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**READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING:
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract: *The paper is focused on theoretical approaches to teaching and learning reading skills in a foreign language. Various theories, methods and approaches of language teaching are presented as well as their impact on and implications for teaching reading in a foreign language.*

Key words: *approaches, foreign language, learning, reading, teaching, theory.*

**ЧТЕНИЕ В ПРЕПОДАВАНИИ И ИЗУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА:
ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ**

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Аннотация: *В статье рассматриваются теоретические подходы к преподаванию и обучению навыкам чтения на иностранном языке. Представлены различные теории, методы и подходы к преподаванию языка, а также их влияние и результаты в обучении чтению на иностранном языке.*

Ключевые слова: *подходы, иностранный язык, изучение, чтение, обучение, теория.*

Introduction

Reading as a language skill is a very important component of foreign language learning having high potential in developing language competences such as the knowledge of vocabulary, text structure and organization, appropriateness of different kinds of texts in different social contexts, and the insight of using various learning and reading strategies. Reading can be defined as the process by which the meaning of a written text is understood (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 483) or as a set of interrelated skills needed to learn from reading in order to comprehend meaning from varied texts (Connors-Tadros, 2014, p. 1). As it can be seen from these definitions, reading has its purpose – it is reading comprehension which is also the product of reading specific text. Reading involves many different cognitive skills, including letter and word recognition, knowledge of syntax, and recognition of text types and text structure (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 483). Reading process has been conceived by the linguists differently over the past several decades. This is demonstrated in various theories of reading and, consequently, in constantly changing approaches to teaching reading.

Reading theories in the context of foreign language learning and teaching

It was not until about 40 years ago that reading theory started to be applied to foreign language learning and teaching. Even then, it was given less attention than theories of language and foreign language learning. The attempts to develop and theorize the models of the reading process itself were limited. Some of these attempts meant different levels of theorizing - methods, theories, or approaches.

In the second part of 19th and in the early 20th century, the *grammar-translation* method dominated foreign language teaching (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 6). At that time, when the approaches to language teaching were based on a long tradition of the study of classical languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew), it was believed that language learning involved understanding how language was structured through grammatical categories (case, gender, number). This detailed analysis of the grammar rules was necessary as the grammar knowledge was to be used in the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the foreign language. While no systematic attention was paid to developing speaking and listening skills in a foreign language, reading and writing were in the focus. Reading was considered to be a cognitive process dealing with how the brain mentally applied the grammatical rules of the language to written text in order to understand. Reading was not explicitly taught in foreign language classes; it was seen as an incidental skill that would develop as an adjunct to general language development through the exposure to written texts (Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996, p. 16).

In the early 20th century *structural linguistics* emerged in reaction to traditional linguistics. Structural approach emphasizes the importance of language as a system and investigates the place that linguistic units such as sounds, words, sentences have within this system (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 563). In its widest sense, the term structural linguistics has been used for various groups of linguists, including those of the Prague School, but most often it is used to refer to a group of American linguists such as Bloomfield (1942) and Fries (1952) whose work was based on the theory of behaviorism and had a considerable influence on some language teaching methods (audiolingual method). Behaviorist approaches to language learning regarded the language learner as a passive recipient of correct language structure; the role of the learner was to memorize language forms accurately to extend his/her own knowledge of language formation. It was thought that individual linguistic items could be learned in isolation and in a rather fixed structural progression, and could also be added to other knowledge of the language in a form of a set of building blocks. This represents a *bottom-up approach* to language learning. The dominant approach to teaching reading was phonic approach, based on the phoneme which was considered to be the building block of language. Learning to read implied the gradual mastery of sounds and the alphabetic symbols for those sounds, words, simple sentences and complex sentences, while meaning became incidental (Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996). Later, the idea of phoneme as the basic unit was replaced by the importance of the word, so the word recognition became the main objective of reading instruction.

The next major shift in the 1960s was led by Chomsky with the theory of *transformational-generative grammar* (Chomsky, 1965). This theory implied that: people's knowledge of the rules of language was innate; the learning occurred by

understanding the rules through observation and deduction; these rules can be applied to create new knowledge. This shift was a signal for a return to cognitive models of language meaning that the learner was involved in mentally in a problem-solving activity. Reading process was considered to involve decoding, starting with the recognition of individual sounds and words, then going to with the matching of sound to printed text and gradual building up of sounds into words. Reading instruction was considered as a passive and bottom-up process. It was seen as a skill learned through drills, rules, memorization, and categorization.

Since the 1970s, an interest has been awakened for the social and communicative aspects of language (Halliday, 1973; Hymes, 1972). A new focus of interest, alongside a cognitive approach of Chomsky, involved meaning and the way people exchange meaning and understand each other in various social contexts. Initially, communicative language teaching was focused on the ability to use the functions (e.g. asking for clarifications, making enquiries, greetings and introduction) and notions of language (concepts such as time, space, location). This method became known as *functional-notional method*. More recently, in the 1980s and 1990s, there have been remarkable interests in systemic functional linguistics and discourse analysis as the means of identifying and analyzing communicative purpose of language and, specifically, how the language interacts with the social setting in which it occurs. More recent teaching methods, such as *process approach* and *genre-based approach* (both approaches to teaching of writing skills) have developed from such interests. These two more recent approaches are also important in teaching reading in the terms of recognition of the discourse community in which the learners will be functioning, e.g. a hotel, factory or hospital (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 245).

Psycholinguistic approach is the approach to reading which has had the greatest influence in foreign language classroom since the 1970s. Psycholinguistics refers to the mental processes that a person uses in producing and understanding language, and how humans learn language: it includes the study of speech perception, the role of memory, concepts and other processes in language use, and how social and psychological factors affect the use of language (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 473). Reading is considered to be an active process of constructing meaning which is created through the interaction of the reader and the written text. Kenneth Goodman, a major author on psycholinguistic theory of reading, suggested that readers draw on three systems as they read: graphophonic referring to word sounds and symbols, syntactic referring to languages structures and grammar, and semantic referring to meaning-making aspect (Goodman, 1967). Frank Smith (1978), another major author in this area, considered background knowledge and non-visual information as important as visual symbols on the page and pointed to the role of prediction in reading suggesting that readers sample the text in order to confirm these predictions. These *top-down* or meaning-making concepts contrast with previous views of reading as a passive decoding of letters to sounds, words and sentences. The factors which facilitate reading involve not only a reader usage of the graphophonic, syntactic and semantic systems of the language, but also the reader's ability to predict, confirm and correct those predictions. According to more recent researches in psycholinguistic theories, reading may be a combination of bottom-up and top-down processes.

Reading is an interactive process (Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980) in which successful readers use a number of cognitive decoding and prediction strategies in combination in order to arrive at meaning.

Psycholinguistic approaches to reading have been challenged by the researches examining how learners' reading practices relate to their social and cultural settings. *Social reading theorists* (Barton, 1994; Cook-Gumperz, 1986) pointed out that reading deals with human relations and purposes - the way people derive meaning is based on their interpretations of these aspects of the text. According to *critical literacy theorists* (Freire, 1983; Gee, 1990; Wallace, 1992), the degree of readers' socializing into literacy practices will vary according to the role that literacy plays in different social groups. Social and critical theorists suggest that classroom discussion focusing on the relationship of the text content to the reader's own cultural and social experience should be a part of reading instruction together with the emphasis on the context, purpose and structure of the text, the nature of written language, and linguistic features of the language used in the text.

Implications of reading theories for the teaching reading in a foreign language

The previously explained theories demonstrate the considerable changes in the recommended teaching approaches and theorists' view of the reading process. New approaches do not mean that previous ones are no longer relevant, but rather that we should consider how previous approaches can be accommodated within new theoretical insights.

As for the teachers of reading in a foreign language, it is important to have a repertoire of theoretical and practical knowledge at their disposal in order to be able to draw on a range of strategies for teaching reading according to their learners' needs and goals. As for the readers in a foreign language, the following principles should be applied (Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996, p. 24):

- it is necessary that readers understand the cultural and social purposes and roles of the text and process and comprehend its meaning;
- they need to be able to read critically to understand the way the text positions them;
- readers need to understand how language works as a system;
- they also need to understand that reading involves various skills and strategies, including social and cultural knowledge, knowledge of the language of the text, strategies of predicting or skimming for the gist of the meaning; and
- it is wise that the classroom tasks start with a focus on whole texts in context so that the learners could understand the overall structure of the text.

Conclusion

Different approaches to the teaching of reading in a foreign language are reflections not only of general currents in the theory of language learning/teaching but also of the developments in reading theories which include newly developed psycholinguistic approaches, interactive models as well as social and critical theories

of reading. All these approaches were developed with a pragmatic goal – to create an efficient reader in a foreign language. Efficient reading includes several features (Ur, 1991): readers' motivation for reading, their awareness of the purpose of reading, using different strategies for reading different texts, having and using background information, predicting, paying attention to find main ideas in the text, comprehensible language and content, automatic recognition of common word combinations. In order to support students to become efficient readers in a foreign language, teachers may encourage them to get a lot of successful reading experience, give them interesting tasks before reading, and give the time to read.

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