

Chapter 64

In Links We Trust: Net-Like Strategic Reading in L2 Learning Context

Sara Costa

E. Medi Secondary School, Italy & Bologna University, Italy

ABSTRACT

The problem of processing texts containing a number of unknown words is relatively common in foreign language learning, especially for students on level A1-A2-B1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The disorientation raised by such texts usually turns into frustration and demotivation, as most students experience a nearly total block in the comprehension process and soon give up reading the text, while only a few of them have recourse to proper comprehension strategies. This chapter describes an experimental reading activity carried out in a class of Italian students during a German lesson in order to enhance a motivating net-like reading attitude in L2 based on a constructivist-connectionist approach to language processing. The activity was meant to make students realise in practice that they have a wide range of interconnected comprehension strategies at their own disposal, which can be effectively activated to overcome when occurring comprehension blocks.

INTRODUCTION

Processing texts containing unknown vocabulary is a relatively common difficulty in foreign language learning, especially for students lying on level A1-A2-B1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). In my teaching practice of German as a foreign language I have found that unknown words in foreign language reading are for some readers a bigger problem

than for others. Some readers are able to overcome this problem having recourse to an active reading attitude, activating a network of (more or less conscious) reading and comprehension strategies, linking different text elements on both micro- and macro-level and making assumptions consistent with meaning. Others, however, are unable to process texts with unknown words and fail decoding the meaning of these lexical items. The disorientation they get from such texts turns soon

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2122-0.ch064

into frustration and demotivation, as these students experience a nearly total block in the comprehension process with the result that reading is almost immediately given up. As I showed in detail in my analysis of reading comprehension blocks (Costa 2010a), processing difficulty in texts containing a considerable amount of unknown vocabulary are mainly due to two factors: lacking net-like reading attitude on the micro-level of the text and weak strategic awareness. The experimental reading activity described in this chapter shows how proper stimuli based on a constructivist-connectionist approach to language processing can enhance a motivating net-like reading attitude making students realise 'in practice' that they have a wide range of interconnected comprehension strategies at their own disposal, which can be effectively activated to overcome occurring comprehension blocks. On a pedagogical level, this also implies helping youth develop greater self-confidence by starting to become aware of the strategic cognitive tools one actually possesses – for instance to face texts in L2 perceived as 'too difficult'. It should be pointed out that this activity had not been initially planned as a structured research but as a lesson which – considered retrospectively – turned out to be meaningful from a scientific (pedagogical and didactic) point of view, as often happens in education. Accordingly, there was no original attempt to preserve materials to be examined later, apart from teacher's notes deriving from my personal teaching approach. The activity has proved to be successful as it actually produced an observable generalized change in the students' reading approach, from initial frustration and renouncing attitude to a fully active heuristic mind-set leading to enthusiastic discovery not only of the text, but also of their own cognitive tools.

This reading activity was carried out in a class of 22 16-year-old Italian students of average socio-economic level attending the third year of a secondary school in the province of Verona. They had been learning German for two years and a half, reaching globally A2/B1 communication

skills. The study of German as a second foreign language is set up in the school curriculum. As for my role in the school, I was working with this class as regular German teacher and have belonged to the school's permanent staff for over ten years, continuously combining my teaching practice with academic research as PhD German linguist.

The purpose of the experiment was twofold: on the one hand I wanted to understand how my students processed a text containing unfamiliar words; on the other hand, from a pedagogical point of view, I wanted to empower their self-confidence and reading awareness by showing them through heuristic cooperative reading that everybody has a range of comprehension strategies which can be activated to succeed in understanding a text despite unknown vocabulary.

A more specific aim of the experiment was to observe the various reading attitudes showed by students when asked to face a text containing unknown vocabulary, so as to see to what extent and in which students such texts can hinder or even block the reading process. Such observations turned out to provide a basis for subsequent research on those students who showed a renouncing manner when dealing with this kind of texts, failing to apply any form of active reading (a summary of my qualitative study on such 'weaker' students is presented in Costa, in press).

I used a German text in which I replaced all keywords through 'pseudo-words', i.e. fake words having a German-like morphology. The students had hence the impression of facing many German words they had never seen before. The choice of using pseudo-words was made to artificially create a text which should satisfy two requirements: it had to appear simple and ordinary in its topic, but highly demanding on a lexical level (the percentage of unknown vocabulary should be about 15%, a sort of threshold value – see Costa 2010b – requiring strong activation of comprehension strategies to build up sense). The text was projected by a beamer in the computer room. Methodologically, general principles of qualita-

12 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/links-trust-net-like-strategic/72115

Related Content

Technologies to "Bridge the Gap" among Learning Contexts in Vocational Training

Elisa Motta, Elena Boldrini and Alberto Cattaneo (2013). *Handbook of Research on Didactic Strategies and Technologies for Education: Incorporating Advancements* (pp. 247-265).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/technologies-bridge-gap-among-learning/72072

A Review of Methods for Selecting Learning Technologies

Richard Caladine (2008). *Enhancing E-Learning with Media-Rich Content and Interactions* (pp. 42-66).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/review-methods-selecting-learning-technologies/18319

eTwinning Project: A Virtual Orchestra

Livia Casamassima (2013). *Handbook of Research on Didactic Strategies and Technologies for Education: Incorporating Advancements* (pp. 703-709).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/etwinning-project-virtual-orchestra/72112

On the Implications of the Social Web Environment for Pedagogical Patterns

Pankaj Kamthan (2011). *Investigations of E-Learning Patterns: Context Factors, Problems and Solutions* (pp. 149-169).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/implications-social-web-environment-pedagogical/51522

Collabor8: Online and Blended Cross-Cultural Studios

Ian McArthur (2013). *Cases on Cultural Implications and Considerations in Online Learning* (pp. 24-47).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/collabor8-online-blended-cross-cultural/68057