Promoting Communication in the EFL Intensive Reading Class --
A Task-Oriented Approach

Yu Li
Beijing Institute of Clothing Technology

Abstract:

To communicate is the primary goal of most foreign language learning. As an important component of the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), reading should also serve this purpose. However, traditional methodology still dominates intensive reading teaching in most of the universities. To promote a communicative intensive reading class, we may start by designing various tasks and activities. This paper then introduces a task-oriented approach. The first part of the paper deals with the theoretical basis of the approach, while the second provides a demonstration of the actual practice of it. It is expected that such an approach can improve our teaching of intensive reading.

1. Introduction

The primary goal of most foreign language learning, according to Littlewood, is to develop the ability to use real and appropriate language to communicate and interact with others. The goal of foreign language teaching, consequently, is to extend the range of communicative situation in which the learners can perform with focus on meaning without being hindered by the attention he must pay to linguistic form (1981). But what is going on in the
intensive reading class in most universities in China is not providing adequate chances for both teachers and students to achieve these goals. The common teaching routine is: reading (sometimes before the class), questioning, explanation and grammar exercises. The method used is mainly structure-based; the focus of the teaching is on language form. The teacher is the authority, providing input model and ways of assessment while the students are demotivated and passive listeners. They depend too much on the teacher and lack a sense of responsibility for their own learning. As a result, the students may be linguistically competent, but unable to cope with communicative tasks effectively. To promote a more effective intensive reading class in terms of developing both the students’ language ability and communicative competence, we should incorporate some communicative moves into the present teaching framework of intensive reading.

Bringing communicative activities into the intensive reading class, we may start by trying to design various tasks and activities. In addition to the target aim to train different skills and strategies for different reading purposes, these tasks and activities will still focus on integrating the four-macro language skills with communicative purposes. This, of course, should base on the understanding of both the nature of reading process and tasks, and also the principles for task designing. This paper then is going to present a task-oriented approach to the teaching of intensive reading, an approach the author has been applying in teaching English majors for years. It is warmly hoped that such an approach may benefit to those teachers who intend to have a more communicative reading class in the Chinese context.

2. The Theoretical Basis

The task-oriented approach this paper is going to introduce is based on
three interactive models of the reading process, namely, the psycholinguistic model, the sociolinguistic model and the schema theory model.

2.1 The psycholinguistic model

This is a meaning-based model proposed by Goodman (1967) and Smith (1971). According to Goodman (1975), reading is “a psycholinguistic guessing game” which involves an interaction between thought and language.” In his view, reading is a psycholinguistic process by which the reader constructs, as best as he can, a message which has been encoded by a writer as a graphic display (1973). He summarizes that “receptive language processes are cycles of sampling, predicting, testing and confirming. The language user relies on strategies which yield the most reliable predictions with the minimum use of the information available” (1973) Simth states that two types of information are necessary in reading: visual information, which we get from the printed pages, and non-visual information, which includes our understanding of the relevant language, familiarity with the subject matter, and some general ability in reading. The more non-visual information we have when we read, the less visual information we need.

According to this model, when the reader reconstructs meaning from the text by using the graphophonic syntactic and semantic systems of the language, he doesn't need to use all the text cues. The efficient reader only uses minimum cues from the three levels of language to predict meaning and confirm those predictions by relating them to his knowledge of the language and his past experience. The better the reader can make correct predictions, the less confirming through the text is necessary.
2.2 The Socialinguistic model

This is a knowledge-based model proposed by Widdowson(1979) and Candlin(1982). According to Widdowson, “reading is seen not as a separate ability which can be investigated and taught in disassociation from other aspects of language behavior (as it tends to be). but as the realization of a general interpretative process operating at two different levels of mental activity. The first dealing with the immediate comprehension of information and the second with the discrimination of this information into patterns of conceptual significance” (1979).

In his view, reading is regarded not as a reaction to a text but as an interaction between writer and reader mediated through the text. Reading efficiency depends on how much knowledge the reader brings to the text, and how much he wishes to extract from it. Reading efficiently is a matter of how effective a discourse the reader can create from the text. According to this model, in order to comprehend a text it isn't enough for the reader only to use his linguistic knowledge. He must also make use of his cultural and social knowledge as well as his own experience. This explains why different readers have different interpretations of the same text and get different amount of meaning from it.

2.3 The Schema Theory Model

The schema theory has been formulated to account for the role of the readers' background knowledge in language comprehension. According to Anderson and Pearson(1984), a schema is an abstract knowledge structure which the reader brings to the text while reading. It is abstract in the sense that it summarizes what is known about a variety of cases that differ in many particulars. And it is structured in the sense that it represents the relationships among its component parts. The fundamental assumption of this theory is that a text doesn't
by itself carry meaning. Rather, it only provides directions for the reader as to how he should reconstruct meaning from his own previously acquired knowledge, i.e. background knowledge. According to this model, comprehension is an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text; and between new information and old knowledge store.

Schemata are hierarchically organized from the most general at the top to the most specific at the bottom. The process of comprehension is guided by the principle that every input is mapped against some existing schema and that all aspects of the schema must be compatible with the input information. This principle results in two basic modes of information processing: The bottom-up processing and the top-down processing. The former is evoked by the in-coming data, whose features enter the system through the best fitting bottom-level schemata. As these schemata converge into higher level, more general schemata, and the top-level schemata, become activated. The top-down processing takes place when the system makes general predictions based on higher level, general schemata, and then searches the input for information to fit into these partially satisfied higher schemata.

For comprehension to take place both modes of information processing should be functioning simultaneously at all levels. The bottom-up processing ensures that the reader will be sensitive the information that is novel or that doesn't fit his on-going prediction about the structure or the content of the text. And the top-down processing helps the reader to select between alternative possible interpretations of the in-coming data and to resolve ambiguities. As long as the in-coming information being processed through the bottom-up processing and the predictions being made through the top-down processing are compatible,
the reader has a satisfactory interpretation of the text. When there is a mismatch between the two modes of processing, the reader is forced to revise the interpretation so as to make the two compatible. To put it simply, comprehension of a message entails drawing information from both the external graphic message and the internal schemata until the two are reconciled as a single schema or message in which the constraints of both graphic message and the internal schemata are satisfied. (Anderson et. al., 1976)

The above three models show the process of efficient reading that involves three types of interaction:

1. the interaction between thought and language
2. the interaction between writer and reader
3. the interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text; between new information and the old knowledge store.

The task-oriented approach involves these three interactive models into intensive reading class, since reading is never a passive, static process but an active and dynamic one. This approach to teach reading is task-based. Then what is a task? What principles do we have to follow to design communicative tasks for an intensive reading class?

3. Task & Task Designing

Crookes(1986:1) defines task as “a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or used to elicit data for research.” Nunan(1989:6) provides the most comprehensive definition for task by quoting Breen (1987:23): “. . . any structured language learning endeavor that has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task.”
Task is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning— from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulation and decision making.”

The definitions imply that tasks involve realistic communicative language use in which learners focus their attention on meaning rather than linguistic structure, and that learning tasks help learners acquire the ability to perform certain communicative functions through the new medium (English). Learning tasks, according to Prabhu (1987), can be classified into three principal activity types:

1). Information-gap activities, which operate on the principle of supplying information to some students and withholding it from others. Prabhu provides the examples of pair work in which each member of the pair has a part of the total information and attempts to transfer it verbally to the other.

2). Reasoning-gap activities, which involve deriving some new information from given information through possessed of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns.

3) Opinion-gap activities, which engage learners in identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling or attitude in response to a given situation such as story completion or taking part in the discussion of some issues. In performing this activity, students may use factual information and formulating arguments to justify their opinions.

We may infer from the task types cited above that the communicative task as a piece of classroom work should be the one involving learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language
while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. (Nunan, 1989:10) while “tasks chosen should at all times be relevant to the students' purpose” (Wilson, 1986:49) and should be those requiring “learners to approximate in class the sorts of behaviors required of them in the world beyond the classroom” (Nunan, 1989:40)

Having explored the theoretical basis of the task-oriented approach, the nature of tasks and principles for task designing, the author is going to exemplify how to carry out the task-oriented approach in the actual teaching by demonstrating the tasks designed for the reading material "How to Lasso a Shark". These tasks intended to interweave the communicative purposes with the lesson planning.

4. A Demonstration

To foster both students' linguistic and communicative competence, to increase their access to and comprehension of the core materials, the author often applies, in the teaching of the intensive reading, an Into, Through and Beyond framework for the lesson planning. This lesson framework originally was adapted from the California Literature Project (Briton, Goodwin, and Ranks, 1994), involves a three-stage process designed to maximize students' comprehension and mastery of content. Different communicative tasks are usually designed for different stages to meet different end goals.

4.1 Into:

In the first stage of lesson, students' prior knowledge about a concept is probed. Typical into activities include reviews of previously learned content, the use of content related visuals, reaction journals, vocabulary reviews, free association or visualization exercises and anticipation reaction guides to assist
students in assessing the new content materials.

Take the passage "How to Lasso a Shark" as an example. It tells about scuba divers who round up sharks for Australia Sea world. Instead of following the traditional routine to teach reading---let students read, then answer the comprehension questions, the author designs pre-reading; what is more important, to create opportunities for communicative interactions in the classroom centering on the content of the material.

**Pre-reading activities:**

1. Teacher shows the picture of a shark and the title of the passage to the students. A. Teacher asks questions about the picture, and the students try to guess and answer.  
B. Students ask questions about the picture, and discuss with partners to make guessing.  
C. Students predict the story according to the title and the picture, and then report to the class.

2. Lexical web game

   With the picture or title as the stimulus, students say out or write some cue words related to sharks that may appear in the text and try to guess the word "lasso" in the title.

3. Brainstorming background knowledge

   Teacher puts forward the topic "hunting shark" and asks students to orally brainstorm the answers to the questions like "who hunt sharks", 'where" and 'why", then the students fill up the left half of information grid as the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My guess</th>
<th>Information from the text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What</th>
<th>Hunting sharks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These **Into** activities generally take as their departure activating students' existing background knowledge to give the chance later for them to reconstruct meaning between new information and old knowledge store. In this manner, the teacher can ascertain whether students have sufficient command of both the necessary language skills and the concepts to proceed to the next step of the lesson. It will take the teachers about 20 minutes to conduct **Into** activities. The end goal of this stage is for students to gain an entree into the topic, recognize the depth of their own prior knowledge, build up their hypotheses, and be better prepared for the new content materials they are about to encounter.

4.2 **Through**

In the second stage, students encounter the new content, relating it to their discussion of the concepts during the **Into** stage. This may entail confirming, or rejecting the hypotheses they formed or expanding their knowledge base with new facts, ideas or opinions. Activities that are typically found in this lesson stage include grammar development, or vocabulary expansion, reading guides (e.g. idea sequencing and/or text completion exercises), and information gap tasks (such as jigsaw reading). **Through** activities also include a variety of text explication exercises, either oral or written. As for the 2nd teaching stage for "How to Lasso a Shark", the author designs the following reading activities to promote communication:
(1) After the silent reading, students are asked to finish another half of the information grid they have done in the Into stage, but this time based on the information they may locate in the reading material. Then in groups they have to report to the class about the comparison and contrast between their own ideas and those found in the text.

(2) Group/pair discussion about the comprehension questions given both by the text and the teacher (discussion on the theme and content)

(3) Group/pair discussion about the technical problems: style of writing, attitude, tone etc.

(4) Vocabulary development game: students are divided into groups, and one group member will be given a list of five new words appearing in the text. S/He will act them out one by one, and the other group members try to guess the meaning of each. The group who first finishes correctly will win.

(5) Guided oral summary of the text with key words and phrases offered.

The above tasks are designed for this stage with the purpose to offer students chances to practice new language skills while demonstrating their comprehension of the basic concepts. The teacher may spend about 40 minutes on this stage.

4.3 Beyond

In the final stage of the framework, students further demonstrate their comprehension by creatively applying their new knowledge. Such application may take several forms: application of the knowledge to personal experience, to a literary passage etc. Beyond activities involve more extended oral and written output such as role-plays, debates, and essays. In this stage of the author's teaching, what the students are supposed to are the following:
A. A role-play

   In groups students take roles of a journalist, the shark hunters, and the audience in the aquarium to have interviews focusing on the topic hunting sharks to express different opinions they may hold.

B. A debate centering on the topic of hunting sharks (group work)

C. Each student is asked to write a letter to the shark hunters and then change the letter with her/his pair partner. At last they have to answer the letters.

   The end goal of this stage is for students to demonstrate both conceptual and linguistic mastery, and to provide a forum for communicative practice. The teacher may spend about 30 minutes on this stage.

5. Conclusion

   Not all the tasks and the activities have to be used in this unit of teaching, and they may take other alternative forms as well. However, from this framework, we can see that the main principles of the communicative approach have been applied to the process of teaching/learning. The lesson is task-based. The class is student-centered. Communicative activities are carried out from the beginning to end. Students are engaged in solving problems, and the tasks make the interaction between teacher and students, students and students, reader and writer more active and meaningful. Although the emphasis is on meaning, language form is not neglected. Skills of reading to solve communicative problems are always treated conscientiously. We take care of both accuracy and fluency in view of the students' future needs. The teacher changes his/her knowledge-imparting role. Here s/he observers, evaluates, plans, organizes, participates and experiments with communicative tasks. The main methodological point is that learners would be doing the problem-raising, experimentation and
discovery rather than teacher providing ready-made answers to problems which may not be those most directly affecting the learners.

The tasks designed are well suited to stimulating particular opinions and views in association with a reading passage, because we use language in a process of thinking, discovering, classifying and manipulating. This process demands our active use, not passive reflection of language.

Of course, difficulty may be experienced in applying the suggested task-oriented approach in teaching. For example, such task designing involves sophisticated adaptation techniques and strategies. For many teachers, it may entail a rethinking of how to present materials to students. It is also demanding and challenging to the teacher, since s/he has to spend much time preparing the lessons and it requires more not only of her /his organizing skills as well as language ability, but also of her /his flexibility in dealing with unexpected problems and questions that may pop up at any time. However, with due efforts, this approach may hopefully result in some improvement on the teaching of intensive reading.

References


Candlin, C. N. 1982, 'Principle and practice in communicative language teaching', *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*. 4

Li. X. 1984, 'In defence of the communicative approach', *ELT Journal 38/1*


University Press

