

The Functional view of language and Teaching reading skills in TCFL: Some thoughts and approaches

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Why change the level 3 Chinese reading classes at SEAS?

- Traditional way to teach Chinese reading focuses on grammar and vocabulary, NOT reading skills
- A drop-off in attendance of higher level students made me realise something was wrong with the reading classes
- I realised the other three language skills classes at SEAS (speaking, listening and writing) focussed on developing skills
- I began to think about what should be the aim of teaching reading in the TCFL class.
- What specific skills should we aim to develop in students?
- How can we do this in the reading classroom?

The different views of language

The structural view of language

Behaviouristic theories assuming language learning as a set of lexical and grammar-oriented activities.

The structural view of language is that language is a system of structurally related elements for the transmission of meaning. These elements are usually described as

- phonological units (phonemes)
- grammatical units (phrases, clauses, sentences)
- grammatical operations (adding, shifting, joining or transforming elements)
- lexical items (function words and structure words)

The target of language learning, in the structural view, is **the mastery of elements of this system.**

The different views of language

The communicative, or functional view of language

The communicative, or functional view of language is the view that language is a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning.

The semantic and communicative dimensions of language are more emphasized than the grammatical characteristics, although these are also included.

The target of language learning is to learn to express communication functions and categories of meaning

The functions of language

1. Language as representation: (we use language to represent the world and the things in it, such as people, the action of smiling...)
2. Language as social (inter) action: we use language to do things with others (Greeting, instruction, arguing...)

We can identify three 'meta-functions' of language, which are reflected in the way it is structured.

(Halliday, 1994)

Language is ...

- Representational: (a resource for) describing the world
- Interpersonal: (a resource for) acting and interacting
- Textual: a systematic way (grammar) of bringing this together as coherent communication

The *functional* view of language teaching

- The *functional* view of language teaching, derived from communicative approach, contemplates the process as a set of specific contents and objectives designed for the acquisition of a given set of pragmatic skills. It's more about social norm than linguistic norm (RÉZEAU, 2001, p. 135), which means the emphasis is not specifically laid on language itself but rather on what the latter is learned or intended for.

What do we teach in the language classroom?

The four macro skills of communication are listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is true for essentially any language.

- **Four Language skills**
 - Listening
 - Speaking
 - **Reading**
 - Writing

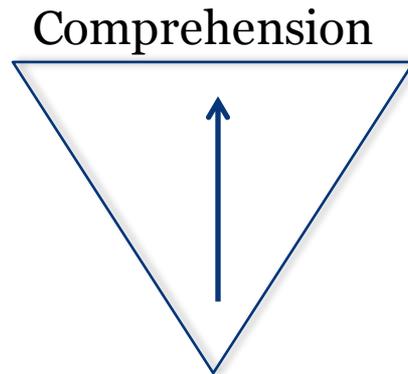
Definition of Reading

- Reading is a fluent process of readers combining information from a text and their own background knowledge to build meaning (McGraw.Hill < 2003: pp 68)
- Reading is the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately.(William Grabe and Fredricka L. Stoller , (2002)Teaching and Researching: Reading)

The goal of reading is comprehension.

Reading processes

- 1 Bottom-up models Figure 2 P70

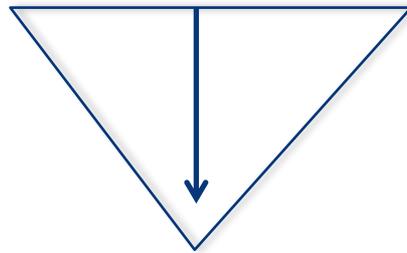


- Lower-level reading processes: Students start with the fundamental basics of letter and sound recognition, --morpheme recognition – word recognition – grammatical structures, sentences, longer texts.
- **Example:** phonics approach: to break words down to individual sounds; intensive reading
- Pedagogy: a graded reader approach, all reading materials are carefully reviewed so that students are not exposed to vocabulary that is either too difficult or contains sounds that they have not been introduced to.

Reading processes

- **2 Top-down models** Figure 3 P71

Reading begins with reader background knowledge

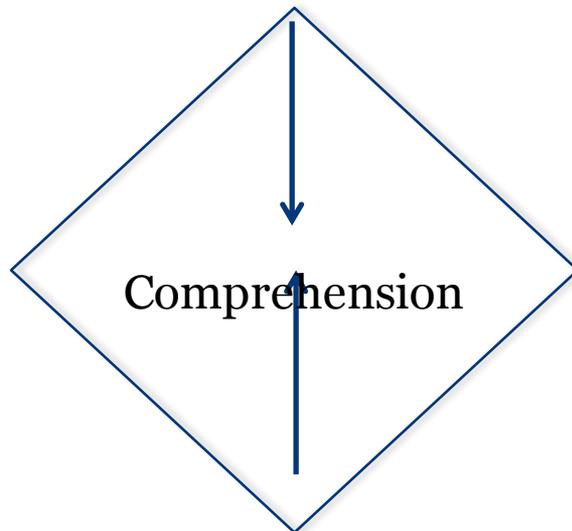


- The reader uses background knowledge, makes predictions, and searches the text to confirm or reject the predictions that are made
- **Example:** a meaning-based approach or a whole language approach. 1) literature based; 2) student-centred; 3) reading and writing are integrated; 4) constructing meaning
- Extensive reading

Reading processes

- **3 Interactive models** Figure 4 P72

Reader background knowledge



Individual letters and sounds

- We need to provide learners with shorter passages to teach specific reading skills and strategies explicitly. We also need to encourage learners to read longer texts without an emphasis on testing their skills.

Reading for Different Purposes

Purposes for reading

1. Reading to search for simple information
2. Reading to skim quickly
3. Reading to learn from texts
4. Reading to integrate information
5. Reading to write
6. Reading to critique texts
7. Reading for general comprehension

William Grabe and Fredricka L. Stoller , (2002)

Different Types of Reading

There are **three** styles of reading which we use in different situations:

1 Scanning (浏览) : for a specific focus

- Reading to search for simple information

2 Skimming (略读) : for getting the gist of something

The technique you use when you're going through a newspaper or magazine: you read quickly to get the main points, and skip over the detail. It's useful to skim:

- to preview a passage before you read it in detail
- to refresh your understanding of a passage after you've read it in detail.

3 Detailed reading (精读) : for extracting information accurately

For example, reading to learn, where you read every word, and work to learn from the text.

In this careful reading, you may find it helpful to skim first, to get a general idea, but then go back to read in detail. Use a dictionary to make sure you understand all the words used.

Some basic concepts

- **Strategies** are commonly defined as processes that are *consciously* controlled by readers to solve problems (Grabe, 2009: 221).
- **Skills** refers to informational processing techniques that are automatic, they are applied to a text *unconsciously* (Grabe, 2009: 221).
- **Reading strategies** refer to any interactive process that has the goal of obtaining meaning from connected text, and reading skills operate within the context of such reading strategies (Hudson, 2007:107)

Some basic concepts

- **Cognition** refers to purposeful action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding.
- **Metacognition** refers to the knowledge (metacognitive awareness, i.e. what we know) and control (knowing when, where and how to use strategies, that is what we can do) that we have over our cognitive process (Grabe, 2009: 222).
- **Cognitive strategies** refer to strategies that a reader is trained to use, such as guessing from context, noting discourse organisation, recognising a transition phrase, skipping a word, identifying a known word part, forming a question about an author, or identifying a main idea (Grabe, 2009: 223).
- **Metacognitive strategies** refer to strategies that require an explicit awareness of reading itself and that most strongly support the goals of reading, for example, learning to monitor comprehension or repairs to miscomprehension (Grabe, 2009: 223).

Good L2 Readers

Grabe (2009) looked at the characteristics of good readers from the following perspectives:

- **Before reading:**

Good readers **make a reading plan**, they know why they are reading, and they often preview the text, activate prior knowledge in appropriate ways, and form predictions about the text.

Good L2 readers

- **While reading:**

1. They read selectively according to **goals**.
2. They read carefully in **key** places.
3. They **reread** as appropriate.
4. They **monitor** their reading continuously and they are aware of whether or not they are comprehending the text.
5. They **identify** the important information.
6. They try to **fill in gaps** in the text through inferences and prior knowledge.
7. They **make guesses** about unknown words
8. They **use text-structure information** to guide understanding.
9. They **make inferences** about the author, key information, and main ideas.
10. They attempt to **integrate ideas** from different parts of the text.
11. They **build interpretations** of the text as they read.
12. They build main-idea **summaries**.
13. They **evaluate** the text and the author and, as a result, form feelings about the text.
14. They attempt to **resolve the difficulties**.

Good L2 readers

- **After reading:**

Good readers **check their understanding, form mental summaries of main ideas, resolve difficulties, reflect on the information in the text, evaluate the information from the text in various ways, and integrate the text information with long-term memory** (prior knowledge).

Reading Strategies Development

Some tasks to develop Reading strategies

Urquhart and Weir (1998:184-223)

1 Language and processing ability

For developing automaticity:

- Basic recognition exercise to improve speed and accuracy of perception
- Develop word recognition through oral and written practice
- Increase syntactic knowledge automaticity in recognition of syntactic patterns
- Develop recognition of conjunctions and cohesive ties

Reading Strategies Development

2 Cognitive ability

Tasks to develop cognitive ability:

- Separate explicit main ideas from supporting detail
- Get an idea of the text as a whole
- Understand the development of arguments and logical organisation
- Read for implicit ideas e.g. writers' attitude, fact and fiction, irony

Reading Strategies Development

3 Metacognitive ability

Tasks:

- Goal setting activities—learners identify tasks and what they are going to do
- Assessment activities – learners determine what is needed, what they have to work with and what they have done
- Planning activities – learners decide how to use their knowledge of the topic and their language knowledge
- **Teachers can model strategies, practise them, scaffold them and let students use them.

Development of Reading Skills

1 A tip for speeding up your active reading

SQ3R technique. SQ3R stands for **Survey, Question, Read, Recall** and **Review**.

1) Survey

- Gather the information you need to focus on the work and set goals:
- Read the title to help prepare for the subject
- Read the introduction or summary to see what the author thinks are the key points
- Notice the boldface headings to see what the structure is
- Notice any maps, graphs or charts. They are there for a purpose
- Notice the reading aids, italics, bold face, questions at the end of the chapter. They are all there to help you understand and remember.

2) Question

- Help your mind to engage and concentrate. Your mind is engaged in learning when it is actively looking for answers to questions.
- Try turning the boldface headings into questions you think the section should answer.

Development of Reading Skills

3) Read

- Read the first section with your questions in mind. Look for the answers, and make up new questions if necessary.

4) Recall

- After each section, stop and think back to your questions. See if you can answer them from memory. If not, take a look back at the text. Do this as often as you need to.

5) Review

- Once you have finished the whole text, go back over all the questions from all the headings. See if you can still answer them. If not, look back and refresh your memory.

Development of Reading Skills

2 Spotting authors' navigation aids

Learn to recognise sequence signals, for example:

- "根据美国法律..." or "根据美国宪法.." leads you to expect several points to follow.
- The first sentence of a paragraph will often indicate a sequence: "美国大选虽然每隔4年来一次，但实际上是连场戏。" followed by "这次选举刚唱罢，另一轮竞选又登场。..." and so on, until "因此，有意入主白宫的人，很早就开始积累政治资本，筹措竞选资金，甚至拟定政纲，进行政治试探，与竞选相关的各种机构、利益集团、新闻传媒等拓展关系。"
- General points are often illustrated by particular examples, for example:
 - **General:** 美国大选虽然每隔4年来一次，但实际上是连场戏。
 - **Particular:** 1992年，克林顿刚刚当选总统就想着如何连任。

Development of Reading Skills

3 Reading critically

➤ Facts v. Interpretation

- To **non**-critical readers, texts provide facts. Readers gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text.
- To the **critical** reader, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "take" on the subject matter. Critical readers thus recognize not only *what* a text says, but also *how* that text portrays the subject matter. They recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author.
- A non-critical reader might read a history book to learn the facts of the situation or to discover an accepted interpretation of those events. A critical reader might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to particular understanding.

Reading critically

➤ **What a Text Says, Does, and Means: Reaching for an Interpretation**

- Non-critical reading is satisfied with recognizing what a text *says* and restating the key remarks.
- Critical reading goes two steps further. Having recognized what a text **says** , it reflects on what the text **does** by making such remarks.
 - Is it offering examples?
 - Arguing?
 - Appealing for sympathy?
 - Making a contrast to clarify a point?
 - Finally, critical readers then infer what the text, as a whole, **means** , based on the earlier analysis.

Reading critically

- **Three steps or modes of analysis** which are reflected in three types of reading and discussion:
 - What a text **says** – **restatement**
 - What a text **does** – **description**
 - What a text **means** – **interpretation** .

You can distinguish each mode of analysis by the subject matter of the discussion:

- What a text says – restatement – talks about the same topic as the original text
- What a text does – description – discusses aspects of the discussion itself
- What a text means – interpretation – analyzes the text and asserts a meaning for the text as a whole

Reading critically

Goals of Critical Reading

It is important to read critically. Critical reading requires you to **evaluate the arguments** in the text. You need to **distinguish fact from opinion**, and **look at arguments given for and against the various claims**. This also means being **aware of your opinions and assumptions** (positive and negative) of the text you are reading so you can evaluate it honestly. It is also important to be aware of the writer's background, assumptions and purposes. All writers have a reason for writing and will emphasise details which support their reason for writing and ignore details that do not.

Reading critically

- Textbooks on critical reading commonly ask students to accomplish certain goals:
 - to recognize an author's purpose
 - to understand tone and persuasive elements
 - to recognize bias
- Notice that none of these goals actually refers to something on the page. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text:
 - recognizing purpose involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language
 - recognizing tone and persuasive elements involves classifying the nature of language choices
 - recognizing bias involves classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content and language
- Critical reading is not simply close and careful reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze evidence upon the page

Reading critically

Analysis and Inference: The Tools of Critical Reading

- What to look for (**analysis**) — involves recognizing those aspects of a discussion that control the meaning.
- How to think about what you find (**inference**) — involves the processes of inference, the interpretation of data from within the text.

Recall that critical reading assumes that each author offers a portrayal of the topic. Critical reading thus relies on an examination of those choices that any and all authors must make when framing a presentation: choices of content, language, and structure. Readers examine each of the three areas of choice, and consider their effect on the meaning.

Reading critically

The following questions may be usefully asked about any text you are reading:

➤ **A Purpose and background**

- Why are you reading this text? What is your purpose?
- What type of text is it: research report, essay, textbook, book review?
- What do you know about the subject of the text?
- What else has been written on the subject of the text?
- What controversies exist in this area? How does this text fit in?

Reading critically

➤ **The author and the text**

- Who is the author? What do you know about the author? What authority does the author have?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the author's purpose? Why has the text been written?
- What is the source of the text? Is it reputable? Who is the publisher? What reputation do they have?
- What is the date of publication? Is it appropriate to the argument?
- What is the writer's attitude towards the topic?
- What conclusions are drawn?

Reading critically

➤ Evidence used

- Is there a clear distinction between fact and opinion?
- Is evidence used to support arguments? How good is the evidence? Are all the points supported?
- In an experimental study, was the sample size adequate and are the statistics reliable?
- Are there any unsupported points? Are they well-known facts or generally accepted opinions?
- How does the writer use other texts and other people's ideas?
- Are the writer's conclusions reasonable in the light of the evidence presented?
- How do the conclusions relate to other similar research?

Reading critically

➤ Assumptions made

- What assumptions has the writer made? Are they valid?
- What beliefs or values does the writer hold? Are they explicit?
- Look at the language that is used, e.g. active/passive verbs, nominalisations, pronouns, ergative verbs, articles, etc.
- Look for emphatic words such as it is obvious, definitely and of course.
- Look for hedges: possible, might, perhaps.
- Look for emotional arguments, use of maximisers: completely, absolutely, entirely, or minimisers: only, just, hardly, simply, merely.
- How else could the text have been written?

Thanks