SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS – AN AID TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN TUCUMÁN , ARGENTINA.

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ABSTRACT: *EFL students find it very hard to achieve a good level of reading comprehension. More often than not our students of English do not understand what they read. Besides, EFL teachers in San Miguel de Tucuman, Argentina face some common problems: over crowded classrooms, opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom, officially prescribed syllabi, etc. All these factors make it difficult for teachers to meet each student's need. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a proposal for teachers of English in the context of the reading class. The paper is directly related to the reality of the EFL classroom, shown by a survey answered by a group of teachers working at state secondary schools. We believe that a Systemic Functional Linguistics approach to text analysis could enable learners to interpret the different meanings conveyed in a written text, what would lead them to a better comprehension of reading texts.*

KEY-WORDS: *reading comprehension – EFL students - classroom - problems*

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is of crucial importance for EFL students, who find it very hard to achieve a good level and cannot even interpret what they are asked to do in simple tasks. More often than not our students of English do not understand what they read.

In the educational context we take into account for our work, teachers are limited in taking professional decisions. Current-traditional instruction still exists and is dominant in some institutions. It is well known that teachers are not satisfied with

their teaching results, but their working conditions do not leave them time to improve their practice. Due to low salaries and the difficulty of having all their classes in only one school, they are pushed to give classes in different institutions. This implies teachers travelling from one school to another almost every day; they are called "taxi-teachers". Besides, educators receive over crowded classes with students that come from different social backgrounds and this makes it difficult for them to meet each student's needs.

We intend our work to aid teachers who work in state secondary schools in the capital city of Tucumán - Argentina. These schools are administered by the government of our province. From a socio-cultural perspective we can say that the community that attends classes there belong to the low-middle class.

We know that secondary schools are complex settings in which reading in L2 must take place. It is our desire to help teachers know about an alternative way of developing reading classes through Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). We sincerely believe that obstacles to understanding reading texts in secondary schools can be rectified with SFL.

2. Theoretical background

Through SFL we can see things that we have looked at but have not seen before. The Copernican Revolution proposed by Goodman (1994) moves us away from a view of the reader as passive and the text as controlling the reader. Reading is

> "an active process in which the reader gets involved in ongoing interaction with the text" (Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 1988:9).

Now we see the reader as an active user of language. Nevertheless, most of the times, the students in our reading classes are seen as passive users of language. We propose teachers in secondary schools to take what writers leave for the reader to infer. What readers understand depends much on what they bring to the transaction and not only on what the author brought to the text. According to Schema Theory

> "a reader comprehends a message when he is able to bring to mind a schema that gives a good account of the objects and

events described in the message" (Anderson 1994:469).

That schema will depend on the reader's age, religion, race, nationality, social class- that is, his culture. Reading comprehension involves an interaction between old and new information. We, teachers, should understand that

> "meaning is in the reader and the writer, not in the text"
> (p. 1094).

As reading is meaning seeking and meaning is an important concept in SFL, thus a functional approach applied in the reading class can help learners to read effectively making sense of print, not identifying word by word accurately. This does not mean we cannot resort on structural linguistics any longer. Goodman (1994) himself explained that he used structural linguistics when he needed to compare the grammatical functions of words in the expected and the observed responses. Goodman realized that if reading was making sense of written language, then it was a socio-psycholinguistic process. He proposed the 'transactional socio-psycholinguistic theory and model of reading'. The reader constructs a text through transaction with the published text and the reader's schemata are also transformed in the process of transacting with the text through the assimilation and accommodation Piaget has described.

> "Characteristics of writer, text, and reader will all
> influence the resultant meaning" (Goodman, 1994: 1103).

In a transactional view, reading is seen as receptive written language and writing as productive or generative. In the productive generative processes (which also includes speaking), a text is generated (constructed) to represent the meaning. In the receptive processes of listening and reading, meaning is constructed through transactions with the text and indirectly through the text with the writer who is the producer of the text. Both generative and receptive processes are constructive, active and transactional. Goodman's Model of Reading has a vertical expansion that includes the importance of function, purpose, and situational context. He uses information from Halliday's (1985) systemic-functional linguistics that is grounded in a sociocultural view of language.

Goodman explains that Halliday's use of field, mode, and tenor is useful in examining literacy events in their socio-cultural contexts. Briefly, *field* refers to the general content area of the literacy event; *tenor* refers to the social and pragmatic relationships between the writer and reader and others in the event; and *mode* is the language form or genre selected for the event. To Halliday, language development is both personal and social in functional contexts. Goodman added the context of language as personal invention and social convention. The theory is also grounded in a general psycholinguistic theory of cognition and comprehension.

The theory of language that the model draws on is Halliday's systemic functional view with its major language levels – symbolic, lexico-grammar, and meaning – and the three functions language serves simultaneously – ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational is what we might call the message. But every text also has an interpersonal function: what participants in the literacy event are trying to do to or for each other. The textual function makes the other functions possible. In turn, the form the text takes is as least partly determined by the ideational and interpersonal functions.

Halliday's language theory also has three main levels of analysis: the symbolic, which in written language Goodman calls graphophonic; the meaning, which for him includes the pragmatic and which in Halliday's terms is both ideational and interpersonal; and the grammar and lexicon (wording) together in what Halliday calls the lexico-grammar. Just a as the textual function makes the other functions possible, the lexico-grammar is what makes a text fully functioning language. Halliday's study of language development shows that the symbolic level is directly linked to meaning until the lexico-grammar develops and fully formed language occurs.

The model includes explanation of reference, cohesion, wording and deliberate and non-deliberate choice of strategies. The theoretical base includes schema theory, reader response, and critical theory.

3. Interview analysis (See appendix A)

In order to have a better picture of the reading class in our states secondary school, we have administered an interview to a sample of teachers that work in state secondary schools. Besides, we are working in states institutions as well, so we have good knowledge of the system and the development of activities there.

In our province most state schools devote only three periods of forty minutes per week to the teaching of English. Groups of students are too big (about forty students) and heterogeneous. Most of the teachers interviewed answered that they select their own material for the reading class. The criteria they use for such a selection are grammar items they want their students to learn, specific vocabulary and students' interests. Teacher's choices do not usually rely on technical knowledge about the language system and the relationship between text and context; elements that could help them select the appropriate teaching material. The rest of those teachers use textbooks that have a communicative approach to the teaching of English. The disadvantage that we see in this is that

> "textbooks' authors presumably introduce interactional features in order to make them less impersonal and more accessible to students, but attempt to introduce interactional features into school based texts that are meant to be read can result in an incoherent register which is not functional for its purpose" (Schleppegrell, 2004:139).

The classroom context of reading textbooks is often not one of dialogue and interaction. What really happens is that students often read this kind of text silently or read it aloud trying to fulfil teachers' instructions but they do not have an opportunity to answer the questions and interact.

When asked about the activities designed to evaluate reading comprehension, the teachers commented that the most widely chosen were: translation, questions, identification and explanation of new vocabulary, multiple choice, true / false and matching exercises.

As regards 'translation' activities teachers declared that they do not get positive results. This may be due to the fact that students

do not see the purpose of such a text. Besides they make 'literary translation', word by word, as they do not know how to grasp the function of the whole text. Therefore they get bored and lose interest in the activity.   Schleppegrell (2004:155) considers that

> "classrooms can provide contexts for language development when students are engaged in exploring new ideas and content through meaningful experiences and activities".

Questions should be asked that remind students of relevant experiences of their own, so that they can meaningfully integrate what they already know with what is presented on the printed page.

There is a strong tendency to rely on Chomsky's Transformational grammar. Most activities, like underlying verbs, making sentences in different tenses, defining new words with the help of a dictionary do not tend to take functionality into account.

The different difficulties that impede students' reading comprehension according to the teachers interviewed may be classified into pedagogical, social and economic. These difficulties are: lack of material, absenteeism, attrition, refusal to study a foreign language because they do not find it useful for their daily lives, few periods of English classes per week, overcrowded classrooms and lack of interest in reading which limits students' literal criticism.

4. SFL in the reading class

Systemic Functional Linguistics is

> "a socially oriented theory of language, the task of which is to explain how meanings are made and exchanged through the resource of grammar and lexis". (Tucker 2002).

Taking Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics as the basis for our present analysis, we shall start by considering the three contextual variables and their corresponding Linguistic Realizations. We shall also include brief commentaries about the development of reading classes in state secondary schools in Tucumán and some suggestions we believe can help teachers and students improve reading comprehension. (See Table 1)

Variable	Linguistic Realization	What is done + suggestions to improve it
Field	<u>**Ideational choices**</u> Realized primarily in nouns, verbs and other content words; that is to say: participants, processes and circumstances.	Ideational choices are seldom taught from the point of view of function. Generally the focus is on the isolated meaning of each item, e.g. literal translation of these words. We believe that if teachers made students aware of the context in which such elements are used and trained them in inferring meaning from context, they would obtain better results.
Tenor	<u>**Interpersonal choices**</u> *Mood*: each choice made by the writer of a particular text suggests a different relationship between he/she and the reader. *Modality*: is a resource for presenting propositions non categorically, e.g. probability, uncertainty, necessity, usuality, obligation and willingness *Evaluation*: depending on the	The relationship established between the writer and the reader is frequently not mentioned explicitly in the reading class, which impedes students grasping the writer's intention. Students are taught modal verbs in isolation instead of being shown that modality plays an important role on communicating meanings.

	situation, we use words that express our attitude, and that reflect positive or negative evaluation. The attitude of the writer towards what is being written is incorporated throughout the text.	The writer's attitude is seldom considered while analysing a text.
Mode	**Textual choices** *Cohesive devices, conjunctions and connectors* help the writer to organize his/her message.	In the reading class, cohesive elements such as reference, conjunctions and connectors are hardly ever resorted to as an aid for students to interpret a written text. They are seldom taught as elements that show the logical connections in a text.
	Thematic organization: the theme of an English clause is the "point of departure" (Halliday, 1994) for the clause as a whole and its analyses reveals the Method of Development of a text.	In the reading class what is generally given importance to is the subject that is the key participant in the text, but not the theme which shows how that text develops. Learners could possibly understand a text better if they were able to signal the flow of information in the text they read.

Table 1 – Adapted from Schleppegrell, 2004: 47

5. Conclusion

The classroom is where teachers and learners face the realities of teaching and reading. They are presented with many obstacles that need to be solved for the benefit of the reading community at state secondary schools in our province. SFL not only can inform educators as they prepare texts for students to read but it can also provide a framework for analysing students' command of language and identifying the areas in which they need further development.

Through an SFL analysis, students could see the relationship between language and context and at the same time they could understand the role of social experience in the linguistic choices made by writers. A functional grammar perspective

> "highlights the role of grammar and lexis in construing the kinds of meanings that students need to make to be successful in school and to be able to participate as adults in the institutions of modern society" (Schleppegrell 2004:148).

We doubt whether anyone will ever come up with a perfect method for teaching second language reading. There are many factors which affect reading comprehension in an EFL class, for example, learners' interests, motivation, amount of time available, previous learning experiences, maturity, cultural backgrounds, class size, available resources, preferred learning styles and strategies, opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom, officially prescribed syllabi, etc. There is little teachers can do as far as socioeconomic problems are concerned but we believe that a Systemic Functional Approach can offer solutions to the pedagogical problems that come up in the class everyday.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Course: ....

1. How many periods a week do you devote to the teaching of English in this course? ....

2. How many students are there in the course? ....

3. What characterizes your classes?

    a) Communication?
    b) Literal translation?
    c) Interpretation?
    d) Translation and interpretation?

4. Do you use textbooks or material chosen by the teacher? Please, specify.

....

....

5. What criteria do you take into account to choose the material? Mark 1 to 5 (1: most important; 5: least important).

    a) Grammatical structure
    b) Vocabulary
    c) Students' Interest
    d) Topics related to the specialization chosen by the students.
    e) Literary genre: scientific, fiction, etc.

6. What activities do you design to help your students achieve reading comprehension?

....

7. What percentage of the whole class do you consider achieves an acceptable comprehension of the text? ....

8. What do you consider the reasons that lead to students' difficulties to understand a text are?

....

Thanks a lot for your help