

# READING AT VERY BEGINNING LEVELS<sup>1</sup>: USING STUDENT'S AUTONOMY

ANTÔNIO R.M. SIMÕES  
University of Kansas at Lawrence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is often neglected in beginning language instruction because it is difficult to talk about or even comprehend the ideas found in the texts without having recourse to translation, word-for-word reading, and question-and-answer comprehension check. Increasingly, research indicates that traditional reading tasks may be at fault (Hamp-Lyons (1985); Bernhardt (1986a, 1986b); Lee (1988)). Consequently, teachers are searching for alternative approaches to the usual approaches to reading instruction.

This paper first illustrates alternative tasks for the reading component of language curricula at the *beginning* of first year college in the United States. Reading strategies for more advanced stages in first and second years have already been proposed in Stauffer (1969), Bernhardt (1986b), Lee (1986, 1989), Kern et al (1989). The approach presented here is then applied to reading in Portuguese. These alternative tasks will be discussed in the following format: (1) the establishment of what the teacher may *expect* from students and what the student may expect from the teacher, (2) activation of *students' background* knowledge by creating common target language reading strategies from individual source language strategies, (3) *examination* of the assignment of meaning-based and learner-centered classification systems which illustrate particular concepts, and concludes with (4) *evaluation* techniques for assessing comprehension of a range of textual messages.

## 2. AN APPROACH TO READING STRATEGIES

In (2.1) there is a core of directions that can be expanded or modified by the teacher. These directions are to be used in a broad sense, as an underlying reference. In actual classroom practice, interaction between teacher and students may produce confusing results. This core of directions provides the teacher with a reference in case classroom reading activities fail to produce students' response.

### 2.1. Teacher's Underlying Reference

2.1.0. Warm-up: Title interpretation and picture interpretation if any.

2.1.1. GENERAL THEME: What is the dominant idea in the text? Why do students think so?

2.1.2. CHARACTERS: Who is/are the character/s in the text? Can you describe them according to their age, sex, country of origin and so on?

2.1.3. TONE: What is the tone of the text? (Formal, informal, playful, somber, ironic)

2.1.4. EFFECT: What effect does the text produce on the learner? What is the purpose of the text? To inspire horror, laughter, reflection, sympathy, empathy, depression, disillusionment, mystery)

The underlying reference in (2.1.) is intended efficiently to stimulate teacher and foreign language student interaction based on both information-processing systems (e.g. Jakobson, 1962; Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and on a literary analysis framework (e.g., Brooks and Warren, 1943; Forster, 1954; Poe, 1984):

emitter	message	receiver
author	text	reader

One of the elements derived from information-processing systems that inspires the present reading activities is that the reader's experience needs to be used in interaction with the incoming information from the text as Lee (1989) has also observed. From techniques of literary analysis, we draw tasks that allow the teacher-student interaction to concentrate on text meaning that is based on the student's interpretation. Meaning, then, is to be found in both the reader's experience and in the

text. From my own teaching experience I have observed that traditional reading activities focus on the text only and the teacher's opinion prevails over the student's interpretation. Consequently such approaches use the learner's experience minimally, if at all. The present approach attempts to motivate interest in foreign language study by means of identifying the student's valuable experience and by giving students autonomy in the classroom. The following sections will elaborate on the four components of the framework: teacher and student expectations, use of student background knowledge, examination of text and evaluation.

## 2.2. Teacher Expectations

Teachers' expectations, when realistically established, will affect positively the teacher's performance and will give students an opportunity to produce within their own potentialities. The teacher, then, should allow the students to talk about their expectations for the reading component so that teacher and students will establish a kind of mutual "contract." The disturbing element of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986) as well as a negative feeling towards foreign languages are most likely to be eliminated after mutual expectations are established.

If a teacher is developing reading comprehension, tasks do not have to include the use of L2 on the student's part, as desirable as this may be. On the other hand, simple translation and questions that require answers which repeat sentences from the text are to be reconsidered. In the first lessons, L1 can be allowed for this particular component of reading comprehension of language programs, and gradually incorporate increasing levels of L2 until complete use of L2 is established.

Teachers should not expect students to understand texts in the same way they do, and they should avoid imposing their own reading on students. Teachers should consider what students know and do not know to avoid preconceived interpretations. It is important to take into consideration the likelihood of interpretative distortions which non-native readers may derive from a text. Students background in L2 culture is limited and they need to be asked questions that elicit limited interpretation. Later the same texts will be *recycled* for a more detailed interpretation. Naturally, one may find passages that are culturally similar and passages that are culturally divergent. The teacher should identify cultural similarities and divergencies before establishing his/her expectations towards that text interpretation.

Avoidance of detailed interpretation leads to emphasis on the semantic, cultural and pragmatic components of the text without focusing

on the syntactic and other lower level components. This emphasis on the semantic, cultural and pragmatic components will be reinforced by the use of authentic texts -- texts written by native speakers for native speakers -- which, at the very beginning level makes it unfeasible to study particular structures of a text. Emphasis on semantic, cultural and pragmatic components of the text will probably require the teacher's intervention, especially in discussions of tone and effect (2.1.3. and 2.1.4.).

Evaluation of students' comprehension must take teacher-student interaction into consideration in the classroom. At the beginning, questions about the text may be asked in L1 if needed, and gradually change into the target language. When a language curriculum begins switching the use of L1 to L2 in the evaluation of reading comprehension, teachers need to remember that the student level of comprehension is advanced, but knowledge of the target language is still limited.

### 2.3. Using Student Knowledge

Once the teacher's and student's expectations are established, one may start to explore the students' strategy or strategies. The term "strategy" is used in this paper in the sense of acquired reading habits. The approach attempted here can be seen as analogous to the image of an inverted pyramid as presented in the ACTFL (1986) view of language learning. In other words, I propose that the teacher explore students' strategies from higher linguistic components, namely pragmatics, culture, and so forth down to lower components, i.e. syntax, morphology and phonology. The beginning level will generally explore a reading assignment at higher language levels. This involves having the teacher ask students, for example, to research some aspects of target language cultural/pragmatic components in relation to the reading before reading the actual passage. Students discuss their understanding of L2 culture, and their understanding is used before beginning textual analysis. Short texts such as advertisements with pictures from L2 magazines and newspapers are a good point of departure at the beginning. These short texts are efficient not only for first steps in language learning, but also for recycling later in the program as warm-ups for longer texts.

Students' reading strategies may be either placed on the blackboard in a classificatory manner or simply used on a teacher-student interaction to "weld" the group together and bring forth students' opinions and interests. A teacher's underlying reference (e.g. 2.1.) is secondary to students' strategies. The function of a teacher in the reading

activity proposed here is ideally limited to the role of moderator.

#### 2.4. Examination of the Text

The language learner is motivated by authentic texts to which s/he can relate. As it will be demonstrated later in the application section of this paper, medium-length texts such as brief news items of one to three paragraphs each, and longer texts of one page each such as film or music reviews.

The progression idealized here is that the preliminary step discussed above may be done for a set of texts. A set of texts is a group of texts composed of 3 to 6 texts of similar length: short, medium, and long. Although the text lengths are similar in each set, the general theme of each text in a set may vary. The range of 3 to 6 texts in each set is a range based on the author's practical experience as an instructor. The exact number of texts in each set is a decision each teacher needs to make, depending on practical matters such as the number of hours a class meets and the weight carried by a reading component in the language curricula, to mention only two. Before starting interpretation of a set of texts, some first steps in activating students' strategies need to be taken.

Students will discuss with their teacher their reading strategies as well as cultural and pragmatic reactions in relation to a reading selection that they have not seen previously. The teacher will work toward the organization of all the different strategies into one or more strategies. Once cultural elements and a reading strategy or reading strategies in L2 are established, texts may begin to be analyzed according to the elicited strategie(s).

#### 2.5. Evaluation

As has been stated, testing needs to be limited to what has been done in the classroom, and students should ideally have autonomy in their reading interpretation. Testing from this perspective requires allowing students to show their autonomy. Thus, the testing design has to allow for open or unpredictable answers on the part of the student. This type of testing design has to include questions that require short-essay answers. As teachers we know that such an ideal practice is not always possible for it is time consuming. The practical solution is a testing design with both controlled answers and short essays.

The short essays, most likely in L1 at this level, will naturally reflect the student's ability to interpret the text in a coherent manner. The

student needs to organize his/her ideas into a formal answer and support convincingly his/her interpretation. A multiple-choice format is more under the teacher control, but it will usually be influenced by classroom discussion. For example, if, as a result of the teacher-student interaction, a reading strategy such as the one in 2.1. were produced, the open question would have to be asked to the student do that s/he discuss the general theme of the text or the tone used by he author and possibly the cultural elements that contribute to the tone of the text. Multiple choice questions would include these same elements, but the teacher would control (i.e. select the possible answers), once again, according to classroom discussions.

### **3. APPLICATION**

The approach discussed here emphasizes the student's autonomy in the classroom and consequently the teacher's role as a moderator. The present approach allows for eliciting reading strategies through student-teacher interaction. A series of procedures has been suggested to enable the teacher to conduct this type of interaction. The following sections attempts at this type of interaction. The following sections attempt an application of the present proposal to reading comprehension.

#### **3.1. Reading Comprehension**

The teacher's underlying reference in 2.1. and the Brazilian Portuguese language will be used in this demonstration of reading for comprehension. Except in the case of ads, any other text, short or long, needs a title. Students's first attempts to predict the content of a text start from the title and, if available pictures related to the text. Once attempts to predict the content are made, these predictions are written on the blackboard. Each class will produce its own collective strategy or strategies out of all individual learners' strategies as we detail below.

##### **3.1.1. Short Text**

The use of short texts is efficient at the beginning level of reading comprehension instruction because of the short time needed for its decoding. In one class, several short texts can be interpreted and the circulation of different texts can create a dynamic session. Due to their

length one may explore a great number of short texts during the semester. At first, understanding of the content may be checked in L1, but later in the semester, when recycling or using the texts again for warm-up purposes, students may be able to interpret these same texts through use of the L2. Ideal short texts should be accompanied by pictures. The application below assumes that students have little knowledge of Portuguese, the equivalent of a Low Novice level in the ACTFL scale.

In the introductory steps the teacher will ask students to link the picture to the text to predict what the text is about. **The teacher** will write on the blackboard the student's L1 or L2 suggestions with equivalents in both L1 and L2. Then the teacher will attempt to find out why the students have given their suggestions. After reading strategies have been discussed from the students' experience, the students should be asked to compare all suggestions and vote on the one or ones they believe to be the most appropriate. Now the instructor may participate with her/his opinion on the best interpretation.

As an example, consider the three short texts "Viaje bem. Viaje Vasp," "Muitas cabeças pensam melhor do que uma," and "Estamos ligados na ciência."

[Vide texto na página seguinte]

Show students the ad "Viaje bem," and ask them what message is being conveyed and what is their expectation from that message and picture. Such a question will generate an array of responses such as: "It's about travelling!" "Vacations!" "Airplanes!" and so forth. Their L1 suggestions will be written by the teacher on the blackboard in the target language: "Fala de viagens," "Férias," "Aviões," and so on. Students on their own may produce enough interpretation to allow the teacher to group their suggestions under a given "archisememe" (Pottier, 1968) and its semantic field. For example, under the archisememe "Férias" ("Teaveling") we may write its field "viagem, viagens, praia, praias, avião, aviões (...)"

Each of the steps in the teacher's underlying reference can form a semantic field to be explored for vocabulary and sentence formation in interaction with reading comprehension. If needed, the teacher may bring in one or more of the steps in 2.1.0.-2.1.4.. Suppose the teacher asks about the effect of the text upon the learner: "Does the ad make you feel happy?" or yet, "Does the ad make you feel well? Answers in L1 may be "Oh yes! Very well!" "I feel terrible because I cannot take vacations!" which may be rendered on the blackboard as "Claro! Muito

**Viaje  
bem.  
Viaje  
Vasp.**



**VASP**

bem!" "Horrrível porque não posso tirar férias!."

Once the teacher has explored on the blackboard the possible semantic fields for the text being studied, students will compare that listing with the words and sentences in the text. Most likely "viagem" and "bem" will be singled out, allowing students a first interpretation of the text. Then the teacher attempts to merge the different interpretations into a single one. Below we find two other texts which, together with "Viaje bem, viaje Vasp" make what was referred to as a set of texts. These three texts are an example of a set.

[Vide texto na página seguinte]

The same approach is repeated with the two other short texts "Muitas cabeças pensam melhor do que uma," and "Estamos ligados na ciência." Incorrect guesses as well as correct ones should be written on the blackboard so that students are exposed to the language. This contact with the language can prove very efficient when these same short texts are recycled later in the program.

### 3.1.2. Longer Texts

The same approach can be used for longer texts. As an example we can consider the text "Os ricos também choram."

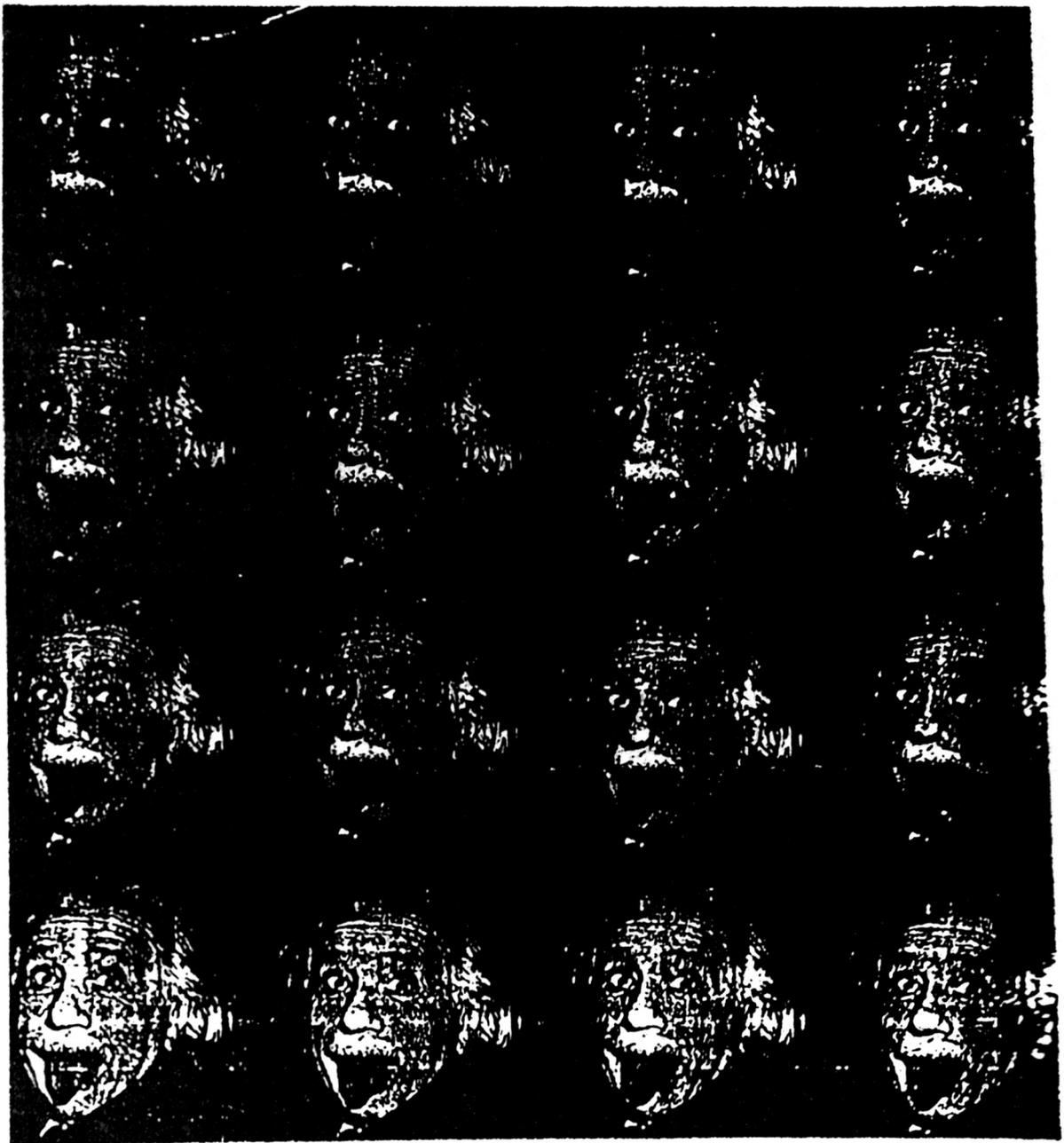
[Vide texto na página seguinte]

The reason for the choice of this text is that American students learning Portuguese most likely know about the Trumps. This will give them an advantage that is useful for beginning readers. Other texts in a set of texts of this kind may include themes and characters less known to American students. Students are again asked to give their different interpretations of the title helped by a picture if there is one. The teacher will list on the blackboard the responses and ask the students for the reasons for their choice. The teacher is attempting to find out about each learner's strategy for reading and combine the different strategies into one strategy or a group of strategies. This interaction is expected to involve the whole group dynamically because it puts into evidence the learner's positive views.

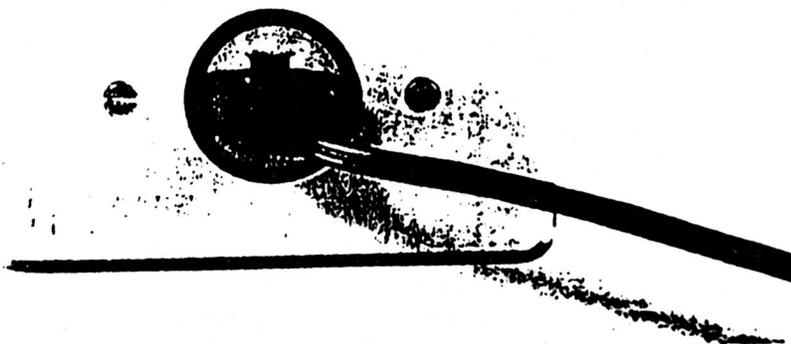
In order to explore the text "Os ricos também choram," one may consider a few possible predictions as to the content of the story from that title and the picture: "Raining in Texan Rivers," "Rich Couple

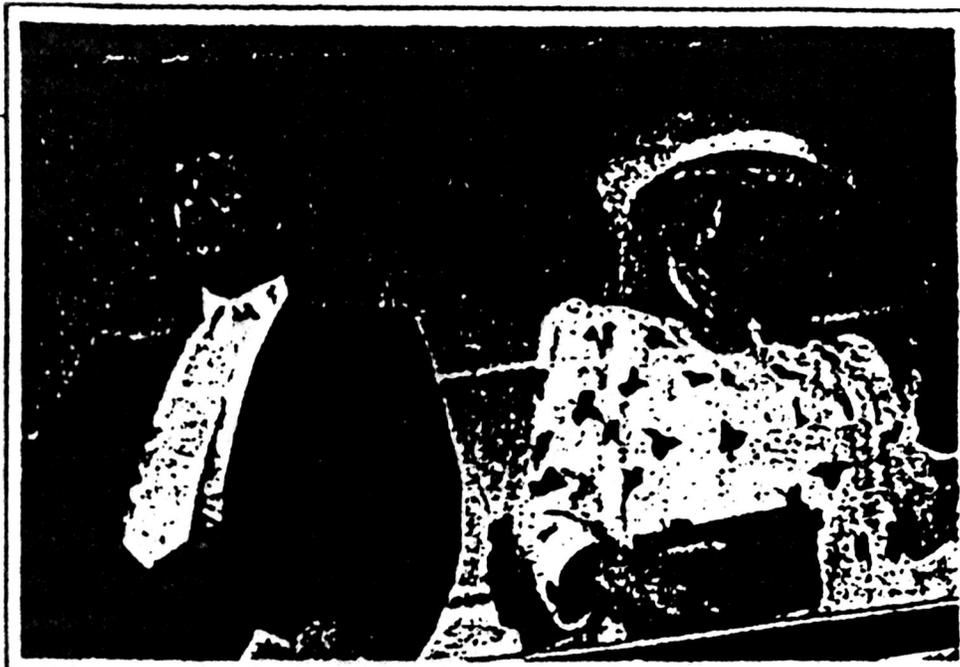
**MUITAS CABEÇAS PENSAM**

**MELHOR DO QUE UMA.**



**ESTAMOS  
LIGADOS NA  
CIÊNCIA**





MARCELO CARNAVAL

**Donald Trump e Ivana: 220 dólares de prejuízo**

## **Os ricos também choram**

O sobrenome Trump remete a muitíssimo dinheiro e talento para acumulá-lo. Envolto por esta aura de sucesso, o empresário americano **Donald Trump**, 42 anos, e sua mulher, **Ivana**, de 39 anos, desembarcaram no Brasil no sábado, dia 8. Em terras brasileiras, os Trump jogaram fora um punhado de dólares. Durante a disputa da **Copa Trump de Turfe**, o empresário apostou 250 dólares em dois páreos. Ganhou o primeiro, perdeu o segundo e levou para casa apenas 30 dólares. Total do prejuízo, 220 dólares, ou 14 milhões de vezes menos do que sua fortuna pessoal. Trump chegou ao país com a promessa de doar 1 milhão de dólares para o Hospital Sírio Libanês. Ficou só na promessa, e não deu um centavo sequer.

Crying," Couple in the Rain," "The Rich Are Crying," "Rich People on the Spot." The instructor will attempt his/her best translation of the predictions on the blackboard: "Chovendo nos rios texanos," "Casal rico chorando," "Casal na chuva," "Os ricos estão chorando," "Os ricos em evidência.". A comparison of the Portuguese sentences on the blackboard with the sentence on the article will probably lead students to select "Os ricos estão chorando" as the best approximation to the real title. The possibilities of this interaction cannot be exhausted here. There is a range of learning processes taking place during this type of interaction. Once the title has been decoded at least in part, and ideally in full, students are asked to say what they expect from the content of the whole article. Their expectations can also be grouped on the blackboard in a structured manner, namely by semantic fields when possible.

"Os ricos estão chorando" ("The Rich Are Crying") may be chosen from this limited list of interpretations. At this point, the teacher may tell the students what a possible translation to the title is: "Rich People Also Cry." With that translation in mind, students are asked to predict the general theme of the text. Suppose students suggest general themes such as Donald and Ivana Trump's love, the Trumps purchase of 220 dollars worth of paint, or yet that the Trumps are crying because of something costing 220 dollars. Again, the teacher may ask the students why they are making these hypotheses.

The teacher lists all vocabulary in the text related to money, unhappiness, profits, losses, travels, games, family, etc. according to students' suggestions. Then, attempts to group vocabulary under these headings are made as depicted below.

DINHEIRO	LUCROS	PERDAS
os dólares	acumulá-lo	o prejuízo
o prejuízo	(acumular o dinheiro)	jogaram fora
os ricos	ganhou (ganhar, past)	(jogar, past)
a fortuna	apostou (apostar, past)	perdeu (perder,
o centavo	levou para casa	past)
apostou	(levar, past)	apostou (apostar,
(apostar, past)		past)
TRISTEZA	VIAGEM	
choram (chorar)	desembarcaram	
	desembarcar, past)	

Again the students will attempt to predict the content and the teacher will list their suggestions. After selecting the closest interpretation, students are asked why they have made their choice. At this point, students should be able to read the text again and identify its theme, characters, tone, effect and other textual elements.

After having explored students' strategies, the teacher checks to see if there are important elements of interpretation missing. One should make sure that the topic sentence (e.g., "O sobrenome Trump remete a muitíssimo dinheiro e talento para acumulá-lo." in this text), a pivotal point, is clearly understood. The teacher may write on the blackboard their L1 responses in the target language, in this case, Portuguese: "Quais são os personagens desse artigo? - Donald e Ivana Trump. Como são eles? - Ricos, americanos, 42 e 39 anos. Quem é Ivana? - A mulher de Donald Trump. Onde estão eles? - No Brasil. Quando foram ao Brasil? - Recentemente, dia 8, sábado. O que houve com eles? Parece que apostaram, mas perderam. Qual é o tom do artigo? - Irônico." This first interpretation may be interrupted here allowing for the class to get into another article, returning later to recycle this same one. Longer texts can be explored in a similar way.

#### **4. TESTING STUDENTS FOR READING STRATEGIES**

Testing has to limit its scope to the activities developed in class. At this stage of the process, namely evaluation, the teacher will realize how important it is to list all students suggestions during teacher/student interaction. Their correct and incorrect suggestions may be used in the tests. An illustration of how a comprehension check can be designed is shown in 4.1-4.2 using the text from "Os ricos também choram" according to the discussion in the preceding section.

##### **4.1. Lexicon and Structures**

a. Circle the words that refer to money.

centavo    envoltos    também    dinheiro    fortuna

b. Circle the words that refer to money interaction.

acumulá-lo    desembarcaram    apostou    doar    chegou

Expected answers: a. centavo, dinheiro, fortuna

b. acumulá-lo, apostou, doar

## 4.2. Contents

- a. What is the general theme of this article?
  - a. The announcement of the Trump's divorce in Brazil.
  - b. The opening of the Trumps' Race Track in Brazil.
  - c. The Trump's departure from Brazil.
  - d. A 220 dollar loss in horse racing.
  - e. The Trump's being robbed in Brazil.
  
- b. Can you describe the main characters in this story?
  - a. Both Americans, both children of Donald Trump, she is 39 and he is 42 years old.
  - b. Donald is American, Ivana is Brazilian, married until recently and divorced in Brazil.
  - c. Both Americans, married, Ivana is 39 and Donald is 42 years old.
  - d. Both Texans, in their forties, and disputing an inheritance matter.
  - e. Both Texans, Donald 42 years old, Ivana 39 years old, divorced.
  
- c. What is the tone of the story?
  - a. Somber
  - b. Formal
  - c. Informal
  - d. Ironic
  - e. Condescending

Expected answers: a. d; b. c; c. c and d.

Articles of one page length or so may be used with the limited goals of interpretation of these strategies. More detailed interpretation of texts, however, as we see in Bransford (1979), Lee (1989) or more detailed application of the present strategies with full use of L2 will be part of a next level of reading strategies.

## SUMMARY

Inspired by information processing theory and literacy analysis, this paper offers an alternative solution for a reading

comprehension component in foreign language curricula. This approach can only be implemented if the teacher allows students' autonomy in the classroom.

This paper is organized into two parts. The first part of the paper deals with the description of the approach for a reading strategy. The approach contains in its preliminary discussion an underlying reading strategy to be used optionally by the teacher during teacher-student interaction in the classroom. Following the presentation of an underlying reading strategy the discussion emphasizes the expectations of both the teacher and the student, the need to use student background knowledge, i.e. student autonomy. The textual analysis proposed in this paper is based on text content instead of form, meaning form in the sense of relations or structure. The first part concludes with evaluation techniques for assessing comprehension of text messages. The second part contains a practical application in which Brazilian Portuguese is used.

#### NOTE

1. I would like to thank Rick Kern for the suggestions he made after reading this paper for me at the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Colloquium in Austin, Texas, October 1989, Andrew Debicki, Danny Anderson and Jon Vicent for the preliminary discussion we had about this topic and the two anonymous reviewers from the *Foreign Languages Annals*. All of them helped in shaping this paper to its present form. I would like to thank Janet Swaffar as well for her encouragement to write this paper.

#### REFERENCES

- ACTFL. ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, 1986.
- BERNHARDT. A Model of L2 Text Reconstruction: The Recall of Literary Texts by Learners of German. In A. LaBarca, (Ed.), *Issues in L2: Theory as Practice / Practice as Theory*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986a.
- BERNHARDT, E. Reading in the Foreign Language. In Barbara H. Wing, (Ed.), *Listening, Reading, Writing: Analysis and Application*, 93-115. Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference, 1986b.
- BRANSFORD, J.D. *Human Cognition: Learning, Understanding and Remembering*. Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1979.

- BROOKS, C. & R.P. Warren. *Understanding Fiction*. New York: F.S. Crofts, 1943.
- FORSTER, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954.
- HAMP-LYONS. Two Approaches to Teaching Reading: A Classroom Based Study. In *Reading a Foreign Language*, 3, (363-73), 1985.
- JAKOBSON, R. *Selected Writings*. The Hague: Mouton, 1962.
- KERN, R., J. Swaffar, and D. Young. Reading as a Classroom Activity: Theory and Techniques. In Koike, D.A. and A.R.M. Simões, (Eds.) *Negotiating for Meaning: Papers on Foreign Language Teaching and Testing*. Austin, TX: Department of Foreign Language Education Studies, 1989.
- LEE, J.F. Background Knowledge and L2 Reading. In *Modern Language Journal*, 70, (350-54), 1986.
- . Toward a Modification of the "Proficiency" Construct for Foreign Language Reading. In *Hispania*, 71, (941-53), 1988.
- . Teaching and Testing and Expository Text. In Koike, D.A. and A.R.M. Simões, eds. *Negotiating for Meaning: Papers on Foreign Language Teaching and Testing*. Austin, TX: Department of Foreign Language Education Studies, 1989.
- EDGAR ALLAN POE, G.R. Thompson, (Ed.) New York: The Library of America, 1984.
- POTTIER, B. *Presentación de la lingüística*. Madrid: Alcalá, 1968.
- SHANNON, C.E. & W. Weaver. *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana, Illinois: University Press, 1949.
- STAUFFER, R.G. *Directing Reading Maturity as a Cognitive Process*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.