information, or the information that best relates to what has been said, in the most important position at the beginning of the sentence.

To use Halliday's terms (Halliday 1967-68) the theme of a sentence or clause is chosen from information which is already given, or recoverable or interpretable by reference to the previous discourse. New information, that which receives tonic stress in an information unit, falls usually within the post designated rheme. Thus, what is new in one sentence usually becomes given in the next; what is part of the rheme in one sentence can become thematic in the next. The theme is what I am talking about which relates to what I have already said, and the rheme is what I am saying about what I am talking about and which includes some new information. Here is an example:

EXAMPLE:

- 1). - Last week I paid a visit to a friend of mine who lives in Mexico City.
- 2). - My friend is employed by UNAM in the Foreign Language Center, an extension centre of the University.
- 3). - Her speciality is Applied Linguistics, and she teaches English to students from various faculties.
- 4). - They require special English language tuition to help them read textbooks in their subjects more efficiently.

The distribution of theme / rheme and given / new is as follows:

	Sentence 1	2	3	4
THEME (given)	last week...	my friend...	her subject...	they
NEW (rheme)		friend of mine...	UNAM...	students from various faculties

As another simple example notice how the following three sentences form a text.

EXAMPLE:

- 1). - The sun's rays heat the soil, rocks and water.
- 2). - The sun's rays do this all day long.
- 3). - The soil, rocks and water heat the layer of air next to them.

All day long the sun's rays heat the soil, rocks and water. As they are heated, the layer of air next to them is heated too.

The temporal and durational expressions are thematized. The passive is used in preference to the active. Such an ordering of linguistic elements is essentially unpredictable from the individual sentences. The eventual order, too, is dependent on what has been said previously. The learner then, in reading a text, has to cope all the time with word order in sentences and the thematization of linguistic elements that he may never have been taught to expect from the many hours of grammar instruction he has received.

6. - Having made the claim that equivalence, connection and thematization are three of the principal areas of knowledge of the linguistic functioning of elements in text that the ESOL student should possess in order to be able to read efficiently, we must now suggest pedagogic procedures or techniques by means of which this knowledge may be taught to the learner and practised by him.

It is essential at this point to distinguish between exercising the student's comprehension and testing it. All too often advanced reading materials provide little practice in exercising comprehension skills.

Instead they merely test whether or not comprehension has taken place. Materials which purport to exercise reading comprehension should be learner-oriented, that is they should be based upon those aspects of the language system and of rhetoric which the learner requires to interpret written discourse effectively.

Most comprehension questions, including true/false statements, yes/no questions and wh questions are designed to elicit from the learner information contained in the text. Comprehension exercises, on the other hand, should be the means of instructing the student in how the text, by means of equivalence, connection and thematization, functions as a linguistic entity.

In other words they should teach the student how to understand the text.

The basic difference between comprehension questions and comprehension exercises is, therefore, that the questions assume in the learner an operational knowledge of how language is used to communicate and so test whether understanding has taken place or not in the text in question.

Exercises, on the other hand, focus the learner's attention upon the linguistic features which make the text in question and an act of communication, and so exercise his ability to cope with such features wherever they might be found and in whatever form. This is not to deny the usefulness of comprehension questions. Carefully constructed, they can serve to elicit an understanding of those features of text we have been discussing. But we do need to make a distinction between testing and teaching, and to teach and exercise before we test and assess.

7. - What form then, can these comprehension exercises take? Although explication de texte is a way of exposing the operational knowledge required to understand a given text, it is entirely unselective. Virtually everything is explained by the teacher in a linear fashion. Neither does it exercise the learner's skill; it displays, rather, the teacher's superior knowledge.

A more disciplined and, we believe, a more pedagogically valid approach, is to work over particular categories of operational knowledge. That is, to examine separately the occurrences of lexical cohesion, syntactic cohesion, connection and thematization so that their contribution to the text as a whole is kept in the foreground. In addition, it must be remembered that in a lesson on reading comprehension, reading must be allowed to happen i. e. that a

considerable amount of time should be spent by the students reading. The reading materials should be constructed in such a way that reading is designed to happen, but in a controlled manner, in which the student is forced back into the text by the exercises themselves.

The exercises which we describe take into account and allow for the fact that in Mexico most teachers of reading have little time to produce their own courses, and even if they could and did, they would frequently be restricted by the scarcity of paper or the lack of duplicating facilities. The following exercises can all be performed orally in class. They do, however, require prior preparation by the teacher.

8. - Exercising comprehension of equivalence.

1). - Lexical Cohesion.

Student's attention to lexically equivalent expressions in text can be exercised by means of rephrasing exercises in which the student is required to substitute another expression from the text for one given in a sentence drawn from the text, or a reworded version of one. The aim is to draw student's attention to such overt markers of equivalence as i. e., that is to say, or... in other words etc. as well as implicit synonymic or hyponymic expressions. A second technique is to devise exercises using the following formats:

- i) Instead of saying X the writer says Y
- ii) In addition to saying x the writer uses the expression y
- iii) As an instance of x the writer talks about y where both x and y can be found in the text.

Thirdly; students may be required to identify sets of lexical items under some superordinate term e. g. debris in the example discussed above. This kind of treatment of vocabulary items which are judged to be difficult or new avoids the danger of the student selecting the wrong word from the dictionary where there are alternatives. It concentrates on getting him to read complete sentences and study expressions in context. Most important, it leads him to see how lexical patterns and relationships can be created in text and how frequently difficult or unknown expressions may in fact be explained within the text.

8. 1. - Syntactic Cohesion

Until recently anaphoric and cataphoric devices have not been given the attention they deserve in reading comprehension materials. The reason for this is, possibly, that their meaning appears so obvious.

In many cases, to the native speaker; the referents of such items are readily apparent. To the ESOL student, however, they may not be so clear. Failure to select the correct referent may lead to serious misinterpretations of what the writer has said. Moreover, such items are only easily understood when the referent is a close antecedent, an obvious noun or noun phrase. But sometimes anaphoric items refer to clauses, sentences or larger stretches of text. They may be marked by summary words: this type, that fact, these cases, that process, those factors, etc.

To exercise an understanding of such devices we may employ a multiple choice format:

In line x, y refers to (i) a, (ii) b, (iii) c, where a, b and c are grammatically (but not semantically) possible referents. Alternatively, the student may be asked to identify the referent for himself:

What does y refer to in line x ?

In addition to demonstratives and pronominals the definite article and implied comparatives can be exercised in this way.

8. 2. - Exercising comprehension of connections

The problem of exercising connection is that, for the most part, the possible relationships between sentences in text have to be taught first. This will involve students becoming familiar with a metalanguage whose terms are communicational rather than grammatical. We have already discussed the kinds of relationship we can observe within and between sentences and units of discourse. A possible approach to the problem, where an extended course allows it, is to devise a graded series of exercises as follows:

- a). - These first exercises would involve inserting or substituting expressions in text. We may start off with one kind of relationship, e. g. consequence, and then introduce contrast then addition, illustration, explication and so on, gradually building up an understanding of different kinds of relationships. This will involve rewriting exercises in order to make relationships clear, or clearer.

e. g. (1) Some transport companies have introduced ways of controlling the maximum speed of their vehicles on the road.

- (2) _____ governors may be fitted to the engines.
 (3) _____ the trucks travel at or below a given speed.
 (4) _____ legal speed limits are adhered to.

Instruction:

Insert the following connectives in the sentences indicated:

For instance 2
 As a consequence 3
 In this way..... 4

b). - When a sufficient number of relationships have been explored, and the various surface forms available to express them noted, students may be asked to select from a list of expressions x, y or z the most appropriate to connect sentences or parts of a text. In other words, the relationship has to be perceived, and a choice made as to how it can be made explicit.

e. g. All animals feed on other animals or plants.

_____ plants make their own food by means of photosynthesis.

Insert the most appropriate connector in the space above:

- i) in addition
- ii) on the contrary
- iii) therefore
- iv) for example

c). - A more difficult exercise is to re-order a jumbled set of sentences according to explicit markers of logical sequence. This exercise also calls upon the student perceiving equivalences, lexical or syntactic. A variation of this exercise is to present a paragraph structure indicated by connections:

e. g.

- A. - General statement (truth, generalization)
- B. - For example
- C. - As a result
- D. - However
- E. - Nevertheless.

And then from a jumbled series of sentences, the student is asked to "compose" the paragraph: This is a very difficult exercise to construct and the teacher should 'work out' all exercises he writes, by himself, to make sure they are operational:

- i) Many complaints are received about the noise heavy vehicles make in towns and cities.
- ii) The public's duty is to continue to remark upon occurrences of pollution in the hope they may be remedied in time.

- iii) The public objects to pollution which reduces the quality of life.
- iv) Not all complaints are given the attention they deserve.
- v) Restrictive legislation may be introduced.

8. 3. - Exercising comprehension of thematization

This aspect of text structure involves exercising the student's ability to predict what comes next on the basis of given and new information in the text. Thus, a modified cloze procedure is an appropriate technique. Thematic elements may be omitted and the student has to deduce what they should be on the basis of what has previously been said. What the writer chooses as thematic from one sentence to the next depends on the nature of the information being imparted and the kind of argument being expounded.

Frequently, the thematic structure is closely inter-related with lexical equivalents and anaphoric devices. In addition, blank filling cloze procedure can be used as a summary on comprehension, i. e. as a testing device.

e. g. Interactions between Species

The relationships between living things in an organism range from conditions of complete cooperation and dependency to those of total antagonism and competition. Between these... is a more or less neutral condition. In this... the effect of one organism on another may be indirect. These... effects may not be readily apparent. Nevertheless, each... is part of the environment of all other living things and has some effect on it.

Instructions to student:

Select the most appropriate words for the spaces in the above paragraph, so that the sentences and the entire paragraph make complete sense.

9. - What we have tried to suggest is a principled pedagogic alternative to the tedious explication of material chosen for reading comprehension. Our alternative requires a good deal of preparation of exercises which are designed to exercise the skill of reading comprehension. We have concentrated on those aspects of cohesion and coherence that may be observed to operate in any text. We have not considered the various types of comprehension questions that traditionally have sought to test comprehension. A more complete set of proposals would certainly include the kinds of questions we might set and their pedagogic function.

It would also include how the answers to such questions can be justified linguistically from evidence in the text. * However, we feel that if, as a first step, comprehension materials take into account the areas of linguistic knowledge we have identified and discussed, and the procedure we have suggested, the lesson on reading comprehension will become more relevant to the needs of the intermediate/advanced students who need to read for information. The onus is thrown back on the teacher to design efficient materials to accompany texts rather than simply explain them in an ad hoc fashion. The onus is also thrown back on the learner to develop from such materials a sound working strategy of comprehension that is applicable to any text he might wish or be required to read, rather than merely to master specific aspects of set texts.

* For such an approach, see the excellent introduction to Read and Think by John Munby, published by Longman group limited, London, 1968.

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