ON ADVANCED READING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR ACADEMIC EXCHANGES

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is part of a variety of activities that are inherent in human life. According to Ellison (1966), one reads from street signs (smaller things) to encyclopaedias (bigger ones). In line with this statement, reading is a process. It makes use of one's sight and mind. However blocks and difficulties do prevent sight and mind to make reading possible. That is why readers' training is paramount.

In the academic context where participants into the reading activity are students and lecturers, reading is at the core of any fruitful study and / or exchange. In other terms, participants into academic activities are mandated to read both quantitatively and qualitatively for both survival and communication. They have to read a good number and variety of materials (be they lecture notes, books and so on) and share the findings with the rest of the community.

Difficulties and more often failures due to either lack or unskilful reading are obviously noticeable in academic exchanges. Such difficulties are sometimes vindicated by one's incapacity to read skilfully a thick handout, answer test questions according to the examiners' expectation, find by oneself research topics, write good papers or dissertations in the delay, react competently to such writings, give one's viewpoint on a given subject and so on. Besides, growing is the tendency that nowadays students do not go far more beyond lecture notes to verify their reliability, find questions and complete their

knowledge on the subject under study. As a result, the quality and the whole prestige of their training are endangered.

Albeit such problems can be triggered by some other factors, we here assume that participants into academic exchanges are not most probably well prepared to penetrate books and other various sources despite their quality and quantity.

This paper is therefore based on the assumption that practitioners of such quantitatively reading-based activities must be trained in reading. That is, they need not waste time to read without special strategies. They must develop reading skills which facilitate, as shown above, competent and qualitative reading. If it is agreed that skills can be possessed, they however, should be sharpened. Accordingly, academic reading practitioners are expected to sharpen and apply both skills and techniques of quick and efficient reading. Such training- based sharpening and application encompass language script recognition and meaning deduction, understanding meaning, interpretation and main ideas identification, and so on. Depending on the quality and quantity of the materials being read, skimming and scanning are also useful for rapid reading. Similarly, prediction, preview and anticipation are necessary for finding relevant piece of information.

In line with what precedes, our modest contribution is but a suggestion of emphasis on developing advanced reading skills and the subsequent increase of the reading teaching load in the training of participants into academic exchanges. We also suppose that extension of such training in different levels of their studies can help empower them read rather easily.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is a documentary research. It deals with reading skills and techniques as hypothesized by Munby (1978), Ellison (1966) and (1968), Grellet (1981) and Bright and McGregor (1970) for skilful extraction, understanding and treatment of information from a text. They either list some reading skills explained in this paper or suggest some techniques and sometimes provide reading practice exercises.

With regards to data analysis, we explain how reading skills can actually contribute to successful academic exchanges.
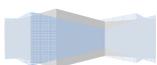
2. ACADEMIC EXCHANGES

As it will be ascertained in this paper, communication and exchange will be used interchangeably. In Richards, Platt and Weber's (1985) words, communication is an exchange of ideas, information and so on between two or more persons. In other terms, it is interaction between participants in a discourse in a given context.

As we said earlier, participants into such communication in the academic context are students and their lecturers. They are always faced with a variety of activities compelling them to interact freely among themselves. They are required to understand what others wish to share (Rivers and Temperly, 1978).

The nature of activities that submerge academic participants into such communication would be lectures, assignments, tests, dissertations, talks or conferences. In all these cases, exchange is sinequanon and reading is the triggering element. The latter allows one to find the required piece of information or knowledge he/she will use to communicate depending on the case. Lack of reading at this level can be considered as an obvious handicap for both knowledge and communication.

According to Bright and McGregor (1970), it is actually hard to imagine any skilled work that does not require of its performer the ability to read for the crucial reason that professional competence depends on it. Accordingly, the members of our worldwide academic community are required, like all normal participants into a discourse (Littlewood: 1981), to have that general skill in order to cope with eventual situations. As communication implies among other factors sharing ideas between participants into a discourse, and since our academic community members must do it not without reading, we here support that they also entertain the three relationships put forward by Biselela (2010: 44),

> The reading activity involves three parties: the writer, the text and the reader. The writer who is indeed the speaker, sender or encoder, encodes the message and sends it to the reader, who is the listener, the addressee or decoder. This message is transmitted through the medium of the text. It is the reader's task to extract it from the written materials.

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If it is agreed – as we said earlier – that all academic activities are reading – based, we now would like to relate them to Biselela's three parties of the reading activity. Any (college or University) student attending given courses is given a list of books known as bibliographical notice in order to read. Such a list of books is provided as a source reference of lectures and therefore allows the student to broaden his /her knowledge on the subjects under study. Besides, it is a tangible proof that the lecturer did also read those sources beforehand.

In addition, reading lecture notes, books and any other relevant sources enhances the student's chance to undertake any subsequent examination successfully and with little stress. During that examination, questions should be carefully read, and answers framed in the light of the sources read. Likewise, it is hard to think of any dissertation written or marked with no reading. In the former case, one reads to select relevant data and in the latter, to find ideas and arguments necessary to back up his/her thesis. In documentary and ethnographical research, reliability of sources, arguments and even answers provided during the viva largely depend on the quantity and quality of the student's reading. It is also seldom imaginable that the supervisor and /or any examiner play well their roles without reading .They have to check whether or not sources and arguments are reliable, and if the dissertation really belongs to the student (Mulamba and Cinza 2008 : 126).

Finally, Biselela's three parties of the reading activity are some how equated with Mulamba's (2001:15) three interlocutors whose collaboration is required in the genesis of a scientific article, viz the writer, the reader and the editor.

Obviously, the join impulse in this academic conversation is provided by reading: the writer for finding a good text, the reader for finding knowledge and reacting to the text, finally the editor for deciding on whether the paper is publishable.

From this analysis, I can state with Grellet (1981:8) that "there are few cases in real life when we do not talk or write about what we have read and when we do not relate what we have read to something we might have read ". That is, apart form survival in our context, one should share what one read with other members of the academic community.

In a nutshell, no efficacious communication is possible in the academic context without reading. But since reading is a multidimensional activity and since complexity is brought in by the quality and the quantity of the literature, readers are required to develop skills and apply strategies for quick and efficient reading.

3. ADVANCED READING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

3.1. READING AND READING PURPOSES.

According to Richards and his co-authors (1985), reading is the perception of a written text in order to understand its contents. Two major mental operations are crucial in this definition: perception and understanding. The former aims at recognizing words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and/or the whole text; whereas the latter focuses on comprehension of the meaning conveyed.

Because the reader must use his/ her sight and/or mind in such a process, a great many difficulties or blocks can be encountered. They can be syntactic, semantic, lexical or contextual handicaps. Nevertheless, understanding or comprehension can help the reader to perceive spontaneously and immediately all elements. In this particular perspective, we construe that reading is but comprehension or understanding of written materials that have been perceived. Put shortly, reading is understood here as understanding what has been perceived.

In line with the aim of this paper, to equip the reader with practical means to overcome reading obstacles, this definition of reading should still be modified. It has to be enriched by the meaning of understanding a written text for it to apply fully. Richards and his co-authors cited above define understanding a written text as the extraction of the required information from that text as efficiently as possible. Now understanding the meaning of a written text and extracting specific information from it can be equated with reading.

As ascertained, the responsibility for understanding the written materials pertains to the reader. This matches Finochiaro and Banomo's (1973: 119) point of view according to which reading is bringing meaning to and getting meaning from printed or written materials. Accordingly, the reader has to know the language in which the text is

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written and recognize its scripts. That linguistic knowledge will involve productively the reader in bringing meaning to words; phrases, sentences or passages and get it from them.

Undoubtedly, reading is a very complex activity that demands of its performer much care and knowledge, skills and strategies for one to do it successfully. But before focussing on such mechanisms that can promote quick and efficient reading, I would like to say a word on reading purposes. This topic has been dealt with by many applied linguists. Among them, I can mention Smith, Franes (all cited by Biselela 2010) and Rivers and Temperly (1978).

Put apart the lexical differences used by each one of them the summary of all the reading purposes has been made clearer by Biselela (2010: 44) as follows:

> When I analyse all these purposes I notice that they are but emanations of only one major purpose viz understanding or getting information. In fact, it is unlikely for one to solve problems, enjoy reading, carry out tasks or find out directions…if one does not first understand what one reads.

From this quote, it follows that the major purpose of reading is understanding or getting information from the text, information with which the reader is then equipped to survive or correspond. Thus, our assumption that reading is but utilitarian is here matched inasmuch as our academic community members do read for information they would like to share among themselves as indicated earlier (2).

However such a target is not easily achievable because readability factors should be overcome by the reader. Among other factors, I can cite:

- The length of sentences in a passage

- The number of new or difficult words in it

- And the grammatical complexity of the language used.

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These readability factors match Biselela's conviction about blocks or handicaps (whatever their nature) that are inherent to the reading activity. To solve this crucial problem, Rivers and Temperly (1978: 189) write,

> Some students may wish to learn merely to extract certain kinds of information from English texts (scientific, historical, political, philosophic, economic, sociological). They wish only to decipher, to break the code sufficiently for their purposes. Courses of this type appeal particularly to students in the senior year of high school and they fulfil the needs of some undergraduate and graduate students. Such courses are also useful to adult learners who wish to pursue a particular subject beyond the limits set by their own language.

In the light of the quote, reading can be equated to skilfully extracting information or meaning from written materials despite many handicaps that impede comprehension. However, solving such a sensitive problem is actually confined to training and helping readers develop reading skills, apply techniques in order to overcome reading difficulties, achieve readability and attain reading autonomy.

3.2. READING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

By reading skill is meant the ability that should be developed or sharpened in order to extract quickly and efficiently meaning or information from a text.

3.2.1. RECOGNITION

Reading is obviously impeded if the reader is unable to recognize the script of the language he / she reads in and all the other indicators used in the discourse. The lack of such a skill seldom allows one to perceive all the units of meaning consisting of sequences and actions related to a particular situation.

3.2.2. DEDUCTION

This skill encompasses inferences of meaning that one should make while reading. It also allows one to cope with any use of unfamiliar lexical terms. Thus, the appropriated technique is sensitizing (Grellet 1981). It is useful for meaning inference through both context and word formation. This view is shared by Bright and McGregor (1970: 56) when they say that meaning inferences are applied from both contextual and internal clues without reference to a dictionary.

3.2.3. UNDERSTANDING

It is both a reading skill and the ultimate reading purpose. It is supposed to be at the core of all other reading skills. Not merely it is paramount but also sinequanon inasmuch as it is achieved through other skills, and if put otherwise, reading is likely to fail, discouraging therefore the reader (Grellet 1981). In other terms, the reader has to grasp the meaning of both explicitly and implicitly stated information. Relations within sentences and those between parts of a text should also be penetrated. In Ellison's (1966) opinion, one is really reading if and only if one gets the meaning of the text by seeing quickly and easily how its sentences are interrelated and what they actually have in common.

However, such perception and subsequent penetration are commonly blocked when one encounters complex and apparently obscure sentences. Such a handicap can be overcome in a variety of ways. For Grellet (1981), the reader's mind should be so stiffened that he / she should not stumble on every difficulty and get discouraged. Besides, knowledge of sentence structures as put forward by Quirk and Greenbaum (1986) and grammatical cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) thanks to which sentences are made up can help overcome such difficulties. Lexical cohesion empowers one to select accurately vocabulary whereas grammatical cohesion encompasses reference (whatever), substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. As it can

be seen, lexical and grammatical competences are required of the reader so as to solve understanding problems while reading.

To reach that level, Grellet proposes a variety of exercises to the learner for his / her training and actual development of reading skills.

In one word, understanding is the central skill in reading. Paradoxically, understanding depends on all the other reading skills.

2.3.4. INTERPRETATION

Text penetration also is facilitated by the context. Therefore the reader has to go outside the text in order to understand words, phrases, sentences or whole passages. In other terms, he/she has to bring his/her social, historical and other background to the text in order to get its very meaning.

2.3.5. INDENTIFICATION

The reader is required to identify the main points or relevant information in a piece of discourse made of an ocean of words, phrases or sentences. For this purpose, a vital technique is suggested by Ellison (1966). The reader has to identify key – words in sentences, key – sentences in paragraphs and main thoughts in passages or texts. This technique allows one to notice what the words, sentences and so on have in common.

2.3.6.3. DISTINCTION

As a discriminating activity, reading helps one to notice that all details never express the main thought. A skilled reader is therefore required to distinguish the main information or idea from supporting details, as illustrated by Ellison (1968:62),

> When he was only three years old, Mozart could pick out melodies on a clavichord and at five he was already beginning to compose. It was evident he was a prodigy and a musical genius. He learned to play the violin and organ without instruction. He published his first composition when he was seven. By the time

he was a young man, he had played at concerts in most of European great cities.

In this passage, supporting details should be distinguished from the main idea. That is, all the details provided in the passage only support that *Mozart was a prodigy and musical genius*. Reading with such ability is not only economic but also enables one to understand and remember for long what is being read. In other terms, the reader not only saves time, but also progressively summarizes the text in order to retain the gist of it. Such a skill enables especially students during their preparation of different examinations and lecturers to have the general view of what they have to teach.

3.2.7. EXTRACTION

As it can be noticed, reading skills so overlap that their unity constitutes the identity, the fullness and the efficiency of the reading activity. When the main idea is identified and discriminated from details, it should now be extracted as the salient point, relevant information saved or summarized for eventual exchanges.

3.2.8. SKIMMING

In Munby's (1978) opinion, all reference skills, viz skimming and scanning, are also reading techniques. They are applied to identify or locate specific information or point. For Grellet (1981), skimming a text is going through it quickly in order to get the gist of it, know how it is organized, or get an idea on the tone or intention of the writer.

This view is also shared by Richards and his co − authors (1985) who define skimming as a type of reading used when the reader wants to get the main idea(s) from a passage. Therefore a chapter or a whole book can be skim − read just to find out the writer's approval or disapproval of something. Besides, this process does not impede comprehension. In our opinion, this skill allows one to find quickly where a specific piece of information is likely to be.

3.2.9. SCANNING

As stated above scanning is both a skill and a technique. It is intended to locate required specific information as Grellet (1981:19) states,

> Scanning, on the contrary is far more limited since it only means retrieving what information is relevant to our purpose. Yet it is usual to make use of these two activities together when reading a given text. For instance, we may skim though an article first just to know whether it is worth reading it, then read it through more carefully because we have decided that it is of interest. It is also possible afterwards to scan the same article in order to note down a figure or name which we particularly want to remember.

In line with the quote, the reader, without always following the text linearity, lets his/her eyes quickly wander over the text until s/he finds the required element (name, date or another less specific piece of information).

Shortly put, scanning as well as skimming (as techniques) can be associated with prediction, preview and anticipation for efficient location of information. This series of skills can be summarized with Bright and McGregor's (1970) skills typology. First, response skills are needed to understand the meaning conveyed through the text. They are understanding, deduction and extraction. Next, practical, businesslike and scholarly skills are required to locate specific information by making use of index, chapter headings and so on. For such rough use, one has to develop and use identification, skimming and scanning. Finally comparative and critical skills are vital to enhance the chance of comprehension and sensitively decrease those of misunderstanding during the reading process.

In conclusion, reading is such a complex activity that if one is not trained in developing skills dealt with in this paper, comprehension will be obviously impeded.

In other terms, reading skills must be developed and techniques applied for efficient and competent reading to take place.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper was based on the assumption that reading is the first sinequanon prerequisite for academic exchanges. Therefore students and lectures must develop reading skills and apply reading techniques that lessen the reading effort and the subsequent rate of misunderstanding. In so doing they also improve their reading speed and rate of understanding opening the door to communication.

Skilled readers should therefore be characterized by:

- Better extraction of information from the text and easier understanding of meaning (explicit or implicit).

- Careful deduction of word meaning especially when unfamiliar lexical items and complex or apparently obscure sentences are used in the text. No recourse to dictionaries is advised; but sensitizing, inference, understanding relation within sentences, linking sentences and ideas are suggested as vital techniques.

- Easier recognition of language script and competent interpretation of the text by going outside it. Here inferences and guesses are to be made in order to retain meanings that suit the best to the context.

- Rather quick dissociation of supporting details from salient or main points well identified or located. Therefore skimming and/or scanning, outlining ideas in order to select the relevant ones are suggested as techniques. When required data are found, note – taking and summarizing can help save that knowledge for academic exchanges.

In line with skimming and scanning as skills, predicting, previewing and anticipation of information have been suggested as helpful techniques for location of information in the text.

To reach such idealized reading competence training and reading practice are hitherto advisable all along the academic curriculum. Reading exercises – intended to promote skills development and suggested in Grellet (1981), Ellison (1966) and (1968); and other scholars are likely to be selected by the teacher or the learner (in the case of self training).

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