Intelligent Ways of Working with Readings

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Let me start with a little anecdote about Umberto Eco's **The Name of the Rose**. The book had just appeared and a journalist came to interview him about it. After a bit of small talk Eco glanced at his watch and said:

' May I start off by asking you a question? Have you had time to read the book? I'm afraid it's a rather long one. '

The journalist blushed and told him she had read all of it, and some parts twice.

Eco sighed and said: ' Then we do have a problem. Are we to talk about the book you read the first time, the second time or about the book I wrote?'

What is Reading?

The act of reading is much more than an accurate decoding of graphemes on a page and the conversion of them into words that are understood within their dictionary definitions. The act of reading, be it in MT or in L2, is a creative transformation of what is perceived to be there on the page into an inner representation by the reader, a transformation governed by the reader's inner schemata. The term 'inner schemata' covers a very wide area. It is your schemata which will govern how you understand these two sentences:

She missed him

Did you understand: ' she felt sadness at his absence ' or
' she aimed badly' or
' She did not find him at the meeting place'

If you have a melancholic mindset you may have gone for the first meaning, if you tend towards being angry you may have understood the second meaning, while the third meaning may have come into your mind if you have recently missed meeting some one in an airport. (There are thousands of other possible inner reasons for your choice)

What an idiot I am to teach!

Did you understand: ' I'll be teaching Johann who is an idiot ' or
' What a fool I was to become a teacher!' or
' What a bad student I am!'

What does your choice of meaning tell you about your inner criteria?

As I suggested above, schemata cover a massive range of inner areas. Let me illustrate this: please read the sentence that follows and notice what happens in your

head:

She looked out across the sea.

Did you get a picture?
Do you hear anything connected with the scene?
Where there any body sensations?
Did you see colours?
How big was your picture?
What was 'she' like?
Did any literary moments come to mind (eg Thomas Hardy, The French Lieutenant's Woman, a snatch from a film you have recently seen)

I would suggest it is hard for a normal human to read
She looked out across the sea
without creating a sensory representation of the moment described. It is impossible to read anything without producing one's own mental elaboration of it.
The elaboration can be sensory, literary, moral, political etc etc……
When you read the words 'Osama Bin Laden' you may think of the Twin New York Towers, the Tora Bora caves, a brilliant horseman, an unassuming, Saudi friend of the US fighting a holy War against the Russians in Afghanistan etc….. As these three words become a reality in your head from off the page, you are in a very real sense co-creating them.

Reading in our classes

An odd bit of our technical EFL tradition is that we seem to be more interested in the text on the page than the transformed text in the student's head. So reading passages tend to be followed by blocks of so-called 'comprehension questions'.
These deal with what some people would call the 'facts' of the text and sometimes with linguistic aspects of the text. So a comprehension question for the woman+sea text above might be:

Was she looking across the sea or across a lake? The focus here is on a German learner's false friend rather than on anything significant going on in the student's head.

Couldn't comprehension questions deal with the reality of the individually elaborated texts rather than just with the pre-comprehension text on the page? Let me offer you an example of this idea in action: Here's a very short passage:

Father: What time did you come home, then, Mary?
Girl: Oh, not sure, 'bout half one, I think.
Father: Half past one? I didn't hear you.
Girl; Came in quietly. Didn't want to wake you up.

Elaborated text Comprehension Questions

What time did Mary say she came in?
How old is Mary?
Where are they talking?
What time is it when they talk?
What age is the man?
What does Mary's hair look like?
Think of some one you know. Who would they sympathise with in this dialogue?
How, exactly, did Mary come in quietly?
What was the weather like that night?
And Mary's mood in the morning?
Does the dialogue remind you of anything?

- Tell the students to read the passage and the questions. Ask them to CROSS OUT all those they feel are irrelevant to their reading of the text.
  Ask them to write five more questions to do with how they imagined the situation.

- Pair the students. Within the pairs, A and B exchange question sheets. Student A asks B the uncrossed-out and added questions. They also work the other way round.

Warning: this simple little exercise may, at first, seem very strange to a 10th class which has always got browny points for accurately answering questions about the details of the text on the page. The students may decide that you have finally flipped!

If you feel this activity is not one you warm too, then you may be rejecting the point made by Umberto Eco at the start of this article. You may feel iffy about the concept of the act of reading being, inevitably, an act of elaboration, of mixing of external stimulus and input from within.

Or again you may agree with the theory but feel that this exercise does not do it justice. (an awful aspect of writing is that I cannot do more than imagine your reactions, knowing for sure that you have now in your head something much richer than what I have written- you have created your own elaboration, your own belief-inspired version of what , before you read it, was my text.)

Enough of this theoretical tub thumping. In the rest of this article I want to forget about schemata theory and offer you some rattling good techniques that you can use with
any passage from your current coursebook.

Lipogram

Choose two to three paragraphs from the reading passage in the unit you are doing. Pair the students and ask them to re-write the 3 paragraphs but in such a way that

there is no occurrence of the letter **'a'.** Let me demonstrate by re-writing the last sentence without the offending letter:

Put the students in twos, then tell them to re-write the lines chosen so there is no occurrence of the forbidden letter.

Tell them that their paraphrase should be as close as possible to the style and feeling of the original.

When most people have finished the re-write ask half a dozen pairs to read out what they have written. Tell them to read slowly and clearly. The rest of the class listens out for any heinous 'a's' left in! The other students are sometimes amazed at the excellent solutions found by a given pair.

I know of no technique that demands a closer reading of the text on the page than this one.

(You can modify the hardness of the task by varying the letter to be omitted)

Phrases I like

Ask the student to work individually and to underline any phrase or word in the coursebook passage that they like, for whatever reason. Tell them to underline between three and five.
Ask students to tell the rest of the class which words/collocations/phrases they have chosen and why. (The reasons for liking phrases that students come up with can be auditory, to do with the shape of the word on the page, or they can be to do with the meaning the words seem to them to express. Sometimes a student likes a bit of text and cannot make the reason conscious.)

As you and the class listen to more and more students, a whole new mapping of the text begins to build up, a kind of web of linguistically intelligent ideas and feelings.

You can do a similar exercise with **phrases I dislike.**

A nice German-English contrastive exercise is phrases that seem very English to me. For example, the other way round, as a low level speaker of German, I think of 'doch' as a marvellously, deliciously German expression and I have nothing as good as this in my own language .

Leaving out unuseful words

Explain to the class that most writers often put more words down on the page than are needed to properly carry their meaning. This last sentence is improved by chopping out most, often, and properly.

Pair the students and ask them to improve their current coursebook passage by chopping out between six and dozen words. The deletions should strengthen what is being said.

Group the students in sixes to compare which words they have taken out and why.

Ask three of four pairs to share their deletions and justifications with the class.

(This activity puts the students into 'editor ' relationship with the coursebook passage- it gives them power. It also prepares them to edit their own writing.)

Let me round off this piece by dealing with a teacher's reaction to one of my earlier contributions to **Close-up.** She wonders why people like me keep on shoving bright, new ideas at teachers, as if attacking the sterling work these teachers are already doing with their students

I sympathise with her feeling. In-service training can feel an aggression against the person and professionalism of the good practitioner.

My defence? I know you do a delicious Pesto sauce for pasta and your Bolognese is outstanding. Your sea-food sauce is a miracle.
But could I take you to the South of Italy and ask you try out something really simple: virgen olive oil with chopped-up garlic browned in it?
Your maybe working with this new taste adds to your sauce-ability, without devaluing the excellence of what you already know and do. Does this make any sense or am I left unprotected before Close-ups' 95,000 readers?