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SELECTIVE FOCUS IN READING: A SOCIAL-BASED EXPLANATION

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Readers do not remember all the information presented in a text; the selection of information has been considered a by-product of the reading process in general. The present investigation regards it as a product of one of the processes involved in reading, i.e. selective focus. The existing literature analyzes selective focus within the framework of two perspectives: reader-based and text-based. This paper reviews this literature and considers the possibility of a third perspective based on social factors, a perspective which is discussed in the light of some recent studies and illustrated by the findings of Braga (1990). Finally, the work addresses the implications of a social-based conception of selective focus for the teaching of reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Experimental studies on prose memory have shown that individual readers do not remember all the information presented in a text. It is generally accepted that reading involves the selection of important information, and previous researchers have considered such information selection as a by-product of the reading process in general. The present work, as in Braga (1990), regards it as a product of only one of the processes involved in reading, i.e. selective focus.

As conceived of here, reading comprises three main cognitive processes: a) recognition of the written system; b) apprehension of the text context; and c) selective focus. Each of these processes relies on a specific type of background knowledge and may be a source of reading problems.

Recognition of the written system is a process required at a very basic level. In order to read a reader must have mastered the medium through which language is represented in written form; he/she must have acquired basic reading skills. The second process, apprehension of the text content, is highly dependent on linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge. Being able to read is by no means a guarantee of comprehension. To understand a text, a reader must be able to apprehend the superficial sentential string of the text, i.e. all the propositions entailed at the expressed level, and the propositions that were left unsaid, that is, the propositions that the author presupposes his/her audience to know. Due to the different types of knowledge required and the cognitive processes involved, the apprehension of the text content may be subdivided into three distinct sub-processes.

The first sub-process is the apprehension of the literal meaning. To apprehend the literal meaning, the reader must be able to recognize the information explicitly stated

in the text. Vocabulary and syntax knowledge is essential to this sub-process. The second and third sub-processes involve deeper levels of inferences. The second sub-process is also highly dependent on language knowledge. It encompasses all the inferences elaborated on the basis of the text's superficial strings. It relies heavily on the knowledge of semantic and logical relations, as well as knowledge of stylistic resources such as metaphor, irony, etc. Finally, the third sub-process, apprehension of unsaid propositions, depends on knowledge of the discursive topic. Novices reading specialized texts tend to have great difficulty, or are even unable to process a text at this third sub-processing level. Being far from the expected audience, they are unable to recover the information the author is presupposing as 'given' from their world knowledge. By describing content apprehension in terms of three sub-levels, it is possible to highlight the fact that the reader's inability to apprehend text content —i.e. misunderstandings— may be traced back to different causes.

However, the two processes generally described above —recognition of the written system and content apprehension— are not sufficient to explain reading interpretation, as the experimental results show. The final output of any normal reading is never a reproduction of all the propositions explicitly/implicitly presented, or presupposed by the text. Even when properly understood, some propositions receive more weight and others are considered peripheral, secondary or irrelevant. This process of weighting of propositions is being labelled here as 'selective focus'. This paper intends to discuss the nature of the criteria that lead readers to select some propositions in the text as relevant. Initially, it examines the traditional approaches to selective focus — reader-based and text-based— arguing that they are not sufficient to interpret selective focus in reading. This limitation strengthens the possibility of a third perspective based on social factors.

2. Reader-based and text-based interpretations of selective focus in reading

The weight that readers give to some propositions during reading has been traditionally explained within two broad theoretical perspectives: one favours the cognitive structure that the reader brings to the text, and the other favours the constraints imposed upon the reader by the structural characteristics of the text itself. Within reader-based perspectives, the importance of an information unit is determined by the reader's knowledge, interest, and viewpoint. In contrast, text-based perspectives understand the importance of an information unit to be determined by the structure or the organization of the text content: during reading, readers make use of their knowledge of the conventions of text construction to select relevant propositions. These two tendencies, as found in the literature, are supported by schema theory. As Ohlhausen and Roller (1985) point out, schema theory suggests that we use text structure and content schemata to help us select important information.

Although a large number of studies have investigated the influence of these schemata on the importance that readers attribute to certain propositions in a text, there are some serious limitations in the existing literature. First of all, even though schema theory predicts a distinction between these two types of schema —world knowledge and text structure— this difference has been overlooked in some studies. The study

developed by Voss, Vesonder, and Spilich (1980) well illustrates this problem. Investigating how expertise in a particular subject-matter domain (the game of baseball) affects the comprehension of texts, the authors stated that:

> [High knowledge] individuals were better able to keep track of macrostructure information during the reading of the text than were low knowledge individuals, and this advantage enabled the high knowledge individuals to integrate the sequences of actions and state changes of the game more readily than low knowledge individuals. (p.651)

The study cited above is mainly concerned with analyzing how the underlying knowledge structures of a reader lead him/her to apprehend certain pieces of information from a text. This is a reader-based approach to reading. However, in discussing this issue, the authors link it to the notion of macrostructure (Kintsch and van Dijk 1978), which is a text-based explanation supported by linguistic categories. As no further clarification of the nature of such a link is offered, this work seems to be relating the reader's underlying knowledge structure to the text structure. To equate the organisation of knowledge in the reader's mind to the organisation of information in the text is certainly problematic. It presupposes that the hierarchical organisation of an expert reader's knowledge —predicted by schema theory— is reproduced in the structural organisation of the text, which is a prediction difficult to confirm.

The distinction between reader-based and text-based factors may also be blurred by the parallel that some studies establish between reading and a dialogic situation. This conception may be found in both reader-based and text-based perspectives. Saljo (1984), for instance, discussing how subjective factors affect learning from written material, suggests that:

> ...the readers must —in one way or another— provisionally accept the line of reasoning followed by the author while they are reading. Thus, the reader/learner must grant to the writer the active role in directing the dialogue, provisionally accept the premises the writer has introduced and search for the message or 'wholes' pointed to by this anonymous partner. (p. 86)

Meyer (1987), arguing in favour of a text-based perspective, suggests that reading is a conversation between an author and a reader. Mentioning the work of Grice (1967), the author proposes that

> ... for the interaction between the author and the reader to be productive, it should follow the pragmatic constraints of conversational behaviour... if the reader recognizes the author's organization or top-level structure of a passage, the conversation will be more successful and the reader will get the author's message. (p. 62)

It can be argued that Grice's proposals may not be applicable to the work of Meyer. The Gricean notion of 'intentionality' aims to characterize how a language receiver apprehends the meaning of an utterance, and not how a reader attributes importance to the information units of a text. Furthermore, taking selective focus into consideration, it may be misleading to equate reading to a dialogic situation. Reading involves comprehension of a text, while a dialogue involves both comprehension and production of a text. That is, the receiver, by alternating roles in the dialogue turns, is also the co-producer of the text constructed. As far as language production is concerned, a written text is a monological situation rather than a dialogic one. Furthermore, in a dialogue both language producer and receiver share the same social setting. Thus, to conceive of reading as a dialogue implies that the condition and situation of language

production match the condition and situation of language reception. This may not always be the case. The reader's intention for reading a text may be completely different from the author's intentions while writing it.

It must be stressed that the lack of a clear distinction between subjective and textual factors is not the only source of problems that one may find in the existing literature. Studies that investigate these factors as distinct variables also face some drawbacks. Reader-based descriptions, for instance, tend to be deficient in explaining how readers attribute relevance to certain propositions in a text. A literature review shows that the great majority of the studies within this perspective are more capable of explaining content apprehension than selective focus. In fact, reader-based accounts tend to approach language comprehension in a very general way. They are either not interested in focusing on reading per se, or they foresee selective focus as a mere by-product of the 'content apprehension' process (Bransford and Johnson 1972, Chiese et al. 1979, Thibadeau et al. 1982, Just and Carpenter 1984, Voss 1984, Wilson and Anderson 1986, Rowe and Rayford 1987, Beers 1987, and Whitney 1987, among others). This critique applies even to studies from the Educational Psychology tradition, which are particulary concerned with the effect of subjective and emotional factors on learning from written texts (Svensson 1977, Marton and Saljo 1976a, 1976b, Entwistle et al. 1979, Saljo 1984). Roller (1985) points out that reader-based accounts have not so far provided a detailed description of the mechanism(s) by which reader-based factors influence importance. The author also indicates another line of criticism. To the present moment, these accounts have failed to provide an adequate explanation for the experimental findings discussed within the text-based perspective, i.e., ideas high in the text hierarchy are recalled more frequently than those located low in the hierarchy.

Text-based explanations are certainly more specific in defining how the structural characteristics of a text may influence the importance of some ideas. However, a close analysis of the different proposals indicate that these explanations are anchored in different conceptions of 'text structure'. Meyer (1975) proposes that the text dimensions may affect mechanisms of cognitive processing. Following the basic tenets of Grimes (1975), Meyer considers the notion of rethorical predicates, which organize the semantic structure of the text in terms of hierarchically arranged tree structures. Meyer's proposal suggests a selective model of comprehension, and predicts a relation between structural level and probability of recall. In other words, information high in the content structure tends to be better recalled, whereas information placed at a lower level is recalled by very few readers. These ideas have been investigated in a series of experimental studies (Meyer 1977, Britton et al. 1979, Meyer, Brandt and Bluth 1980, Meyer 1984, Taylor 1982, Berkowitz 1986, Richgels et al. 1987, Stevens 1988, Cook and Mayer 1988). These studies share two basic axioms: (a) the contents of text are organized in a hierarchical way, and (b) the structural characteristics of the text give more prominence to certain pieces of information conveyed by the text.

Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) offer a different processing explanation for the correlation between structural aspects of the text and recall probabilities. Their model establishes a close relation between summarization and comprehension of a text. According to these authors, text bases must be coherent. Referential coherence is a linguistic criterion for the semantic coherence of a text. Accepting the concept of argument overlap among propositions, this model proposes three types of rules of semantic

reduction —deletion, generalization and construction— which condense the full meaning of the text into its "gist". These ideas have been further explored in studies developed by Brown and Smiley 1977, Brown, Champione and Day 1981, Brown and Day 1983, Brown, Day and Jones 1983, Garner 1982, 1985, Taylor 1986, and Hindi and Anderson 1986, among others. Kintsch and van Dijk's model does not take into consideration the notion of rhetorical relationship, nor the link between textual organization and the cognitive salience of certain pieces of information suggested by Meyer. The authors' conception of macrostructure is mainly anchored upon the notion of information redundancy, overlap of propositions, and multiple processing, i.e. comprehension is understood as a cyclic process. Due to referential coherence, high level propositions are, on average, processed in more than one processing cycle. This multiple processing favours their retention.

The notion of conventional text types is a third description of text structure explored by the current literature. This approach takes into consideration some broad patterns of text organization and defines them in terms of functional categories. This notion of text types is mentioned in the work of Kintsch and van Dijk (1978), and is more evident in Meyer's later work (1984). The effect of text type on comprehension and retention of written material has also been experimentally tested in works such as Stein and Glenn 1979, Freedle and Hale 1979, Richgels et al. 1987, and Cook and Mayer 1988. Lunzer and Gardner (1984), discussing this structural notion, indicate that passages that belong to the same text type tend to share a number of features such as a) dealing with the same kind of content, even when the topic is very different; b) tending to break up in the same way, yielding segments or sections that serve the same function; and c) containing more or less standard, and predictable, information types within the segments of each text type. The knowledge of these standard text patterns may guide the reader's decisions about which information should carry most weight.

The three text-based explanations mentioned above agree that structural schemata influence importance. However, they differ in the way they characterize structural schemata. It is not clear how these different notions relate to or complement each other to influence the importance of information units in a text. This issue needs to be better investigated. In addition, text-based accounts of importance cannot alone explain the existing data. The results obtained within the reader-based perspective indicate that the reader's prior knowledge and interest may affect the selective focus adopted during reading (Steffenson, Joag-Dev and Anderson 1979, Voss 1984).

The limitations found in existing studies point to the need for experimental investigations that consider the effect of subjective and textual factors simultaneously. Very little is known about how these different structural schemata interact within specific contexts of reading. However, studies that have explored both issues concurrently have obtained some very interesting results. Roller (1985) conducted a series of four experiments to investigate the role of text-based and reader-based factors on perception of importance. Two of these experiments focused on reading. One employed an importance rating task and the other employed a summary writing task. As a control for the reader's previous knowledge of the topic of the text, the author designed a training task which impaired knowledge of a fictitious insect family. Experimental groups were asked to compare the description of four fictitious insects - Abug, Bbug, Cbug,

and Dbug. The control groups had no training, and thus lacked previous knowledge of the insect family. Four groups of readers —two experimental and two control— were exposed either to an unelaborated version or to an elaborated (structured) version of the same text. The experimental findings indicated that different tasks may favour different criteria of importance. In summary writing tasks, the perception of importance was influenced by text elaboration. In contrast, importance rating tasks were mostly affected by reader-based factors —i.e. previous knowledge of the topic.

Ohlhausen and Roller (1985) investigated the operation of text structure and content schemata both in isolation and when interacting. The authors tested three versions of a passage about a little known country, Melanesia. The passages were designed to favour the use of specific schemata. One of the versions favoured the use of structure schemata (S), the other favoured content schemata (C) and, finally, the third version allowed the use of both C and S (a C/S type condition is that most commonly found in texts). The experimental results indicated that, on average, subjects used a structure strategy in the structure passage, and a content strategy in the content passage. The data also indicated that the use of structure schema tends to be greater in difficult or unfamiliar texts, such as S and C, than in the C/S condition. Considering these results, the authors suggested that well-internalized structure schemata of adults operate in different ways depending on the difficulty of the text or their familiarity with it.

The two studies mentioned indicate that the influence of different schemata may vary depending on the nature of the text or reading task. Other studies indicate the necessity of investigating the effect of a third variable —purpose for reading— which has not been properly explored in the reader-based or text-based interpretations of selective focus in reading. Birkmire (1985) —investigating how the selection of main ideas from a text may be affected by the text structure, content knowledge and purpose for reading— discovered that all three variables affected processing during reading. The studies developed by Pichert and Anderson (1977) also offer some grounds for thinking that purpose for reading affects the selective focus adopted by readers.

Pichert and Anderson attempted to put forward the concept that the importance of an idea unit depends on the reader's perspective and should not be understood as an invariant property of the text. To test their hypothesis, the authors asked readers to read a story about two boys playing hooky. The passage included a description of the house of one of the boys. Readers were asked to read the text from the perspective of a burglar or a person interested in buying a house. The data indicated that the attribution of significance to a specific idea unit is affected by the reading perspective adopted (Pichert and Anderson 1977, Anderson and Pichert 1978). The same empirical results have been reproduced with some modifications in a series of studies (Goetz et al. 1983, Newsome III 1986, Kardash, Royer, and Greene 1988). These results indicate that telling readers to take a perspective induces them to process the story in a way that results in better memory for information related to that given perspective.

It will be argued here that what these experiments are in fact investigating is not the effect of the reader's perspective on selective focus, but the effect of reading purpose. Newsome III (1986) states that subjects who were requested to recall the story from the burglar's perspective were using their knowledge of what is important to burglars. However, it would make more sense to conceive of the idea that these readers interpreted the reading instructions as: "read this text as if you intended to

rob the house", rather than "read this text adopting the world perspective of a burglar". Certainly these readers know that the world perspective of a burglar is not restricted to stealing. A burglar intending to buy a house would focus on different bits of information than those favoured by the "burglar's perspective". This analysis does not intend to question the main argument defended by Pichert and Anderson, namely, the importance of certain information units is not an invariant property of the text. Its main aim is to highlight the theoretical value of considering purpose for reading as a variable in itself. In the experimental studies mentioned above, the purpose for reading was not necessarily chosen by the reader, nor was it imposed by the text —it was externally determined by the experiment. As a purpose for reading always exists within a certain social context, it is relevant to inquire how the selection of information from a text is affected by the social constraints imposed by different "situations of reading".

Summarizing this discussion, the literature that investigates the effect of reader-based and text-based factors on selective focus faces some serious limitations. Some studies do not establish a distinction between reader-based and text-based factors. Others blur this distinction by equating reading and the dialogue between a reader and a writer through a written text. However, even the studies that make a clear distinction between these factors are limited. Reader-based approaches tend to offer a better explanation of content apprehension than of selective focus in reading. Such explanations are insufficient to explain the fact that when a group of people read the same passage, some ideas tend to be recalled by everyone, whereas other ideas are hardly ever recalled.

Text-based approaches explain this issue in terms of the structural characteristics of a text, although the studies within this perspective vary in their structural notions and cognitive explanations, and it is unclear how the different notions complement or exclude one another. Furthermore, this perspective hardly explains the effect of the reader's prior knowledge and interest in reading. Such text-based interpretations have little to say about variation in reading. As a general trend, reader-based and text-based factors have been tested in isolation, although studies investigating the effect of both factors have indicated that the criteria for selection adopted by readers may vary depending on the nature of the text or the reading task. Some experimental studies have also shown the effect of purpose for reading on selective focus. Purposes for reading exist within social situations and, consequently, are affected by social norms and rules. The present study proposes that the importance of information units is also influenced by social factors. The criteria that guide the selection of information vary from one "reading situation" to another and for different social uses of written material. This leads to a social-based interpretation of selective focus in reading.

3. Social-based explanation of selective focus in reading

In the field of linguistics, one can notice in the 1960's, a shift from the study of idealized linguistic systems and ideal speakers —the Saussurean and Chomskian schools— to the study of language within the broader context of social behaviour (Giglioli 1972). The systematic description of the way in which cultural norms and values of specific communities are reflected in language usage brought to light the

complexity of linguistic interaction. It also pointed out some serious limitations in the traditional universalist approaches of explaining the linguistic variation that exists from individual to individual and from situation to situation. Unfortunately, most of this discussion has been restricted to production or oral language interaction within a dialogue situation. So far, the literature has not properly explored how social norms and values affect language reception in general, and reading in particular. However, it seems reasonable to expect such an influence. Studies from different areas of knowledge seem to support the idea that literacy is not a technical skill, neutral to the ideological nature of socio-cultural practices.

Scribner and Cole (1981), investigating the effect of literacy on thought processes, state that literacy is not the mere acquisition of script. It requires the learning of how to apply the knowledge of reading and writing for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. There is a close relationship between the nature of literacy practices and the cognitive skills required and promoted by the acquisition of the written language. The work developed by Street (1984) and Levine (1986) —approaching this issue from the socio-anthropological tradition— puts forward the idea that fruitful insights concerning literacy can only be achieved if one goes beyond the notion of technical skill and examines ideas in the sociology of knowledge: how knowledge is created and reproduced (or not) in particular social communities. Focusing on reading from a linguistic perspective, Kress (1985) proposes that readers, as individuals, belong to social groups and share the membership of specific institutions that are accessible to these groups. Their social experience provides them with a set of meanings and values. This is a set of meanings and values that characterize their social experience and activity and which shape and are shaped by the kind of language used by their own group, the texts that tend to be prominent in their community, and the content and function of these texts. These three proposals support a general theoretical framework in which reading is understood as a social practice. Readers, texts and "situation of reading" exist within a society and are impregnated by social values. The comprehension of any written material is significantly affected by the nature of the social/linguistic activities that are accessible and familiar to readers. These activities will affect the way readers apprehend the content of a text and will also influence the type of information that they select as relevant within specific "situations of reading". In other words, selective focus is a process guided by a value criterion, which is a product of socio-ideological practices.

The work developed by Steffenson, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979) may illustrate the effect of socio-cultural experiences on reading. The authors investigated how readers from the United States and India read letters about an American and an Indian wedding. Their results showed that subjects recalled a larger amount of information from the native passage, produced more critically appropiate elaborations of the native passage and more culturally-based distortions of the foreign passage. The data also indicated that whether recalling the native or foreign passage, the subjects tended to recall more of the text elements considered important by other subjects from the same cultural heritage. These results demonstrate that socio-cultural differences affect not only content apprehension but also the selective focus adopted in reading.

The detailed ethnographic study conducted by Heath (1983) provides even stronger evidence for this line of analysis. The data collected by the author showed how two

working class communities —Tracktown and Roadville— had distinct conceptions about ideal language uses. It also showed that these two literate groups had different ways of interacting with written material. In this study, Heath stressed how these groups' language and literacy experiences differed from middle class (school) practices and how these differences could be associated with the school failure of working class children. The author's comparison between story telling in Tracktown and Roadville also illustrated how different language uses may create different expectancies in relation to texts.

In Roadville, tales have the function of reassuring the commitment to community and church values; they highlight personal and community weaknesses and the struggle faced by individuals to overcome and survive them. In Tracktown, tales are intented to intensify social interaction and to give everyone the opportunity to share the common experience on which the story is based, as well as the humour based on language play and imagination. Individuals are, therefore, expected not to give straightforward accounts of reality, but to retell a story with a particular style that expresses their feelings about the story. The different purposes fulfilled by the stories affect the way they are structured and their evaluation as good or bad stories. As Heath (1983) points out:

> ...in Tracktown there is only one 'true story', that would be to Roadville residents anything but true. In contrast, neither Roadville's factual accounts or tales from the Bible would be termed stories in Tracktown... In short, for Roadville, Tracktown's stories would be lies; for Tracktown, Roadville's stories would not even count as stories. (p. 189)

It is reasonable to expect that these different conceptions about what constitutes a true story —as described by Heath— lead to different ways of dealing with a text and also favour the adoption of different selective focus. In one case, this focus is going to be directed towards information that supports a moral lesson; in the other case, the focus will be directed towards linguistic creativity and fiction.

Applying the same line of reasoning to reading, it is possible to predict that the selective focus adopted by readers will be affected by their social and linguistic experiences. It is the reader's discursive history that will determine how he/she interprets the content and function of a text and also how he/she perceives the demands of a particular "situation of reading". Since reading may occur in different social situations and since readers may bring many different discursive histories to the text, the selective focus adopted during the reading of a single text may vary between readers and also from one "situation of reading" to another. Reader-based and text-based approaches to selective focus in reading have ignored or not fully investigated these great possibilities of variation. The work developed by Braga (1990) indicated that expert readers may favour different criteria for guiding their selection of information from texts. In a situation of reading for study purposes, this can be linked to the effect of social norms and values. The next section will briefly present some of Braga's findings in an attempt to illustrate the fact that reading in daily-life situations is affected by social constraints.

4. Social influences on selective focus

Selective focus is a cognitive process that involves a value criterion. That is, when reading a text, readers judge some pieces of information as relevant and others as

secondary or peripheral. It would be reasonable to expect this process to be affected by social factors. However, most of the explanations given for selective focus in reading have only taken the readers' previous structure schemata or encyclopedic knowledge into consideration. Braga (1990) suggests that previous studies may have overlooked the importance of social factors due to the nature of the empirical evidence they have considered. Most of the existing work is based on data obtained in an experimental situation, a situation which does not reveal the multiplicity of social aims that guide everyday reading practices. To overcome this limitation, Braga decided to interview expert readers to explore their insights into non-experimental reading tasks. The author elaborated three studies. The two initial ones, which were developed to improve the instrument and interview procedures, pointed out to a wide range of differences involved in reading practices, including differences in "situations of reading", purposes for reading, reading strategies and text types. These differences made any comparison between the readers' responses very difficult. In the light of these results, the final set of interviews conducted by the author concentrated the discussion on one single situation of reading: reading for study purposes. Fifteen readers selected from three different levels of higher education —initial teacher training for postgraduate students, master's degree students, and doctoral degree students— participated in the final study. The readers brought a text of their own choice to the interview in which they had previously marked the most pertinent information. During the interview, the readers were asked to specify their aims for reading the chosen text and to evaluate how reader-based, text-based and social-based factors influenced their selection of information from the text (for a more detailed description of the methodology adopted, see Braga 1990: 117-148).

The analysis of the interviews indicated a wide range of possible reading variations not predicted by studies that investigated reader-based and text-based factors in isolation. Reader-based factors, for instance, were revealed to be critical in situations of reading for research. In fact, all the PhD students indicated that their selection of information was affected by their previous knowledge and interest in the topic of the text. However, such an influence was not the same for all "situations of reading". At a more advanced stage in the research, for instance, personal interest was constrained by the research focus. That is, readers avoided information that interested them but which was no related to the specific issues that they were discussing. One of the readers pointed out that his personal interest was reduced to a secondary level in situations in which the research topic was not determined solely by his choice, as in a job situation. Faced with the conflict between personal and external interest, he avoided details and tried to apprehend the "gist" of the text. In such a situation the selective focus adopted during reading was mostly determined by the expected use of the information.

Text-based factors acquired special relevance in guiding the selection of information when the reader was reading to reproduce the text or trying to grasp the author's standpoint. However, in situations where the reader was using a task-oriented approach for reading or when he had a precise idea about the type of information to look for, text-based factors did not have a major effect on selection. Structural guidelines were used as mere shortcuts to locate the required information, which had been determined prior to the reading.

Furthermore, the data collected by Braga strengthens the notion that social issues should not be ignored by studies that aim to investigate reading. The readers' description of their own reading practices indicated that their personal interest and perception of task demands are not dissociated from their own social experiences. The analyses conducted by the author highlighted how selective focus might be affected by the reader's perception of the uses of knowledge expected within specific "situations of reading". The interview reported in the next section exemplifies how uses of knowledge are socially determined and socially learned.

5. Selective focus in law texts: a cross-cultural comparison

The data discussed in this section was provided by Peter, an Austrian lawyer who was a subject in the second study. This example was chosen to illustrate how the value given to certain types of information is motivated by social factors and is reinforced through social/educational practices. Prior to his studies in England, he had obtained an Austrian degree in Law, and also an MA and a PhD degrees in the field. This example shows Peter's understanding of two different legal systems: the Austrian and the British. Both systems aim at the same social function: to defend the law established by the state. In spite of their common social function, they are structured in different ways: the former is based on the principle of the law, and the latter on jurisprudence, or the practice of the law. He explained these differences. He also pointed out how they are stressed by the assessment procedures adopted in Austria and Britain. Finally, he indicated how the two different legal systems attribute importance to different types of information.

When describing the two legal systems, he stated that

> In Austria, you have the facts, the naked law. But in England, it doesn't exist, because in England, the court decides and that is the law basically —except that you have statutes. But again, even with those statutes, the different opinions that the court says may form the law (...). On the continent, lawyers out of all the different principles of the law form an answer. Here, you need a bunch of judges to decide. We try to give abstract principles, which you apply to the facts. Here, in England, the facts and the answer of the judges to the facts, you use for other facts.

These differences in the legal structure directly affected the type of texts relevant to lawyers in both countries:

> In Austria, a section in a statute consisting of 100 words —if it is a lot, 100 words— will give you an answer to a legal problem. It will answer your legal question. The same problem, set in England, you have to read 50 pages on a decision in the House of Lords. Because in England, since you have no statute like on the continent, you must rely on judges' decision or judgements. And that could be, if it is a House of Lords decision, 500 pages in which different law lords are expressing their opinions. So, in Austria, I would just read the text of the law, the text of the statute. (...) Here, I have to read all sorts of interpretations.

The two legal systems follow different ideological principles. As a result, the importance and use of statutes within the context of legal practice differ. The Austrian system gives priority to the principle of the law. Within this system, legal statutes do have a greater power in the sense that they may be applied across different situations. In contrast, the British system of jurisprudence devotes greater importance to previous legal decisions and it diminishes the power of the legal statutes by making their use less flexible. Peter made some comments that highlight these differences.

(discussing air transport conventions) ...in England, if you apply the same section of the same convention, you won't get interest because the English law, the English judges, interpret the statute in a very narrow sense. So, if in the whole convention you don't find interest mentioned, you won't get it. The judge will say that it is not in the statute. In Austria, it doesn't matter because it is in the other statutes and the other statutes say you get interest. That is what the law is saying.
(...) in England, it must expressly be mentioned either in a statute or in a case. If there is no precedent case, you can't use it. It won't apply.

Due to the differences between the two legal systems, an Austrian lawyer in England must learn not just the content of the law but also its structure. In other words, he/she must acquire a new criterion of relevance. Discussing such a situation, he suggests:

First he has to study the English law as such, and he must get rid of the whole structure of the law he learned at home. He must get rid of it because you can't apply the structure we learn on the Continent in England. The English law is a mess. There is no structure. There is no hierarchy of the law, there is a certain hierarchy but it is not that clearly structured like on the Continent.
For example, if he doesn't know the principle of indistinguishableness here in England, he would be lost. Because here in England what you do, you apply older cases to your fact situation and the opponent will try to distinguish. (...) In Austria, you wouldn't do it. The difference is that in England you are going to the very situation, the fact itself. In Austria, you would try to abstract. So there is a different method.

As is to be expected, these different criteria of relevance are transmitted especially through schooling. The study of law in Austria and in England gives emphasis to different issues.

It is a completely different way of studying in England or at home. At home, I would study facts, what must be in agreement, how it must be drafted, and so on and so on... What is the law. Here you must criticize that law. Should be that way, that court said this, that court said that...

Assessment procedures reinforce the social value of specific information. Peter pointed this out when he discussed the way he was studying for his MA examinations.

Because, when you are studying for an exam, you can't study everything (...), you should have an idea about what questions are coming up. (...) So you underline what is really important, that you might use in your answering.

He then exemplified the type of answer that he considered to be expected by his British examiners:

Because the exams, what they want is not just facts of the law, they want critiques, like different opinions. So, I try to get out of the article as much as I can in respect to that. So, I try to identify different opinions.

This cross-cultural comparison between two legal systems makes it evident how different social practices lead to different criteria of importance. Both British and Austrian systems are informed by written legal texts. These texts tend to deal with similar types of information. A typical legal article, according to Peter, tends to quote and interpret the law and tries to provide an answer and a conclusion. However, as he pointed out, the British and the Austrian legal systems are structured by different ideological principles. Due to the different structures —and the legal practices made possible by these structures— a lawyer reading a text in Britain or in Austria must give special focus to different sorts of information. Peter's report exemplifies the statement made earlier that the criterion of importance which guides the selection of information from a text is affected by socio-ideological factors.

6. Implications for the teaching of reading

The general discussion and the findings discussed in this paper are relevant to the teaching of reading in both first and foreign languages. Within the context of teaching reading to native speakers, these findings stress that the knowledge of social norms is part of reading expertise, and hence learners should be made aware of them. A focus on "irrelevant" information does not necessarily indicate that the reader has failed to understand the content of the text or that he is not aware of the text's structural organization. The choice of "secondary" or "irrelevant" information from a text may be an indication that the reader was not familiar with the social use of the knowledge promoted and expected by different school activities. Different situations of reading for study —reading to write a report, reading to prepare an exam question, reading to acquire required background knowledge or reading to present and discuss a text— conform to different social norms and may favour the adoption of different criteria for selecting information from a text.

Non-expected selections may also be triggered by the adoption of a different set of values and meanings that characterize different discourses within a social community. The type of information that is relevant to an academic area such as History, for example, is not the same type of information that would be relevant for another area of study, such as Geography. If the knowledge of discourse affects selective focus, then reading should be taught across the curriculum. Teachers in different subject areas might contribute to the teaching of reading by making the norms and values that are characteristic of the discourse of their area explicit to the learners. This issue is also relevant to the teaching of reading in a foreign language. Teachers involved in the teaching of reading with an instrumental orientation —such as English for specific purposes— could lead their students to make use of their previous knowledge of types of discourse to compensate for their lack of language knowledge. Finally, the teaching of reading —be it in first or foreign language— could contribute to the education of learners by stressing the effect of social factors. The emphasis on different social uses of knowledge and on the ideologies that shape these uses, might provide students with elements to understand and question their own reality.

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