Academic reading and critical worldview: an analysis of a task
Leitura acadêmica e visão crítica de mundo: a análise de uma tarefa

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Resumo: *O presente artigo apresenta a análise de uma tarefa de revisão submetida a alunos de graduação da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFGRS) tendo a leitura como foco. É dada ênfase à leitura crítica, sendo essa vista como uma atividade social pelos autores. Alguns conceitos a respeito de leitura trazidos por Gibbons (2002), Luke e Freebody (1990), Marcuschi (2001 b) e pelos Referenciais Curriculares do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul (2009) baseiam o desenvolvimento da tarefa. Após sua aplicação, é possível constatar que uma boa tarefa, além de proporcionar o uso social de um texto, evita traduções mecânicas e grandes problemas de compreensão. Estudos como o aqui presente são importantes na construção de materiais para tal modalidade de ensino e ainda uma fonte de reflexão.*

Palavras chaves: *leitura em língua inglesa, estratégias de leitura, desenvolvimento de tarefas, leitura crítica.*

Abstract: *This paper presents an analysis of a review task submitted to undergraduate students at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFGRS) with a focus on reading activities. Here, the emphasis is on critical reading, which is seen as a social activity by the authors. Some concepts about reading brought by Gibbons (2002), Luke and Freebody (1990), Marcuschi (2001 b) and Referenciais Curriculares do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul (2009) are the basis for the task development. After its application, it is possible to notice that a good task, a side from providing the social use of a text, avoids mechanical translations and major problems of comprehension. Studies like the one presented here are important for material developing on this specific teaching area and a source of reflection.*

Keywords: *reading in English language, reading strategies, task development, critical reading.*

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Introduction and objectives

Two pieces of information are important to contextualize this work: firstly, in recent decades, government policies enable access to higher education, thus increasing the number of undergraduate students in Brazil. Secondly, academia is the place to exchange knowledge and, in order to do this, it is essential that those involved have access to it, not having the language as an obstacle. Considering this and the fact that the majority of academic texts are produced in English, it is necessary that the teaching of reading in English receives attention. These new undergraduate students as well as others will be facing the challenges of reading in an additional language and strategies to make it possible need to be rethought.

Today a considerable amount of literature on English for specific purpose (ESP) is found, but most of them do not bring reading as something social, they detach it from a context offering a general and poor idea of the contents, which is reflected in the selection of the texts and exercises presented in it. Reading displaced of its social role makes it a mere decoding of the text technology which prevents the student from growing as a reader, even in his/her mother tongue. Here the idea defended is that an additional language class should be the place to learn how to be a more effective reader, meaning that a reader who understands the text as something which has an author, a context and an ideology (Luke and Freebody, 1990).

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze a task that was developed to make reading an objective to occur in a critical way. In order to accomplish it, the task was developed and applied to students with a basic level English in *Programa de Apoio à Graduação* (PAG – Undergraduate Support Program) at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), through which the students receive tutoring in different areas, including in English language. This task focused on reviewing some contents and strategies taught during the program and it was applied in the last class of the module.

Considering the above, the main objective of this paper is to analyze a task that intended to promote a critical reading of an academic text, in this case an abstract, considering it as a social practice with a production context and a source of knowledge. This view helps the student be a better reader bringing advantages in his/her studies in general, aside from improving his worldview.

1. Literature Review

In this section, the theoretical background which conducted this paper will be shown. The basis for it are some ideas regarding reading developed by Luke and Freebody (1990), Gibbons (2002), Marcuschi (2001 b), as well as the task model proposed by Referenciais Curriculares do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul (RC) (2009).

1.1 The concepts of reading and reader

In this paper we defend the act of reading as a social activity, once a text has an author who is inserted in a context and in an ideological field. According to Bagno and Rangel (2005), the use of reading and writing is a fuller and more participative way to insert a citizen in a society such as ours, that is surrounded by texts. The work presented here aims to give an undergraduate student the possibility to act socially in an additional language through reading.

In order to develop the idea mentioned above, we worked with some literacy concepts concerning the reader according to Luke and Freebody (1990). They point out four roles of performance for a successful reader: the reader as code breaker, the reader as text participant, the reader as text user and the reader as text analyst.

The first role refers to the handling of text technology, i.e.: sound-symbol, text layout, knowledge of the alphabet, among others. It concerns the decoding of the text. In the second role, the authors bring the reader's relation with his/her background knowledge, for example including his/her knowledge of the world and his/her cultural knowledge. It allows the reader to establish important connections in order to understand what is read. The third role refers to the ability of the reader to interact in social activities where written texts play a major part. It deals directly with the reading as a social activity. In the final role, the reader is seen as someone who is capable to see the text as the product of an author that has a particular ideology or set of assumptions and, just as the third role, the reader is connected to a social environment.

These four concepts permeate the entire preparation of the task, since the goal is to get students to use them without following a strict order, allowing the analysis to precede participation, for instance.

1.2 Reading strategies and class contents

As mentioned before, the task analyzed here was designed for review classes. And then some contents worked in the classes are present in the activities. Topics of reading strategies such as scanning and skimming were worked as well as the use of a bilingual dictionary and key-words.

Skimming and scanning are popular strategies much used in the process of reading. According to Gibbons (2002) it is very important that the reader becomes familiar with them, once they are frequent in a text reading. Still in Gibbons (2002), the first strategy, skimming, refers to the quick reading of a text so that the student may become familiar with the general idea while the second one, scanning, refers to the quick reading of a text in order to seek specific information.

It is very common to use such techniques in the reading process and their use is very common in the students daily life (in a reading of a newspaper, for example), therefore the use of these occured at various points of the task.

Another content of the classes was the use of a bilingual dictionary, which is very important for the reading process regarding the comprehension of the text. During the classes, the students learned how to identify the use of some words by the context and some notions about grammatical classes. The main role of dictionary exercises is not to translate the whole text, but to be a support for text comprehension as a whole.

The last topic worked in class and present in the task are the use of key-words. They are present in almost all academic texts in order to make future researches easier. Besides, identifying them is important to make the appropriate reading. In the task the students were asked to write the key-words they judged most appropriate to fill the space provided. This activity is very useful to show the comprehension of the text, once it works as a summary of what was read. According to Marcuschi (2001 b), summarizing a text is an effective way in the process of understanding the reading process.

1.3 Activities models

In the task presented here, theoretical background was used to design the activities. Guided by Gibbons (2002), the task was divided in before-reading activities and after-reading activities.

1.3.1 Before-reading activities

Before-reading activities are important to prepare the student for linguistic, cultural and conceptual difficulties and to activate prior knowledge (Gibbons, 2002). When students come to the text with a sense of what they will be reading, it becomes easier once they have more resources to draw on.

In the task presented here, the major before-reading activity used was predicting from the title. According to Marchusci (2001 b) and Gibbons (2002), the title it is the first cognitive entry in the text. From the title it is possible to predict the idea of the text which may be confirmed or not. Working with the title of the text is a good way to notice how a text is written in a context even before the reading (Marcuschi, 2001 b).

1.3.2 After-reading activities

The after-reading activities are based on the idea that the students are already familiar with the text. 'Well-designed after-reading activities usually require students to keep returning to the text and rereading it to check on specific information or language use' (Gibbons, 2002).

In the task presented here, a series of after-reading activities were designed. With them, questions regarding the concepts of reader as a text user and a reader as a text analyst took place. The final questions required from the students an analysis of what they read in order to make a social use of the text (see question 08 of the task attached), expanding the interlocution situation.

Another after-reading activity used is text summaries. According to Marcuschi (2001 b), a reader needs to understand a text in order to summarize it and, if students are unable to do it, chances are high that they have not understood what they have read (Gibbons, 2002). This kind of activity requires an engagement in the text to the reader.

2. Methodology

The present paper is based on the analysis of a reading task developed for students with a basic English level, college students that attend the English for Reading course of the '*Programa de Apoio à Graduação*' (PAG - Undegraduate Support Program) of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). The assignment was developed as a review activity and applied by one of the authors of this article, Abel Prates, and by the undergraduate student Ana Hemmons Baratz during an English

teaching internship practice, conducted by Professor Margarete Schllater. The task was accomplished by the eight students present on November 10th 2012, on the closing class of the first module. The questions resume some of the contents worked in class, such as: the reading strategies scanning and skimming, the use of the bilingual dictionary, key words and other questions that refer to its reading and study. The activity sought to contemplate the four roles of the reader (Luke and Freebody 1990): reader as a code breaker, a text participant, a text user, a text analyst, making sure all these levels were addressed in different moments and so the reading could become a social practice.

A text in English belonging to the genre called abstract was chosen for the exercise. The choice was based on its relation with the academic context, since its present in almost all productions of the type. The theme's choice, the stress in the academic environment, seeks to follow the idea of making the text relevant for the student and providing a significant learning, one of the goals of RC (2009).

It is important to stress that the task was developed in Portuguese – except for the text – because the students have a basic level of English. Additionally, most of the books specialized in English for reading follow this procedure, inserting questions in the additional language to the extent that students acquire more knowledge in it.

3. Analysis of the tasks

The first activity follows the concepts of Gibbons (2002) about *Before Reading-Activities*. According to the author a preparation is required for the reading of an abstract. For this matter, this activity is a preparation for the reading of the genre discussed, aiming to activate the students' prior knowledge of this academic genre. The questions of this activity intent to contextualize the students on the matter what would be worked with and for that they share their previous knowledge of the genre with their classmates.

For the second activity the title of the abstract is given for students to analyze. In question a), students use the technique described by Gibbons (2002), *Prediction from Title or First Sentence,* in which they are led "to predict what kind of text is (...) and what the text will be about". In question b), a concept brought by Gibbons (2002) was used, *Prediction from words*, in which students are led to predict from the title what their expectations on what will be found in the text are. Marcuschi (2001 b) also addresses the subject in *Treatment from the title*, in which "The title is always the first

cognitive text entry. From it, we make a number of initial assumptions that may be modified or confirmed."[2] In this question, students activate their own social context and their individual knowledge on the subject in order to answer the question, thinking about what will be covered in the abstract just by reading the title.

In the third activity, students use the technique of scanning (Gibbons, 2002), looking in the text for elements of the abstract genre necessary to fill in the frame of the exercise. Through the mastering of the elements, the students understand the process of construction of the abstract genre and how its development unfolds. By comparing the answers with that of another colleague, the students can assist themselves if needed in understanding the construction of the abstract without the teacher's intervention.

In the fourth activity, initially students use the technique of skimming (Gibbons, 2002), to understand the abstract's idea as a whole. From this, they apply the technique of scanning (Gibbons, 2002), to withdraw the words they did not understand and which hinder the understanding of the abstract. Then, when using the dictionary, students understand the meaning of these words and they summarize the content worked on. This technique is widely used in the teaching of an additional language. By sharing with colleagues, students can enrich their vocabulary and they are able to see that the definition of a word is not related t o what they had understood first and so they turn a mechanical activity into a social activity.

In the fifth activity, from the previous activities and the students' prior knowledge on the subject of the abstract, they demonstrate understanding of abstract content to indicate words that fit the keywords.

In question a) of the sixth activity, through the reading technique of scanning, readers seek the part from the abstract that answers questions that were not answered by their prior knowledge. Question b) is answered in accordance with the student's prior knowledge about the building of an abstract. In question c), from the concept of Gibbons (2002), *Summarizing the text*, students demonstrate that they understood the abstract. Marcuschi (2001 b) also addresses the subject of producing summaries, stating that working understanding of the text by the technique of summarizing is also important. Questions d) and e) activate prior knowledge of the students on the subject. In d) the students explore, adding to their prior knowledge, their personal involvement with the subject of the abstract, indicating which information could be added in the abstract. In e) students use prior knowledge beyond what was studied in the previous

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[2] Translated by the authors

questions about construction and organization of the abstract, indicating that they understood what was exposed to them previously.

The seventh activity activates the techniques of skimming and scanning, because students must identify the main ideas of the abstract and extract the required information for each question. Afterwards, the students apply their social context to perform a critical analysis of what was asked of them.

In the eighth activity students expose their social context to respond to the activity. The exchange of information with other students allows understanding a reality often diverse, enriching their personal relationships and their knowledge, not only about the subject, but also about the world.

4. Results and conclusion

One of the challenges on teaching reading in English language is to help students understand the text without having to translate it fully and also to make them able to use it as social activity. The focus of the work presented here was to meet such ideas and on what concerns the understanding of the authors of this paper the goal was achieved.

In previous classes the tasks used were taken from English for specific purpose (ESP) books and the need to nearly translate the texts completely was perceived. The lack of introductory questions to the theme threw the students onto the text without any prior knowledge activation, an important step for the reading process. Moreover, the lack of decoding questions forced the teachers to translate the details of the text and often translate it entirely. Still, the lack of questions for discussion on the topic and on the text as something endowed in context made the readings extremely mechanical, distorting the social function of an additional language classroom.

The implementation of this task confirmed what was observed in classes when the didactical material was prepared by the trainees and led to the proposal of the Referenciais Curriculares do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul (2009) for teaching an additional language: the practice was much more successful than those which did not follow this pattern. Discussions on the text became the subject of debate, leading to a reflection on the theme that was quite productive, in which students brought informed collaborations, since the topic was familiar to them.

Questions number 03, for instance, which involved decoding, made students scrutinize the abstract, which made the translation of this text by the teachers

unnecessary. In addition, students demonstrated a good level of understanding when completing the questions where they should fill in the keywords of the abstract. They also evidenced success on the exercise that requested a summary of the text in three lines, once they did not show any difficulties in understanding the central idea.

From this study it was concluded that reading classes of an additional language do not need to focus only on decoding the text and that this kind of teaching can be used to help students improve their reading skills in general, even in his/her mother tongue. On this matter, the development of a good task underlies for the success of such purpose, it will produce the connection between the text, the student, the additional language and the context in which this production is inserted, serving as an ally of the teacher and preventing the class from becoming simply a moment of translation.

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The task

   Na aula de hoje, faremos uma reflexão sobre o uso de abstracts (resumos), textos ligados diretamente ao meio acadêmico.

1. Com os colegas, discuta as seguintes questões:
a) O que são abstracts?
b) Qual a importância deles para a vida acadêmica?
c) Vocês já precisaram escrever um? Se sim, em qual situação?
d) Que conteúdos, em geral, são incluídos em um abstract? Por quê?

2. Agora vamos ler o título de um abstract para estudar mais detalhadamente esse gênero acadêmico.
a) Analise o título. Sobre o que trata o estudo?
b) A partir do título, o que você espera encontrar no texto?

3. Leia o abstract e, com o colega, complete o quadro a seguir. Após concluírem, comparem suas respostas com as de outra dupla.

Objetivo da pesquisa	
Participantes	
Fatores analisados: a) Estressores	
b) Reações ao estresse	
Resultados: a) Comparação entre as populações	
b) Principais preditores do estresse	
Contribuições e implicações da pesquisa	

ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: COMPARISON OF AMERICAN AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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This study compared academic stressors and reactions to stressors between American and international students using Gadzella's Life Stress Inventory (B. M. Gadzella, 1991). Five categories of academic stressors (i.e., frustrations, conflicts, pressures, changes, and self-imposed) and four categories describing reactions to these stressors (i.e., physiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive) were examined. The sample consisted of 392 international and American students from 2 Midwestern universities. American students reported higher self-imposed stressors and greater behavioral reactions to stressors than international students. Respondent's status (American or international) and interaction of status and stressors emerged as the 2 strongest predictors of their behavioral, emotional, physiological, and cognitive reaction to stressors. Five stressors attained statistical significance in the regression model. The findings emphasize the need to recognize cultural differences in stress management. Implications for mental health providers in the university arena are discussed.

Key-words:

4. É provável que você não conheça algumas palavras do texto. Na tabela abaixo, liste três dessas palavras, consulte o dicionário e complete com as definições. Seu glossário deverá ter no mínimo três palavras.

Após concluir, compartilhe com os colegas as palavras que você aprendeu.

Palavras	Definições

5. Pense nas palavras-chaves de um texto. No abstract lido, vocês devem ter percebido que o espaço destinado para elas está em branco. Sendo assim, voltem ao texto e completem tal espaço, propondo palavras-chaves que poderiam se adequar à pesquisa. Expliquem para os colegas por que você escolheu essas palavras.

6. Com base no que discutimos até aqui e nos seus conhecimentos sobre o assunto, discutam as seguintes questões:

a)   Quais partes do abstract lido revelam a função social do gênero (motivar o leitor a ler o texto)?

b)   Qual é a extensão de um abstract? Isso pode mudar de acordo com a área ou com o tipo de publicação?

c)   Como vocês sintetizariam a pesquisa apresentada no abstract acima se tivessem apenas três linhas para isso? Utilize o espaço abaixo para tal.

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_____

d)   Que informações poderiam ser acrescentadas neste abstract para dar mais informações para o leitor decidir se vai ler a pesquisa?

e)   Que características básicas tem um bom abstract?

7. Uma breve discussão sobre o tema.

a)   Vocês acham o estudo relevante? Concordam com as conclusões trazidas pelos autores?

b)   Que pesquisas poderiam ser feitas a partir dos resultados encontrados nesta pesquisa?

c)   Vocês acreditam que o estresse é uma constante na vida de acadêmicos brasileiros? Quais fatores podem levar ao estresse nesse contexto? No que isso pode prejudicá-los?

d)   Como o estresse influencia a vida de vocês?

8. Agora, em duplas, elaborem uma lista com dicas para evitar o estresse na vida acadêmica. Compartilhem suas dicas com a turma.