CURRENT PRACTICES IN TEACHING EAP READING

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a small scale study investigating the way in which EAP teachers carry out reading lessons and the ways in which they conceptualise EAP reading. It indicates that teachers are fairly bound to the book, use little metalanguage, and focus little on language *per se.* Two important views of reading that emerge are product focus and process focus.

KEY WORDS: Reading, EAP, process, product.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo informa sobre una investigación a pequeña escala de la manera en la que los profesores de inglés para fines académicos (EAP) llevan a cabo las clases de lectura y el modo en que conceptualizan la lectura para esos fines. Se señala cómo los profesores están muy unidos al libro, usan poco metalenguaje y apenas se centran en la lengua tal cual. Dos puntos de vista importantes que sobresalen son, por un lado, el enfoque del producto y, por otro, el del proceso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Lectura, inglés para fines académicos, proceso, producto.

1. INTRODUCTION: PREVIOUS RESEARCH INTO READING CLASSROOMS

The standard beginning for any paper on reading is to comment that in the past 10, 15 or 20 years, depending on the date of the publication, "reading has emerged as a major issue" (Grabe 1986: 25), or "interest... has burgeoned" (Bernhardt 1991:1.) This is indeed true, and there is a great deal published about reading in EFL, ESL, and EAP: we have a steadily growing body of research which describes a large number of aspects of the reading process, the reader, language factors in reading, including vocabulary, orthographic factors, and background knowledge, and which demonstrates the role of these factors in reading. There is also some research into the efficiency of different teaching methods, e.g. of different prereading formats (e.g. Hamp-Lyons 1985; Tudor 1988; Taglieber, Johnson and Yarbrough 1988). We also have a large number of publications recommending teaching methods, with the most noteworthy articles being Williams (1986), Grabe (1991), and, espe-

cially important for an EAP setting, Shih (1992). There are also numerous books approaching this area through the discussion of various approaches to lesson planning (e.g. Aebersold and Field 1997, Nuttal 1996, Williams 1984). More recently there is also some emerging research looking at the reading activities in coursebooks (Mera Rivas 1999).

However, there is almost no research which describes the teaching of reading as it is actually practised in the classroom, either in EGP or in EAP. The remark made by Brumfit and Mitchell (1989) about language teaching in general seems to me particularly apt to the status of research in reading in a foreign language: "it must be emphasised that we lack empirical support for much of what is claimed to be 'known' about teaching methodology." They go on to say that "exciting recommendations have abounded in the last twenty years... but there has been remarkably little descriptive work" (3-4). Richards, also writing in 1989, comments that "missing in the growing literature on second-language reading, however, is consideration of teachers themselves and what it is that effective teachers do in the reading classroom. What teaching and learning behaviours can an observer expect to observe in the classroom of a good reading teacher?" (14). The situation has not changed fundamentally since the publication of that paper. Recent books which deal with reading or with EAP do not include descriptive research at all: Aebersold and Field (1997), for example, give examples of classes, but I was unable to verify in their book that these were classes that actually took place, rather than imaginary classrooms which they had scripted to illustrate specific points. Other descriptions are normally written by teachers/researchers, trying to crystallise a series of lessons which they themselves had taught in order to illustrate specific points (e.g. Hamps-Lyons 1983, Wallace 1995). A recent handbook on EAP, (Jordan 1997), discusses the teaching of EAP reading but without any reference to actual classroom behaviour.

I am aware of only two studies which look at reading classrooms. Richards 1989, quoted above, focuses on one lesson given by one reading teacher. Entitled 'Profile of an Effective L2 Reading Teacher', it is an attempt to uncover, through classroom observation, what it is that makes a reading teacher effective. There are, however, many problems inherent in any attempt to discuss effective teaching. Richards' "effective teacher" was judged to be effective as a result of "highly positive impression", "positive reports" by a supervisor, and "positive student evaluations." (16) A more recent study is Schneider (2001a, 2001b), which was motivated to uncover what actually happens in the classroom during an EAP reading course, in contrast to what is referred to in methodological recommendations. However, during her research, Schneider quickly realised that what was happening in the classroom was first and foremost directed towards the final test.

The study reported here is a small scale enquiry adding to our knowledge and understanding of the way in which reading classes in EAP are conducted. Its purpose is to examine what teachers actually do in the classroom, and to some extent uncover what their reasons for doing this are. As Brumfit and Mitchell say, "the arguments for concentration on description is that expectations of teachers, recommendations of teacher educators and theorists, and the demands of administrators, are often rightly concerned with what ought to be. However, there is little

point in constantly pushing for an ideal without any understanding of what in fact happens" (1989: 11-12). Because of the problems inherent in evaluation, I do not evaluate teaching methodologies or teaching behaviours in terms of effectiveness.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 General

The study was conducted at a language centre with a university setting in the UK. As part of its activities, this institution provides a variety of programmes focusing on language, study skills, and EAP. Entry into these programmes is at a number of pre-determined points, according to the student's initial level of English, and they are designed to feed into each other. Final admission onto undergraduate and postgraduate courses at the university is contingent upon passing the final test at the end of the pre-sessional programme. I observed classes which were conducted on two of the programmes, though one of the classes I observed was a special class being conducted for a group of EFL teachers who were going back to their country once the course ended, rather than entering university studies in the UK. Six classes were observed, each lasting one and a half hours.

2.2 The teachers

Four teachers were involved in this study, 2 male and 2 female. All were highly experienced teachers, with more than 15 years of EFL experience each. Their experience on the programme they were actually teaching on varied from first time to 9 years. Three had MA degrees in EFL, TESOL or Applied Linguistics from UK institutions, and one was in the final phase of MA studies. They were selected on the basis of their willingness to take part in the study, and mutual availability —that is, they had to be teaching a reading class during a period when I myself was free to observe and record. Two additional criteria had to be satisfied: firstly, students had to agree to being recorded and videotaped; secondly, all teachers made it clear that they would only allow recording to take place once they had established rapport with the class.

2.3 Data collection

After receiving permission to observe and record a lesson from both teacher and students, each of the lessons was videotaped and audio recorded. For technical reasons, it was possible to place only one audio recorder in each class, and as a result recordings of students' group work are not available. The audio recordings were then transcribed. Where possible, teachers were asked to view the video of the lesson and to comment on what they were doing and thinking during the lesson. In

addition, in some cases it was possible to discuss the lesson with some of the students in the class, but this was normally within a few days rather than immediately afterwards. Thus an attempt was made to involve all the participants in the lessons in the study. This was done for two reasons. Firstly, it was recognised that both teachers and students would have meaningful contributions to make based on their perceptions of the lesson. These findings could then be triangulated. Secondly, teachers and students were recognised as stakeholders in the research endeavour, thus being entitled to express their views of what had happened in the lesson. However, this was in fact only very partly successful, and in fact neither teachers nor students always took the opportunity to discuss the lessons.

3. GENERAL FINDINGS

A number of general findings emerge from the data, and seem to be common to the classes observed. These are the following:

- In five classes out of the six, the teacher used a book. In three cases this was a unit out of McGovern, Matthews and Mackay (1994); in two cases it was a unit out of Abdulaziz and Stover (1989). In all of these five classes the book was followed fairly closely, with fairly minimal variation. In one case the teacher added a short pre-reading activity to the pre-reading activity in the book; in another case the teacher skipped some of the post-reading activities but not much more. The general shape of the lessons was thus dictated by the book, though the internal structure of some of the activities varied (see section 4 below).
- Teachers give examples of their own reading behaviour: they describe their own strategies when doing an exercise, or refer to their own reasons for reading.
- Other learning experiences of the students are referred to, such as the writing the students were doing for the language course, and the presentations they were doing in the speaking class. The class is thus experienced in the context of other learning experiences, and not in a vacuum.
- Target reading performance is discussed. Interestingly, this was mainly with reference to the exam which the students would take at the end of the course. Although all the students were working on projects for the pre-sessional course, during which they were doing quite a bit of reading, there was no reference to the individual reading they were doing for their own projects.
- There was not a great deal of use of the metalanguage of reading; the two metalinguistic terms which were used most were skimming and scanning. I am not sure why this is the case. This may be because of the textbook, taking into account the heavy reliance on the book observed in these lessons. It is also possible that other metalinguistic terms are not amenable to use in the EAP classroom, and are not easily explained. There was also some use of other more general terms (e.g. mention of cohesive markers, cause-effect markers, etc.)

– Knowledge of the world figures quite heavily, and connections were being made by the teachers to world events. There were a great number of references to Princess Diana and the media, since some of the lessons were recorded quite soon after she died. There was also a great deal of discussion of WWII and of technological developments in the 20th century, which arose in one class as the result of the topic of the text being read.
– There was fairly minimal focus on language, though there may have been more language work going on when students were sitting in groups and when they needed to discuss what they had read with each other. In terms of lexis, there was explanation of essential items only; these were often lexical items included in the rubric (e.g. "abstract;" "diplomatic agenda"), which were needed to carry out the tasks at hand. On the whole, only minor corrections of language were made (often pronunciation). In one class there was quite a lot of pronunciation work going on, but this may have been the result of the composition of the class —this was the group who were going back to their country at the end of term. The teacher said later that they would do pronunciation work with any class with whom this came up, but my impression was that this was strengthened by knowing that these students would need pronunciation work as well as by the fact that they were a homogeneous group with similar pronunciation issues.

In one case, there was fairly lengthy discussion of tenses in the article being read, but this was done in order to illustrate the way in which understanding tense use contributes to understanding the chronology of events. There were other cases where grammatical points were made without reference to the text. The same teacher, in another lesson, looked quite often at sentences and analysed them, often looking at words which can be both verbs and nouns —"results," "improving," etc. Finally, there was some focus on discourse markers, often because the textbook recommended this.

The obvious question with respect to all the above is to what extent these phenomena are specific to a reading lesson, and, indeed, the answer seems to be that they probably are not (apart from the emphasis on skimming and scanning). Interestingly, the same is applicable to Richards' (1989) findings, many of which, such as 'instructional activities have a teaching rather than a testing focus' (24) and 'lessons have a clear structure' (25) are also characteristic of good lessons in general, and not only reading lessons.

4. TWO LESSONS COMPARED

4.1 The materials

Having presented some general findings, I would now like to focus on two particular lessons which to my mind raise interesting issues about what it is that we are teaching —or trying to teach— in the EAP classroom. Both lessons used the

same unit in the textbook McGovern, Matthews and Mackay, an EAP reading textbook which is highly respected and used in a large number of British universities. This provided an opportunity to see what two different teachers would make of the same unit. (The two lessons were in fact recorded on the same day.)

The lessons focused on the abstract and a number of sections of an article entitled "The New Diplomatic Agenda —Are Governments Ready?" The outline structure of the unit is as follows:

Pre-reading —discussion of what the title means. In effect readers are asked to predict the content of the article.
Task 1: Skimming the abstract to check predictions.
Task 2: Analysing the abstract in terms of situation-problem-solution.
Task 3: Looking at a list of new technological developments and then reading through a section of the article to see whether any of them is mentioned.
Task 4: Discussing the meaning and the role of the word 'therefore' which appears in the first line of the section read.
Task 5: Rereading that section: identifying the topic/main idea of each paragraph; identifying the time periods specified in the text; seeing which paragraphs relate to each time period and in which lines this is shown; and filling a table showing this.

There are two additional tasks related to the first full section of the article which the students read, and the unit then goes on to an additional text with various tasks, but since this work was done in the next lesson, it is not included in the discussion below.

4.2 Issues emerging from the analysis of the lessons

On the face of it, both teachers followed the teaching plan in the book quite faithfully, as indicated above. This can be seen in Table 1, which summarises the different stages in the two lessons, mapped onto the lesson in the book.

Table 1 indicates that the lessons were both of approximately the same length, and illustrates the way in which both teachers followed the teaching structure of the unit in the book fairly closely. However, a closer look indicates a number of differences. Firstly, within the general similar timing, specific timings were in fact quite different. There are some minor variations in the timing of instructions, for example. A more important difference is that Teacher A is taking much longer on three of the activities: Pre-reading, Task 1, and Task 4. In all three cases, this teacher spent twice as long on the task than Teacher B. (In fact, the teacher acknowledged this fact when watching the video of the lesson, and remarked that they had been quite unhappy about the lesson at its end.) In Tasks 2, 3, and 5, on which Teacher B spent more time, the difference is not as pronounced. When comparing the time spent by students reading, it emerges that in Teacher A's lesson, the total time spent reading the different texts was 22.5 minutes. In Teacher B's lesson, the total was

TABLE 1. STRUCTURE AND TIMINGS OF TWO LESSONS USING UNIT 6 OF MCGOVERN *ET AL.*

	Timings of activities (in minutes)					
		Teacher A			Teacher B	
Pre-reading		13			6.5	
Task 1: Skimming abstract		9.5			2.5	
Task 2: Analysing abstract		5			8	
Task 3: Looking at a list of technological developments and reading through a section of article to see whether any of them is mentioned	11.9	0.45	Instructions	12.4	4	Instructions
		4.25	Reading		3	Reading
		2.5	Compare list with others and discuss what article is about		1.25	Checking answers
		4.7	Discussion of skimming and scanning		4.15	Additional discussion of general meaning of paragraph
Task 4: Discussing 'therefore'		8.75			4.3	
Task 5: Re-reading and identifying the topic or the main idea of each paragraph, identifying the time periods in the text, and seeing which paragraphs relate to each time period.	35.7	9.8	Reading	43.9	2.5	Instructions
		6.9	Discuss in pairs		6.25	Reading
		8.5	Summarising in plenary		14.5	Group discussion
		10.5	Discussion of issues arising from text		1.2	Setting up next task
					6.6	Discussion in new groups
					4.75	Long teacher turn
					8.1	Summarising article on board
	Total: 83.9			Total: 77.6		

10.2 minutes. This difference does not seem to arise from any factors connected with the level of the two classes, which were deemed to be approximately similar.

Looking at the last set of activities, Task 5, it seems to me that there are two conceptualisations of the teaching of reading that are at work here, and which direct the two teachers in their thinking, in their organisation of classwork, and in their actions in class. It is difficult to draw the exact borderline between the two conceptualisations, and one would need to have additional data as to how the teachers saw the lesson, but in general, it seemed to me that Teacher A reflects a product-oriented approach, and Teacher B, a process-oriented one.

TABLE 2 ORGANISATION OF TASK 5 IN UNIT 6 OF MCGOVERN ET AL: TEACHER A

TIME (MINUTES)	ACTIVITY	MODE	
9.8	Reading the text and fill in table	S	Individual
6.9	Discussion in pairs	S <-> S	Pairwork
8.5	Summarising the reading	T<-> SS	Plenary
8	Discussion of world history	T<-> SS	Plenary
2.5	Looking at tenses	T -> SS	Plenary

Both teachers add to the activities included in Task 5. Teacher A asks the learners, once they have read and filled in the table, to discuss the two tasks together in pairs. Once the students have done this, the topics of the different paragraphs are summarised in a plenary, through asking learners, in turn, what their answers were, and then the time periods in the text are discussed, again in the plenary. The emphasis thus seems to be on getting the right answer, and at the end of the last section, the teacher does in fact provide the answer. A great deal of time is spent in plenary, and most of the interaction is between individual students and the teacher, as illustrated in Table 2.

Teacher B, on the other hand, uses a different strategy. After the students have filled in the table, they are asked to discuss their answers in groups and reach agreement; after a fairly long group discussion of 14.5 minutes, the teacher sets up a new task, a version of jigsaw, in which each group has to choose one person who will go to another group and discuss the solutions of the group with the others. (Note that this is Teacher B's addition to the lesson plan, and is not suggested in the Teachers' Book). As can be seen in Table 1 and in Table 3, students are given nearly 7 minutes for this activity.

Once this is done, there is a discussion of the article in plenary. The main topics of the paragraphs were put on the board by the teacher while the students were in groups —i.e. the product of the reading is dispensed with fairly quickly; the underlying message seems to be that the product is not especially interesting. The following plenary discussion concentrates on the more problematic issue of the time periods mentioned in the article. What happens is that there is quite a bit of disagreement between students on various issues, with students arguing for different readings of the text.

What Teacher B seems to have done is to set up a sequence of activities which had a number of pedagogic foci. Firstly, a great deal of the interaction is between the students. Of the total of 43.9 minutes devoted to this task, about 21.2 minutes are spent by students interacting with a number of other students. Secondly, the way the task was set up forces the learners to process and then re-process the text. This means that they are forced to examine their own understanding of the text a number of times: first, while reading the text individually; secondly, while discussing it in groups; and thirdly, and this is probably the most important part,

TABLE 3 ORGANISATION OF TASK 5 IN UNIT 6 OF MCGOVERN ET AL (1994): TEACHER B			
TIME (MINUTES)	ACTIVITY	MODE	
2.5	Setting up Task 5.2	T -> SS	plenary
6.25	Reading	S	individual
14.5	Discussion	SS <-> SS	group
1.2	Setting up next task	T -> SS	plenary
6.66	Discussion in new groups	SS <-> SS	group
4.75	Teacher turn	T -> SS	plenary
8.1	Summarising article on board	T<-> SS	plenary

when presenting their understanding of the text to a new group. This is expressed by the teacher at the end of the activity in the following words:

> what you've been doing here is that first of all you worked as a group when you've come to an agreement as a group about the main ideas and then you sent a representative to another group who may have had to to defend your point of view against a different point of view. So you have (...) had the opportunity to argue, to defend your case or to agree or to add more detail to what was said by that representative... This (...) is obviously a useful exercise to carry out; you're always defending and justifying (...) that's academia, that's what happens in academic circles...basically.

The teacher recreated the purposeful nature of reading in a focused way, simulating, as I have indicated above, a real academic situation in which what the mental representation of the text read becomes the focus of discussion with others. During such discussions, our understandings of texts are shaped and re-shaped. Thus, product and process merge.

Additional points come out at the very end of the lesson, with the teacher summarising the lesson with the following words:

> You've got a very good point there (...) you've argued it well and you know *(turning to another student)* —you've made your point as well. You're not going to get a definitive answer to this. What you've achieved at the moment is, because of this discussion you've now got a pretty good idea of the text, I hope it's all pretty clear at the level that you need to have understood it, you're putting things into your own words, which I like. You're not just relying on the actual words of the text. At the beginning of this course you were very reliant on the actual words of the text. Now you're expressing things in your own words.

This seems to me to be preparing the students for academic reading in three important ways. Firstly, the teacher acknowledges that texts may have multiple meanings which can, indeed must, be discussed. Importantly, the teacher makes the point that no definitive answer will be given. Secondly, the teachers makes it ex-

plicit that comprehension can be achieved at different levels —and that the students needed to understand the text at a specific level. Thirdly, the point is being made that in the academic community which they are about to enter, students and academics are expected to summarise reading in their own words, rather than quote verbatim from source, with or without acknowledgement.

One might claim that this is not a reading activity, but a speaking activity, and that learners whose productive skills are not up to par would find this task difficult to do: anyone who has studied a foreign language knows that there are many occasions on which we know that we have understood something, but we would be unable to reproduce the result of our comprehensions. However, in order to function in an academic community, comprehension on its own is not sufficient. What is required is action as a result of comprehension, action expressed either as a piece of writing, or action in a laboratory, and so on. It seems to me that here we are getting at the heart of what EAP reading is about.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Apart from the obvious limitation of being based on a very small number of lessons, there are a number of other limitations which may not be as easily solved.

Firstly, it was important to teachers that the recording should be done after they had established a good rapport with the students. This meant that it was impossible to collect data about the students' first encounter with some of the metalanguage they were taught, or to document their work at the beginning of the course.

Secondly, there is the technical problem of recording the students. For technical reasons, as well as in order to minimise disruption, I did not place a taperecorder at each table. This may, however, be extremely important. I have argued above that Teacher B's lesson was process-oriented and that it encouraged students to engage with the text in a way that is not possible if there is a pre-determined answer to their understandings. However, there is no evidence that in the lesson itself, students were actually negotiating among themselves the meaning of the text. It is entirely possible that in each group, there was one person who forced their opinion on the others. It may be quite difficult to acquire data that will throw light on this question.

Thirdly, there is the obvious interfering presence of the researcher and the recording equipment. Not surprisingly, all recordings begin with a reference to the cameras, and each lesson always contains an additional reference, somewhere, to the researcher or to the recording equipment. There is always the possibility that some of the findings may be an artefact of being observed —for example, teachers may rely on the book to a lesser extent if they are not being recorded.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has gone a little way in describing what teachers do in EAP reading classrooms, focusing on the teaching strategies of two teachers. There are

two types of general observations that arise from the previous sections. Firstly, a number of quite simple question still await answers:

– How much time do teachers spend on pre-reading? What is pre-reading used for?
– Is metalanguage really used so little in the classroom? Or is it used more at earlier points in teaching?
– How do teachers interpret the tasks in the books? There is some evidence that teachers have divergent interpretations of what the textbook does (Latif). This study also indicates that teachers will add different elements to tasks, as teacher B did.
– What is happening within groups when they are asked to discuss their reading?
– Where, within such lessons as I have described, do learners 'learn' to perform the operations needed for EAP reading?

The second question that arises is whether the product/process distinction that I have made here is a relevant one, and if it is, in what way it is important and in what way it is expressed within classroom organisation, task management or a teacher's behaviour.

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