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TEXT AS THE BASIS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITY
IN ACHIEVING HIGH LEVEL PROFICIENCY IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

ТЕКСТ КАК ОСНОВА КОММУНИКАИВНОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ДЛЯ
ДОСТИЖЕНИЯ ВЫСОКОГО УРОВНЯ ЗНАНИЯ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА

Abstract:

The role of oral and written text, as a basis for development of communicative competence is the theme of the article. Textual stimulus functions as a trigger for language reaction. Text involves the participants of dialogue into language activity, activates the most suitable strategies for performing a specific language task, as well as strategies for reduction of the load to cognitive processes of students while reading texts of high level. The article tells about theoretical and

practical factors which should be taken into consideration when selecting the text (for inst., organization of discourse, linear structure, prior student's knowledge, etc.), as well as strategies, necessary for achievement of high level of proficiency in a foreign language.

Keywords: "agents" of social communication, interaction, fields of communication, communicative competence, learning styles, spectrum of personality types, language proficiency, domains, activating strategies, textual response, textual stimulus text tasks, congruence

Introduction

Reaching upper-level language proficiency (ILR Level 3 and higher) is a very challenging endeavor for both students and instructors. There are countless theoretical and practical factors, aspects and elements involved in this process.

First of all, we would like to determine and systematize some terminology and approaches that are used in this article. We consider language learners and language users as *"agents" of social communication or interaction,* who carry out certain *tasks* (not exclusively language-related) in certain *circumstances,* in specific *situations* and within particular *domains (spheres or fields of communication).* Verbal communication is realized in a wider social context that alone determines the real meaning of language expressions. We speak of tasks as actions that are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. Such an approach makes us consider the whole spectrum of personality types and particular learning styles of an individual as an agent of the social interaction. These characteristics of personality type and learning styles include cognitive, emotional and volitional aspects, and their consideration is extremely important in achieving upper-level language proficiency. (For more details and an in-depth familiarization with these very important aspects, see [5]).

Theory

It is a well-known fact now that language use and language learning comprise the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of *competences*, both in general and in particular *communicative language competences*. They draw on the competences at their disposal in various contexts under various *conditions* and under various *constraints* to engage in *language activities* involving *language processes* to produce and/or

receive *texts* in relation to *themes* in specific *domains*, activating those *strategies* that seem most appropriate for carrying out the *tasks* to be accomplished [2,7,8].

The *text* is at the core and center of communication and is used to cover any piece of language, whether a spoken utterance or a piece of writing that users/learners receive, produce or exchange. Thus, there can be no act of communication through language without a text. Summarizing numerous approaches, *text* could be defined as an any sequence or discourse (spoken and/or written) related to a specific domain, and which in the course of carrying out a task becomes the occasion of a language activity, whether as a support or as a goal, as a product or a process [3,4,10]. With the above factors, it can be assumed that written or spoken texts *are the basis of communicative activity in a foreign language and the basis of language learning*.

Practice

In the process of communication, the user/learner is required to *produce a textual response to a textual stimulus*. The textual stimulus may be an oral question, a set of written instructions (e.g. an examination rubric), a discursive text, authentic or composed, or some combination of these. The required textual response may be anything from a single word to a three-hour essay. Both input and output texts may be spoken or written. In other words, the output of the process of language production is a text, which, once it is uttered or written, becomes an artifact carried by a particular media and independent of its producer. The text then functions as the input to the process of language reception.

This factor is very significant in terms of language instruction and achieving higher level proficiency; in order for a student *to produce a high level textual response, he/she has to be presented a high level textual stimulus.* This idea is not at all new, and it would be banal if some very important categories were not be taken into account, to wit, *text characteristics, text type, text strategies and text tasks.*

High level texts increase the burden on the student-learner's cognitive load. However, the cognitive load on the learner dealing with high level texts can be lessened and successful task completion facilitated according to the extent of his/her familiarity with the:
- theme(s)
- type of task and operations involved
- type of text (genre)

- interactional schemata (scripts and frames) involved as the availability to the learner of unconscious or "routinized" schemata can free the learner to deal with other aspects of performance, or assist in anticipating text content and organization
- necessary background knowledge (assumed by the producer)
- relevant socio-cultural knowledge (e.g. knowledge of social norms and variations, social conventions and rules, language forms appropriate to the context, references connected with national or cultural identity, and distinctive differences between the learner's culture and the target culture and intercultural awareness [1,2,8])

Among the text characteristics that are most important and relevant in terms of the topic of the present article are: "tremens" and situational pertinence. Let's elaborate on these in more detail.

Motive is the main driving force of every activity, including communication. Communicative goals are achieved by the realization of numerous corresponding intentions, materialized in language. These communicative intentions are the conscious intents of a user/producer (speaker or writer) to make an impact on a receiver/interlocutor. While producing such a textual stimulus a user is anticipating a relevant and adequate textual response from the receiver.

The choice of the effective means is mostly determined by the main *theme* of a text, which is the conceptual and perceptive core of a *text*. Themes are topics that are the subjects of discourse, conversation, reflection or composition, and are the focus of attention in particular communicative acts. In verbal interaction, the user and interlocutor(s) share the same theme, and its determinants include the context, although their observation and interpretation of the context may differ.

The effect – and often all or part of the function – of a communicative act is to increase the *area of congruence* in the mutual understanding of the thematic and contextual situation in the interest of effective communication so as to serve the purposes of the participants. On a higher level of communication (and proficiency, accordingly) it is much more difficult to bridge the differences in values and beliefs, politeness conventions, social expectations, and so on, in terms of which the parties interpret the interaction, unless they have acquired the relevant intercultural awareness. In other words, mutual knowledge about the theme is crucial in learning practice and is an objective factor affecting the linear unfolding structure of the text (the stimulus), the process of receiving and processing the information, and the textual reaction of a receiver (response). The higher the level of the stimulus, the more thematic and contextual knowledge a receiver should

have. Furthermore, comprehension (reception and interpretation) of a high level text by a learner would not be appropriate and adequate without introducing him/her to the *extensive* background knowledge about the central theme of the text.

Situational pertinence is the next important factor, which is closely related to the theme in that the latter is a reflection of the specific socio-cultural situation. Dridze noticed that "texts are created by life and social situations as a result of the striving to resolve a problem" [Dridze, translated from Russian: 4, p.60]. Text is situational by its nature. There are certain determinants included in a communicative situation: a specific physical environment, a time, a place, circumstances of the interaction, background knowledge of the participants, presupposition, social status of the participants, their mutual relationships, etc.

Striving to resolve a situational "problem" and to achieve the goal of communication at a higher level, lead its participants to create and produce text of different types at the same level. The more an individual resolves such situations (similar in different aspects), the more easily the process of production and interpretation of texts of different types with positive results proceeds. In other words, in the process of social activity, an individual acquires a specific "set" of knowledge constructs that exist in his/her consciousness as schemata or models. While perceiving language expressions, the very first operation of a receiver is to tune in to a corresponding type of text, which results in an activation of knowledge pertaining to the conventional schemata of text production (on the level of text macrostructure and linear unfolding).

Thus, in a repeating communicative situation, a certain type of text with a standardized communicative and pragmatic context is produced or received, which is a type of *invariant* that determines the stereo-typicality of the text's compositional structure and the choice of language means. The more such high level invariants the learner has at his/her disposal, the better his/her response will conform and match the stimulus.

In evaluating a text as a basis for communicative tasks designed to enable a learner to acquire a higher level of proficiency, other factors such as text type, linguistic complexity, discourse structure, linear structure of the text and its relevance for the learner(s) [2,3,4,6,10], need to be considered:

- *Text type*: *Familiarity* with the genre and domain as a certain "sphere" of communication (including assumed background and socio-cultural knowledge) helps the learner in anticipating and comprehending text structure and content; the abstract nature of high level

text also definitely plays a role; increasing the learner's abstract vocabulary and paying attention to complex grammar relations (see below) also plays a crucial role in achieving high level proficiency.

- *Linguistic complexity*: *Particularly complex syntax* draws on many language and cognitive resources of a learner that might otherwise be available for dealing with content (for example, long sentences with a number of subordinate clauses, non-continuous constituents, multiple negation, scope ambiguity, etc.). It is absolutely necessary to work on students' skills to deal with high-level syntactic structures to significantly increase their ability to adequately react to high-level textual stimulus.

- *Organization of discourse*: *Textual coherence and clear organization* (for example, temporal sequencing, main points clearly signaled and presented before illustration of the points), the explicit rather than implicit nature of information presented, and the absence of conflicting or surprising information, all contribute to reducing information-processing complexity; in high level texts the above mentioned factors most likely would not be present and the learner should be ready to deal with that.

- *Linear structure*: *It is assumed that a longer text requires more processing time* and there is an additional cognitive load on the learner, including the risk of fatigue and distraction; however, a long text that is not too dense and contains considerable redundancy may be easier than a short abstract text with implicit context, references, connotations, etc. In other words, the length of texts is not a relevant issue in terms of the level of verbal interaction.

- *Relevance to the learner*: *A high level of motivation due to personal interest in the content* will help sustain the learner's comprehension. While the occurrence of low-frequency vocabulary may be expected to increase the difficulty of a text in general, a text containing quite specific vocabulary on a familiar and relevant topic is likely to be less demanding for a learner and may be approached with greater confidence. Confidence almost always helps augment both interest on a subject and motivation to learn, and vice versa; embedding a comprehension task within another task may help make it inherently purposeful and increase learner involvement. Encouraging learners to express their personal knowledge, ideas and opinions within a comprehension task may also increase motivation and confidence, and activate linguistic competence related to the text.

Conclusions

All of the above text factors and parameters reflect in many points the current model of communication, which, from the perspective of the theory of verbal (textual) interaction, is interpreted as "an exchange of acts of producing and interpreting/receiving texts" [Dridze, 4, p. 87, translated from Russian]. Therefore, it is necessary to organize a text in a way that the communicative intention, goal, user's purpose and theme can be adequately interpreted by a receiver/learner. On the other hand, the receiver/learner him/herself should be ready to perceive the textual product, or should be motivated, purposeful, and thematically and "situationally" oriented. These process are interactive. They lead to development of communicative competence, which significantly depends upon the factors and characteristics of the oral or written text.

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