

# Reading in the Foreign Language Classroom: Focus on Process

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This article sets out to present techniques which any adult reader, regardless of text, method, language level or language, can apply to achieve comprehension of a text.<sup>1</sup> These techniques are predicated on the assumption that reading comprehension is a function of active analytical restructuring of information on the part of the reader, as opposed to the more commonly held assumption that reading comprehension represents the reader's passive registration of information in the mode presented in the text. The research and theory supporting the notion that reading comprehension results from analytical processing has a venerable tradition which is currently enjoying a renaissance.<sup>2</sup> The most recent descriptions of the analytical reading process are emerging primarily in psycholinguistics and discourse analysis. In identifying the inadequacies in the passive reading model, this literature shares several fundamental assumptions which serve as significant points of departure for this paper.

1) Active control of isolated structures and vocabulary is no guarantee of reading comprehension. Such grammatical elements remain a collection of unrelated data until they are integrated into the communicative framework, the message of the text.<sup>3</sup>

2) The ability to translate from the foreign language to the native language is not, in itself, a guarantee of reading comprehension.<sup>4</sup>

3) The use of the interrogative question, the "who, what, when and where" questions, is not an efficient way to foster or check reader comprehension of a text because they isolate new bits of information and thereby remove them from their meaningful context.<sup>5</sup> By focussing on detail with "wh"-questions, the textbook or teacher may actually interrupt the reader's efforts to put segments or details of the text into a meaningful whole. Only the analytical or inferential "why" question (why does the reader agree or disagree?) calls for reader interpretation of textual meaning. Hence students who can answer the "who, what, when, where" recognition questions are frequently unable to frame a response to the "why" question if it demands an analysis of information not specified, but only implied, in the text.

4) To categorize the reading task as a "skill," unrelated to listening, speaking, and writing tasks, teaches and reenforces a distinction which may well be unproductive in a communicative setting.<sup>6</sup> If reading is taught as a separate "skill," classroom practice focusses on the isolated surface detail of the text ("who, what, when and where" questions). Only if reading is taught as a part of the total language learning process

will classroom practice correlate reading to meaning.

To illustrate this distinction, assume a skills classroom treatment of the fable "Der Wolf und das Lamm."

## Der Wolf und das Lamm<sup>7</sup>

von Phädrus (1. Jahrhundert nach Christus)

Zum gleichen Bach kamen einmal ein Wolf und ein Lamm, denn sie hatten beide Durst. Oben trank der Wolf, unten das Lamm. Da fing der böse Räuber an zu streiten. "Warum machst du mir das Wasser trübe, wo ich trinke?" Darauf versetzte das Wolletier mit Angst: "Bitte, Wolf, wie kann ich denn das tun? Das Wasser, das ich trinke, kommt von dir zu mir herab." Die Kraft der Wahrheit machte den Wolf ein Momentchen stumm. Aber gleich begann er wieder: "Vor sechs Monden hast du mich beleidigt, Lamm!" Worauf das Lamm ängstlich erwiderte: "Da lebte ich noch nicht!" "Ganz recht, es war dein Vater, der geschimpft hat!"  
Dann ergriff er das Lamm und tötete es. 10

Measures of "successful reading" of this text in a skills framework are evaluated in terms of recognition and recall of vocabulary and grammar forms. Consequently, skills exercises and examinations rely heavily on "wh"-questions such as "Wo trinken das Lamm und der Wolf?" and "Was sagt der Wolf zu dem Lamm?", as well as on vocabulary glosses followed by reinforcement drill. Student attention is drawn to disassociated parts of the textual message, but not to the interrelationship, the developed meaning, of those parts: structures and vocabulary are removed from their original context. As a result, the language which originally belonged to a text is presented and practiced in disassociation from context, as a formal paradigm instead of parts of a larger message.

To focus on the larger message of a text, the text assignments in a process approach should be devised so that students will identify vocabulary and grammar forms as redundant or as variants of a central idea of the text. To avoid presenting isolated functions out of narrative context, the assignments must stress inference and analysis in conjunction with recognition and recall. To maintain and draw on the meaning structure of the text, assignments must be designed to reveal to the students the interrelated functions of vocabulary and grammar in the narrative context. Assignments which fulfill these criteria—identifying vocabulary and syntactic features in terms of total narrative message—can be reduced to two major types: 1) semantic categorization (*Identifizieren Sie: die anderen Wörter für Wolf und Lamm; die Wörter, die mit Wasser verbunden sind; die Wörter, die Sprecharten beschreiben; etc.*); and 2) syntactic categorization (*Suchen Sie im Text: die Wörter, wofür folgende Pronomen stehen; die Verben im Präsens, in der Vergangenheit, und im Perfekt.*).

The semantic categorization exercise, grouping words for wolf and lamb, serves to connect authorial sympathies and imagery (*Wolletier, Räuber*) to the focal figures of the text. In so doing, this exercise alerts students to the implied levels of association which are available in the text. In the syntactic categorization exercise grouping verb tenses, the grammatical structure of the text is revealed as integral ( ) meaning

structure. Students will discover the consistent use of simple past for narrative and the present tense for the dialogue typically characteristic of the fable genre. The only exception to this pattern occurs after the dialogue of polite conversation has ceased and the wolf tries to legitimize his intentions by fabricating an excuse to kill the lamb ("Vor sechs Monden hast du mich beleidigt, Lamm!"). At this point, the wolf uses the present perfect for the first time. In effect, the shift in tense is the purely syntactical signal that the lamb's situation is hopeless. Such correlations between syntactical changes and changes in implied meaning are a frequent and prominent feature of unedited texts of all kinds, a feature which, if noted, can facilitate reader comprehension. Additionally, studies conducted in the past two decades indicate that learner efforts to schematize or connect textual information enhance recall significantly.<sup>9</sup> To test this assertion, my present readers need only conduct in class one of the process exercises designed for the German fable, and subsequently ask students to reconstruct the story from memory. The degree of recall, not only of main ideas, but also of grammatical and semantic detail, is generally striking.

In summary, then, skills approaches focus on language forms: their purview is largely restricted to passive identification of isolated meanings such as replication of grammatical forms and substitution of vocabulary. In contrast, a process approach regards language learning as an analytic activity: its emphasis is ideational, focussed on the meaning or message conveyed by the text. Consequently, all language tasks are viewed as integral parts of a multifaceted whole at whose center is the informational core or communication which is being received or conveyed.

For those unfamiliar with a process approach to reading, three objections may present themselves which deserve consideration: 1) How can students comprehend a text without knowing all the parts? 2) How can students acquire new vocabulary and structures if they are not learning them explicitly—in paradigms and vocabulary lists? and 3) Even if advanced foreign language students could profit from this approach, how can beginners, first and second semester language learners, read texts containing vocabulary and structures with which they are largely unfamiliar?

The first question goes to the heart of reading in *any* language: how do we derive meaning from texts? Emphatically not, say many experts in this field, by identifying words:

"Text can be comprehended only if it is read for meaning in the first place: reading to identify words is both unnecessary and inefficient."<sup>9</sup>

"... (M)eaning identification is generally a prior operation to word identification because it reduces word uncertainty and therefore permits word identification on minimal visual information."<sup>10</sup>

Such a definition of reading for meaning seems to belie core suppositions of current language teaching practice, and anticipates our second question: how can we acquire language without explicitly acquiring vocabulary and structures? Reading theorists invert this question to

answer it, maintaining that a communicative context must give meaning to structures and vocabulary functions *before* isolated words and syntactic patterns can be meaningful.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the ability to identify the meanings of words and to recall those words actually seems to be facilitated by meaningful context.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of the necessity of meaningful context suggests the direction in which to resolve the third objection: how can beginning language learners with very limited knowledge of the foreign language identify meaning while only commanding a restricted linguistic base? The classroom resolution to this objection depends on the age of those learners. Very young children cannot identify complex meanings because they lack cognitive maturity and extra-linguistic reference. Adult readers of English (age fourteen or over), however, bring to any foreign language text a wealth of background knowledge and experience with which to undertake the core task, the necessary first step in the reading process: the formulation of a reading hypothesis.<sup>13</sup> Adults have the ability to look at *Der Wolf und das Lamm* and note: "This is one paragraph, long, contains dialogue, and the animals seem to be doing the talking. The words *Wolf* and *Lamm* are like English." At this point, adult readers can infer: "I'll bet this is a fable." Armed with this reading hypothesis, our adult learners can proceed to confirm or disconfirm their fable theory and decide whether this is a fable with a traditional moral, or something different, a bizarre or humorous variant such as a Kafka fable.

Such reasoning and its supporting research lead to the conclusion that, to teach reading using the assumptions of a process approach, both instructional strategies and reading exercises must focus on the informational structure of the text. Unless linguistic details interfere with comprehension of either textual structure or fundamental message, to learn to read fluently, students must be encouraged to be unconcerned about isolated morphological segments or knowledge of each word in the text.

In their natural sequence, the classroom and learner tasks which enable reading for meaning are those which:

1) **preview:** ask the students to create a reading hypothesis based on preliminary identification of text type and subject matter ("This is a \_\_\_\_\_ [poem, essay, newspaper article]. It is about the movie "The Tin Drum.").

2) **organize:** establish a focus intrinsic to the text which correlates redundancies in vocabulary and structures with the preestablished reading hypothesis ("Identify all the words and phrases which refer to the making of the movie "The Tin Drum.").

3) **weight:** ask students to trace and reconstruct the linguistic and semantic patterns which establish the focus and reinforce the message of the text ("Identify those words and phrases which criticize the way "The Tin Drum" was made and those which praise it. Decide which type of observation predominates."). These activities correlate with the natural hierarchy of thought processes which the successful reader in

the native language uses to read fluently.<sup>14</sup>

The first contact with the text is inferential, making preliminary hypotheses about subject matter and genre ("It is one-half sheet of ditto paper in my office mail box; it's probably a memo"; or "There's a list of verb forms; what follows is probably a grammar description."). After making initial inferences, the reader uses analytical thought processes to confirm or disconfirm these inferences.

For example, the office memo can be quickly confirmed if the heading has "To:/From:", contains the words "employees are advised" and is signed by your boss. The grammar description hypothesis is quickly disconfirmed if the reader, engaging in further previewing, notices the words "spy," "code," and "CIA." This completed preview should result in a confirmed and more accurate hypothesis: this is about spies. To make an inference about genre, the reader will, as in the office memo illustration, generally rely on external features such as headings, pictures, and format. To make an inference about subject matter, the reader will have to skim or scan for four or five key words (predominantly nouns) which are an identifiable aggregate, a group of words which are comprehended by the reader as meaningfully related, as the propositional core of the text.<sup>15</sup>

Such previewing prepares the student of any language for fluent reading. How, then, may one implement previewing tasks into the language classroom?

### The Previewing Processes: Genre and Subject Matter

In order to establish a preliminary framework for reading, it will be necessary to discuss initial inferences before students commence to read an out-of-class reading assignment. As part of the assignment procedure in class, students take one or two minutes to scan the first two or three paragraphs—i.e., pick out format features such as illustrations, pagination, or titles (genre preview) or key words such as names and dates (subject matter preview). If the text is, for example, a journalistic report on riots in England, the class will find (and possibly underline or circle) names of heads of state or geographic locations, and references to destruction which will tell the reader whether the time is the past or the present. Next, books should be closed, and key words generated from memory should be written on the board or on a transparency. Using this preliminary list, students should decide if all the words are relevant and if any relevant words are missing. Such a discussion creates, in effect, a reading hypothesis. The class as a whole knows and agrees about what to expect.

In actual classroom practice, the identification of genre and subject matter of a new reading assignment should take no more than five minutes at the end of the class hour. It is the optimal preview exercise for reading since it represents a structured attempt to give the class a working hypothesis about the text. If we accept Smith's definition that meaningful reading occurs when reader prediction is confirmed in the process of continued contact with the text, then such preview strategies

should reflect intuitive or learned preview strategies of successful readers.<sup>16</sup> The objective of these strategies can be characterized as the effort of correlating subject matter with genre.

After one or two practice sessions, students generally find it very easy to correlate genre with subject matter. Their oral and written responses will be facilitated if they can refer to the primary types of texts or genres which they will be reading. For German, the following list serves both as a guide to students and as a basis for classroom discussion:

#### Textarten

1. **Information**
  - Artikel, Bericht (z.B. in einer Zeitschrift)
  - Liste (z.B. eine Speisekarte)
  - Tafel (z.B. ein Fahrplan)
2. **Beschreibung**
  - eine konkrete Beschreibung einer Person, eines Objekts, einer visuellen Szene
  - eine technische Beschreibung (z.B. Grammatik)
3. **Bewerbung**
  - Reklame (z.B. in einer Zeitschrift)
  - Anzeige (z.B. in einer Zeitung)
4. **Anweisungen**
  - Rezept
  - Spiel
  - Bauanleitung (z.B. für einen Papierhubschrauber)
  - Aufgabe, Übung, usw.
5. **Meinung**
  - Essay
  - Theorie
6. **Gespräch**
  - Interview, Dialog
  - Monolog
  - Predigt, Gebet
  - Rede, Vorlesung, Vortrag
7. **Geschichte (nicht fiktiv)**
  - Biographie, Autobiographie
  - Geschichte (historische)
8. **Geschichte (fiktiv) oder Erzählung**
  - Fabel
  - Märchen
  - Anekdote
  - Kurzgeschichte
  - Novelle
  - Roman
  - usw.
9. **Gedicht**
  - Lied
  - Gesang
  - Hymne
  - Lyrik
10. **Drama**
  - Hörspiel
  - Theaterstück (z.B. Komödie, Tragödie, Oper, usw.)
  - Drehbuch für Film, Fernsehen, usw.

Die Textart kann man oft durch die äusserlichen Merkmale des Textes identifizieren, z.B. Titel, Illustrationen, äußere Form, Tafeln, Daten, usw.<sup>17</sup>

After establishing genre, students need guidance in anticipating the text's logical development (or absence thereof), probable redundancies, and general stylistic features. It is at this point that the integration of genre and subject matter begins. In a real sense, by establishing genre, students have already identified the probable rhetorical grammar of the text, the stylistic markers which serve as predictors of the flow of ideas and of the constraints within which those ideas can be developed.

As an example, let us assume that the class is working with our fable about the wolf and the lamb. Once students recognize that they are dealing with a fable, they need little knowledge of the target language to know that the text contains the following features as present (+): + figures, + action, + dialogue, and + visual scene. The students' extrinsic knowledge—their familiarity with fables in the English language—will assist them in further identifying that this text, as a fable, will probably have + chronology, + fiction. Having thus identified which features the text as a fable can potentially develop, students will now be able to weight and organize the information available in their reading assignment.

By way of contrast, let us assume that the class has just previewed an essay. The class will, in the case of most essays, have found virtually none of the genre features of the fable, since the majority of essays will lack the following features (-): - action, - dialogue, - visual scene, - fiction. It should be noted that minus features frequently render a text more difficult for the foreign language reader, because the text lacks visual references or extrinsic information about the world which the reader can apply to the text.<sup>18</sup>

### **From Inference to Analytic Thought Processes: Weighting and Organizing Factors**

Initial identification of genre and subject matter prepares students for fluent reading—that is, for fuller comprehension achieved through analysis of multiple levels of textual meaning. In previewing, they have isolated a first level, the global presuppositions of genre and subject matter, which can now be confirmed and elaborated in confronting the text on various other levels of content and form, depending on the reader's intent. As a preliminary to fluent reading, the class has hypothesized about the informational boundaries of the text and the rhetorical patterns which structure that information, and is now ready to assess the ways in which textual language is organized and weighted by the author. Previewing has delineated the information available in the text. Further reading identifies the systematizing or the authorial structuring of that information. Correlating authorial structure or, as it is more commonly known, authorial point of view, with textual information is the process by which the reader achieves comprehension or reads for meaning: using analytical processes (systematic weighting and organizing) rather than inference processes or recognition.

In terms of classroom practices, the implementation of a simple but radical departure from the usual recall and recognition questions

("wh"-questions and multiple choice, for example) is essential. To foster true analytic processing in reading, neither recall nor recognition are sufficient. A student can only comprehend a text through an active confrontation with it, in which s/he selects elements of the language of the text, and then organizes and weights these elements into meaningful patterns.

In the fable of "The Wolf and the Lamb," the students who selected and grouped the verbs according to the present, past, and present perfect tenses can now analyze the systematic groupings and decide whether or not there is a pattern which correlates that syntactic level with a semantic level of the text. The juxtaposition of these two levels will, in turn, open a range of implied meaning (part of the total implication structure of the text) and make them available to students for discussion in simple language drawn almost exclusively from the text. Having understood that there is a pattern, students are then prepared to respond to an analytic "why" question: *Warum spricht der Wolf plötzlich im Perfekt? Raten Sie mögliche Gründe!* (Why might the wolf have started talking about prior events in the perfect tense?). A range of answers is available in simple, text-based language which nonetheless convey complex implications: *Er will Recht haben* (justification of actions); *er will Autorität zeigen* (recourse to authoritarian threats); *das Lamm soll Angst haben* (intimidation of the lamb); *er denkt, Wölfe tun das* (standard bully tactics, working himself up to feel self-righteous in killing the lamb).

### **The Reading Process: Weighting and Organizing Factors**

Two fundamental tasks help readers locate authorial systematizing of information in the text: locating information groupings and identifying the authorial point of view indicated by the weighting of that information. The source of language for these assignments need only be the text, as has been demonstrated above. In classroom practice, both tasks demand no more of the student than reading aloud those segments of the text whose language fulfills the particular requirement. Cognitively, however, students will be asked to do more than recognize information as they did in the preview: they have to analyze it. Establishing the organizing and weighting of textual information is an active analysis, a critique of the structure of the text. In assessing the relative balance or imbalance of information or argumentation, the students are a short step from confronting the question of whether they agree or disagree with the author's presentation.

The first task is to establish, through examination of textual language, the logical groupings of information in terms of continuity/sameness (general to specific, small to large, etc.), chronology/sequence (first, second, third; from the end to the beginning; etc.), and instrumentality (because of x, y results). These are the organizational factors available to the author. If we assume that reading for textual message will be done more accurately if analysis is conducted with a minimum of reader contamination—without the intrusion of preconceptions and

information not expressed in the text—, then organizational assignments must be structured so that students examine the language of the text which anticipates distinctive authorial patterns. Three kinds of assignments are useful to foster student analysis of textual language without recourse to text-extrinsic language:

1) assignments which ask students to select textual references to continuity or discontinuity, sameness or difference. Students will cite or list statements, words or phrases which reveal, for example, shifts or contrasts in visual scene, in action or behavior of characters. Indicators of such shifts are bound closely to the grammar of the text, including such factors as tense indicators (e.g., the old lady in "Frau Prümm erzählt" reflects on her childhood and present life in clearly alternating shifts of tense) or connectors such as coordinating or subordinating conjunctions which indicate the unity of a certain group of reflections ("and," "since," "because") or perhaps their disparity ("but," "on the contrary"). An example of an exercise based on the text "Frau Prümm erzählt" (see Appendix A) asks the students to group the statements where Frau Prümm is speaking about the past:

*Aufgabe: Orientierung*

*Identifizieren Sie, wo Frau Prümm von der Vergangenheit erzählt!*

Possible Answer: "Silberne Löffel hatte ich," "... hat die Schwiegertochter gestohlen," "Ich hatte die Rente unter die Zuckerdose gelegt," ...

(An additional example is included with the text in Appendix A.)

2) assignments which ask students to select textual references to chronology or sequence of events. Events can be listed, for example, in terms of the point in the text at which they are mentioned. This textual chronology can, in turn, be contrasted with a sequence of the actual (real-world) order in which events must have occurred. As with the first type of assignment, the location of textual chronology/sequence is found in grammatical detail—in most cases, in the consistent pattern of temporal references or adverbial expressions ("in 1974," "later," "afterwards," etc.). A sample assignment, again about the text "Frau Prümm erzählt," asks students to locate the actual sequence of events which is not self-evident in the narrative structure of the text:

*Aufgabe: Orientierung—Die Zeit*

*Ordnen Sie Folgendes chronologisch ein!*

- \_\_\_ Die Schwiegertochter soll Geld gestohlen haben.
- \_\_\_ Herr Prümm stirbt.
- \_\_\_ Die Kinder krabbeln um Herrn Prümm herum.
- \_\_\_ Frau Prümm legt Geld unter die Zuckerdose.

3) assignments which ask students to group textual references in terms of instrumentality or linked phenomena of any sort: that is, to reveal the way which people, objects, or events influence or connect

with each other explicitly or implicitly. An example of such assignments for the text "Frau Prümm erzählt" with possible answers is:

1a) *Suchen Sie Frau Prümms Äußerungen über den Tod aus.*

z.B.: "dort . . . in der Herrlichkeit Gottes."

Possible Answers: "Angst . . . Da muß ich lachen," "Ich wollte, ich wäre schon da oben."

1b) *Suchen Sie die Ereignisse aus ihrem Leben aus, die diese Äußerungen oder Meinungen erklären.*

z.B.: "Die Schwiegertochter . . . hat 400 Mark gestohlen."

Possible Answers: "Zwei Jahre, und er war tot, und ich allein," "Ich kann doch nicht schlafen."

The information falling under at least one of the three organizing factors (continuity, chronology, or instrumentality, as exemplified by the foregoing assignments), must be determined before the students commence the second fundamental task, the assessment of authorial point of view through an analysis of authorial weighting given to these primary organizing factors.

Assignments which prepare students for this assessment will necessitate reader reference to their own knowledge of the world, to the extrinsic information which they bring to the text. Before readers can identify language which suggests negative or positive feelings or note vital omissions in reasoning and information, they must have their own personal standards for making such judgments. This re-emphasizes that the assignments here only apply to reading done by adults.<sup>19</sup> But particularly for adults it is vital to distinguish between an impressionistic, unsubstantiated judgment and a judgment based on presentation of textual evidence. The conclusions which adults may reach in both cases may be the same, but the pedagogical value of the assignment types described here is their focus on the active *processing* of information rather than on "correct" conclusions per se. There are at least seven or eight ways Frau Prümm expresses dissatisfaction with her life. Identifying *any* three or four prepares the student to draw correct conclusions about the larger implications of the text.

The organizing assignments exemplified above must be tailored to the nature of the text in question (to genre or subject matter). For any text, however, one or more of the following weighting assignments will provide the basis for subsequent reader judgment or conclusions about the authorial point of view: 1) analyzing authorial objectivity or subjectivity as manifested in textual language; 2) determining whether textual language is critical or uncritical vis-à-vis the subject matter; 3) assessing whether textual language is positive or negative vis-à-vis the subject matter; 4) locating the relative balance or imbalance of information in the text, as well as possible omissions or extraneous data or arguments.

As an example, let us assume that a first semester class has been asked to read Wolf Wondratschek's "Aspirin" (see Appendix B). This short text will have been identified in the preview phase as *ve story,*

and the students have determined that the text refers to two people identified as "she" and "they." The organizing assignment consists of: 1) grouping references to "sie" which are singular and those which are plural (syntactical organizing to locate consistency), and 2) correlating language which refers to the ages of the two people and the probable setting of the story (semantic organizing to locate consistency). The weighting assignment is to analyze two important author omissions: the absence of personal names and of the pronoun "he."

The reading assignments excluded a number of possible organizational considerations such as chronology or instrumentality, since these are less overt in the language of this particular text. Similarly, assignments examining such weighting features as author objectivity, critical versus uncritical, or positive versus negative stance were eliminated as less revealing than those based on inclusion/omission. Inevitably, the reading tasks described here elicit subinterpretations, deemphasizing less significant features and directing attention to others. But while the assignment is narrowing a student's field of activity, it does not prescribe a student's response. The tasks are open-ended in the sense that they encourage variability among individual student answers.

By way of contrast, the non-open "wh" questions restrict student discourse on both the informational and the organizational levels. They are teacher rather than learner questions. Or, as Hatch and Long state:

Teachers' questions are usually not genuine questions at all, but pseudo-questions whose real function is to make students display knowledge (which the teacher already has) or to reveal that they lack a given piece of information.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, the process reading assignment described does restrict examination of information by focusing on "sie" singular or plural rather than, for example, on what happens first, second, or third. But the assignment lets the *student* organize and weight the information, allowing for a considerable range of acceptable observations. For example, in the "Aspirin" weighting assignment, it would not be "wrong" for a student to decide to organize the information in the text around *any* of the hypotheses in the semantic organization assignments (see Appendix B). The purpose of the exercise is not so much that a student arrives at a prescribed "right" answer or a particular conclusion; rather it is to guide the student to use textual language in the clarification or development of that conclusion, a process which can be valid at *widely different levels of linguistic and interpretive sophistication*. Or, as Clarke and Silberstein conclude: "We must construct reading tasks which reward students as much for trying as for getting the correct answer."<sup>21</sup>

Student A who contrasts singular and plural references in "Aspirin" may not have the level of insight of student B, who points out that references to thinking ("Sie denkt an Rom.") or personal appearance ("Sie hat so viele Hände.") are exclusively "hers" and not "theirs." Yet

student A is not "wrong" for failing to perceive these implications. Successful answers to a process assignment will reflect individual perceptions of the various levels of meaning available in most texts and as such, will correspond to the students' maturational and cognitive levels.

In the task assigned for "Aspirin," meaning is derived exclusively from examination of textual detail. After students categorize or list dominant textual features, they are ready to proceed from the organization of the text (consistency, same/different) to the weighting of those informational groups. Only now can students determine what is more or less important to the author. Only after grouping the two "sie" functions in their various textual realizations can the class discuss whether or not the use of "sie" singular and plural is indicative of a statement about the people or relationships in the text implied by the author's interchanging of pronoun forms. The class can compare, for example, whether anything "she" does or thinks has its equivalent in what "they" do or think. Students may disagree if, by implication, the young woman's relationship with the young man reflects a differentiated "other," or if that anonymous plural represents merely an extension of the woman's own self-centered universe ("Wer ist wichtiger, er oder sie? Woher wissen wir das vom Text?"). Before such a conclusion is reached, however, the class will have identified recurrent informational and grammatical detail as a textual pattern conveying meaning.

Demonstrably, then, the reading process assignment, even for beginning students, allows the teacher's role to be relatively non-directive and non-prescriptive. "Right" and "wrong" will be a question of amassing evidence rather than pinpointing an isolated correct answer. The teacher's task is to guide students rather than to stand in absolute judgment of their success or failure. As any literary critic knows, interpretations of the meaning of a text will vary, at least to some degree. Process assignments do not exclude the natural richness available in the many levels of textual language on which students may draw. By reason of this natural linguistic richness, unedited readings are more accessible to students even when they are judged to be more difficult in terms of unknown structures and vocabulary.<sup>22</sup> The redundancies and the real world context of unedited readings enable students to apply many types of prior knowledge in identifying possible meanings of a text.<sup>23</sup>

With process assignments, the teacher has automatically structured class discussions of readings. The entire class, including the teacher, engages in a dialogue about the constituents of the text. Linguistically, the task for students is simple. To provide a minimal correct answer, they need only read aloud. Their evidence may well be redirected or modified by more linguistically advanced peers in the class, but in the absolute sense ordinarily implied by an incorrect response to the "wh" questions, the student's presentation can never result in total failure.<sup>24</sup> Unless the student is totally unresponsive, some evidence he locates can be incorporated into the analysis done by the class as a whole.

Ideally, throughout this process the teacher serves only as a monitor, as a resource person confirming and disconfirming the class' reconstruction on the basis of broader knowledge of the language. The teacher need no longer be the absolute authority about what a text means.

### Conclusions

Classroom approaches which focus on reading as a process have multiple implications for foreign language teaching. They offer, first, a consistent structure for comparative analysis of texts in a classroom setting. In providing students with instruction and guidance about how to read for meaning in terms of the target language, the classroom teacher is making optimal use of group interaction.<sup>25</sup>

Second, the process approach offers both students and instructors considerable variety. After the class as a group has developed confidence about the reliability of their reading strategies, even unedited reading texts can be selected, according to the needs of specific interest groups or individuals.

Third, the process approach emphasizes the importance of reader purpose in undertaking to read a given type of text. Encouraging students to relate their particular interests to their knowledge of German enhances their learning. The knowledge which a chemistry major brings to bear on a scientific text, for example, will greatly facilitate that reader's comprehension of the material. Training in tasks which capitalize on this prior knowledge has motivational as well as cognitive value.

Fourth, the process approach increases freedom of text selection. Students who use this approach need not be restricted to graded readings.<sup>26</sup> There are practical reasons beyond the technical assessments of comprehensibility that argue in favor of making the transition from simplified to authentic texts as rapidly as possible. Authentic, unsimplified texts come closer to approximating the real linguistic world which the foreign language learner is preparing to confront. The sooner students are exposed to authentic language, the more rapidly they will learn that comprehension is not a function of understanding every word, but rather of developing strategies for selecting and identifying multiple verbal and non-verbal cues, strategies essential in both oral and written communication.

The inherent advantage of a process approach is therefore clear: its presentation of reading as an adult activity, as active analysis in which students expand their conceptual and informational horizons.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The substance of this paper reflects thinking and teaching practices which were developed at the University of Texas at Austin between 1977 and 1980 with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Major contributor to the research and materials on which this paper is based

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were made by G. Truett Cates (now at Austin College, Sherman, TX, Betty Nance Weber, Phyllis Manning, Margaret Woodruff, Don S. Stephens, John Pustejovsky, and Nancy Zeller. My particular thanks go to Katherine Arens and Inge C. Schwerdtfeger for discussions and guidance in writing this article.

<sup>2</sup>Within the last year, periodicals such as *The Modern Language Journal*, *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *Foreign Language Annals*, *Language Learning*, *System*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *Zielsprache: Deutsch*, whose previous attention to reading had been relatively limited, have featured articles on aspects of reading a foreign language in virtually every issue.

<sup>3</sup>See Frank Smith and Deborah Lott Holmes, "The Independence of Letter, Word, and Meaning Identification in Reading," *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, ed. Frank Smith (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1973), pp. 50-69.

<sup>4</sup>In a discussion of the difficulties of teaching a foreign language for general as opposed to more restricted and clearly defined purposes, Richard Alexander provides a number of examples which suggest that, in part, "the word-for-word translation approach was preprogrammed to complicate the reading process unnecessarily" (p. 117); "A Learning-to-Learn Perspective on Reading in a Foreign Language," *System*, 8 (1980), pp. 113-19.

<sup>5</sup>For a thorough analysis of the inadequacies of "wh" questions in establishing comprehension of textual meaning, see: June K. Phillips, "Second Language Reading: Teaching Decoding Skills," *Foreign Language Annals*, 8 (1975), pp. 227-32; and "A Study of the Applicability of Task Analysis Methodology and Learning Hierarchies in Second-Language Reading," Diss., Ohio State Univ., 1974. For similar conclusions about native speakers, see also R. C. Anderson, "Comprehension," *Review of Educational Research*, 42, No. 2 (1972), who expands the analysis of the deficiencies of traditional questions about reading passages by comparing responses to verbatim and paraphrase questions.

<sup>6</sup>H. G. Widdowson illustrates in *Teaching Language as Communication* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978) why current distinctions among skills are unproductive in a communicative framework: "... speaking and writing are said to be active, or productive skills whereas listening and reading are said to be passive or receptive skills... I want to suggest that although it might be convenient to represent the language skills in this way when considering usage [linguistic competence], it is not specifically helpful, and indeed might be positively misleading, to represent them in this way when considering use [performance]. The terms aural/visual and productive/receptive refer to the way language is manifested rather than to the way it is realized in communication" (p. 57).

<sup>7</sup>This text and exercises, as well as those included as the appendices of the present article, are drawn from: G. Truett Cates, and Janet K. Swaffar, *BASIS: A First Course in German* (unpublished, copyright 1979). This fable is included as part of the first semester's work for high school or college students.

<sup>8</sup>Janet L. Mistler-Lachman, in her study "Levels of Comprehension in Processing of Normal and Ambiguous Sentences," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 11 (1972), pp. 614-23, concludes that "an additional 'inferential' step was suggested as a component of deep comprehension" (p. 622). Her later study, "Depth of Comprehension and Sentence Memory," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 13 (1974), pp. 98-106, expands these earlier conclusions: "The operation of a levels-of-processing model has been less clearly specified, but presumably would hold that the system immediately enters a processing level appropriate to the task demands. Deeper tasks are handled at deeper levels, and deeper levels are characterized by better memory for the input" (p. 105). The effect of logical processing on language recall in the native language has also been confirmed by David R. Olson, in his paper "Language and Thought: Aspects of a Cognitive Theory of Semantics," *Psychological Review*, 77, No. 4 (1970), pp. 257-73, where he concludes: "... it is shown by reference to the role of semantics in a transformational grammar that semantic decisions are not determined by either syntactic or semantic selection restrictions but by the speaker's knowledge of intended

referent." See also: Richard P. Honeck, "Interpretive Versus Structural Effects on Semantic Memory," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 12 (1973), pp. 448-55; S. A. Bobrow and G. H. Bower, "Comprehension and Recall of Sentences," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 80 (1969), pp. 455-61; and Morris Moscovitch and Fergus I. M. Craik, "Depth of Processing, Retrieval Values, and Uniqueness of Encoding as Factors in Recall," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 15 (1976), pp. 447-58.

<sup>9</sup>Frank Smith, ed., *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup>Frank Smith, ed., *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, p. 60. Mark A. Clarke and Sandra Silberstein conclude that teachers of second language students should have as a major goal "to give our students practice and encouragement in using the minimum number of syntactic/semantic clues to obtain the maximum amount of information when reading" (p. 50); in "Toward a Realization of Psycholinguistic Principles in the ESL Reading Class," *Reading in a Second Language: Hypotheses, Organization, and Practice*, ed. R. Mackay, B. Barkman, and R. R. Jordan (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1979), pp. 48-65.

<sup>11</sup>This premise is gradually finding support in second language research, e.g.: "General exposure to the language in communicative situations is therefore relevant to performance requiring attention to either meaning or form" (p. 390), Ellen Bialystok, "The Role of Conscious Strategies in Second Language Proficiency," *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 35 (1979), pp. 372-94; Herbert W. Seliger's research "On the Nature and Function of Language Rules in Language Teaching," *TESOL Quarterly*, 13 (1979), pp. 359-69, found "no relationship . . . for 'good' [linguistically complete] and 'bad' [incomplete or 'rule-of-thumb'] rules and quality of the learner's performance of the task" (p. 359), because the concept behind a rule dominated in memory.

<sup>12</sup>See Frank Smith, ed., *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, pp. 60-62; P. A. Kolers, "Reading is Only Incidentally Visual" in *Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of Reading*, ed. K. S. Goodman and J. T. Fleming (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1969); and Mark A. Clarke and Sandra Silberstein, "Toward a Realization of Psycholinguistic Principles," (note 10), who assert that "more information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories" (p. 48).

<sup>13</sup>For a more complete discussion of reading hypotheses, see Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1971), esp. p. 24, and Aaron S. Carton, "Inferencing: A Process in Using and Learning Language," *The Psychology of Second Language Learning: Papers from the Second International Congress of Applied Linguistics*, ed. Paul Pimsleur and Terence Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 45-58.

<sup>14</sup>Kenneth S. Goodman, "Psycholinguistic Universals in the Reading Process," *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, ed. Frank Smith (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1973), particularly p. 23, describes the efficient reader as follows: "He accomplishes this [efficient reading] by *sampling*, relying on the redundancy of language, and his knowledge of linguistic constraints. He *predicts* structures, tests them against the semantic context which he builds up from the situation and the on-going discourse, and then *confirms* or disconfirms as he processes further language." Foreign language teachers, however, may have to realize that they assume that students read efficiently in their native language. James Coady, "A Psycholinguistic Model of the ESL Reader" *Reading in a Second Language*, ed. R. Mackay, B. Barkman, and R. R. Jordan (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1979), notes that: "We have only recently come to realize that many students have very poor reading habits to transfer from their first language, and thus, in many cases, we must teach reading skills which should have been learned in first language instruction" (p. 12).

<sup>15</sup>The distinction between the propositional content of an utterance and its illocutionary force (the mode in which these propositional facts are presented,

such as questioning, demanding, entreating) is most usefully made by John L. Searle: *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), section 2.4: "Propositions."

<sup>16</sup>Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading*.

<sup>17</sup>This chart of "Textarten" is drawn from Cates/Swaffar, Chapter 6, *BASIS: A First Course in German*; see note 7.

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of the relationship between textual features and readability, see Helen G. C. Chapman, "Criteria for the Selection of Short Prose Fiction to be Used in Level II (Intermediate) Foreign Language Classes," Diss. Univ. of Texas, 1975. In actual classroom practice, we have found that the following list of features is useful in characterizing the major genres indicated on the chart included in the text of this article. Students given a list of these distinctions along with the "Textarten" can draw on this vocabulary during the classroom preview session to work out a particular genre's organizing and weighting features prior to the actual reading of an assignment:

1. +/- figures—are characters discussed or do they speak for themselves? can students list them or cite characteristic behaviors?
2. +/- dialogue—do the people speak to one another? to themselves?
3. +/- visual scene—is a place or object depicted which the reader can visualize concretely?
4. +/- action—do the people or other groupings do anything or does something happen to them?
5. +/- fiction—is this text completely invented by the author or is the text about actual people and events?
6. +/- chronology—do events occur in any temporal order and does the text reflect that chronology faithfully or vary it and if so, how?
7. +/- specificity—is the text about a specific topic or people? or is it about a group or type of people? about a general topic such as the economy? childrearing? or about one family's struggle with inflation? a juvenile delinquent? etc.

<sup>19</sup>In regard to the present study's restriction to adult learnings, see Ellen Bialystok, "The Role of Conscious Strategies in Second Language Proficiency," particularly p. 392. Her study was unable to ascertain whether or not inferencing strategies would definitively influence language learning: "In this case, no claim may be made about the role of inferencing—it neither discriminated among the criterion tasks nor facilitated general performance. . . . Both a better instrument for measuring inferencing and a task placing greater stress on general communicative meaning need to be developed." Inferencing plays a large role in the present study's weighting tasks, and requires adult knowledge of the world to facilitate learning with maximum efficiency. Bialystok's sample consisted of Canadian fourteen-to-seventeen-year olds. The possibility exists that her research instrument was not defective in regard to inferencing, but that the level of maturity of her subjects made distinctive results difficult to obtain for this strategy.

<sup>20</sup>Evelyn Hatch and Michael H. Long, "Discourse Analysis, What's That?" *Discourse Analysis in Second Language Research*, ed. Diane Larsen-Freeman (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1980), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup>Clarke and Silberstein, p. 49 (see note 10).

<sup>22</sup>For a detailed discussion of the advantages which unedited texts may have for foreign language learners, see J. Honeyfield, "Simplification," *TESOL Quarterly*, 11, (1977), pp. 431-40.

<sup>23</sup>For a discussion of the importance of a meaningful and authentic real world context for classroom exercises, see H. G. Widdowson, *Teaching Language as Communication* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), particularly pp. 79-82 and 88-91.

<sup>24</sup>Additionally, "wh" questions do not correspond to real-world discourse forms. In this sense, process assignments reduce the artificiality of classroom discourse. As Widdowson, remarks in *Teaching Language as Communication*



(p. 96): "We are not, in normal circumstances, required to submit ourselves to interrogation after having read something, knowing at the same time that the person putting the questions already knows the answers. To cast comprehension exercises in the form of questions only tends to emphasize the artificiality of the enterprise and so to prevent the learner from adopting the kind of attitude which will encourage the development of the reading ability."

"Colin Harrison and Terry Dolan, "Reading Comprehension—A Psychological Viewpoint" *Reading in a Second Language*, pp. 13-23, support the value of group confirmation of reading conclusions: "What we do say is that no reader will learn from a text unless he actually engages with it, and that these activities [class discussions] seem to encourage this engagement or reflection in a way that individual silent reading may not. . . . The task in developing reading comprehension is to encourage a vital response rather than a mechanical or unchallenged one. Our belief is that in a fluent reader the critical and reflective response is internalized; what group reading activities offer is an externalization of the process of critical reading, which can be shared and enjoyed by those who take part, and which is potentially a valuable learning experience, since it offers the poorer reader models and strategies which he can use in his own private reading" (p. 23).

"For over two decades, the criteria for grading readers have been the focus of a largely unresolved controversy. For an analysis of the current stage in this ongoing discussion, see Renate A. Schulz, "Literature and Readability: Bridging the Gap in Foreign Language Reading," *Modern Language Journal*, 65 (1981), pp. 43-53.

## Appendix A

"Frau Prümm erzählt" is a text included in *BASIS: A First Course in German* for the second semester. Aside from the exercises included in the body of the present paper, the preview and orientation exercises included here are part of the students' text.

### Preview Exercises

#### VORSCHAUAUFGABE: "FRAU PRÜMM ERZÄHLT"

(In der Klasse)

Textart: \_\_\_\_\_

Hauptpersonen: \_\_\_\_\_

Zeit: Präsens und Vergangenheit

Wir lesen den Text einmal schnell durch (30 Sekunden)! Dabei notieren Sie 5 Wörter, die Ihnen wichtig scheinen. Danach werden wir bei geschlossenen Büchern versuchen, gemeinsam einen Satz zu bilden, der die Hauptidee des Textes ausdrückt.

#### FRAU PRÜMM ERZÄHLT\*

Ob ich Angst vor dem Tod hab? Da muß ich ja lachen! Ich hab doch meinen Glauben. Hier macht man die Augen zu, und dort macht man sie wieder auf, in der Herrlichkeit Gottes. Ja, wenn ich meinen Glauben nicht hätte! Es ist schlimm, wenn man nicht mehr weiß, was man hat. Silberne Löffel hatte ich, für den Sonntag. Vierhundert Mark hat mir die Schwiegertochter gestohlen, das weiß ich ganz genau. Ich hatte meine Rente unter die Zuckerdose gelegt. Sie war da zum Putzen, sonst war niemand da. Frau Piper hat gesagt: "Es ist nicht zu glauben."

Mein Mann, das war ein guter Mann. Wir waren wie die Kinder zusammen. Freud und in Leid. Er war bei der Bahn, Kessel-

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schmied! Einmal haben sie ihn halbtot rausgebracht, was war das für ein Tag. Wie er dalag, verrußt und halbtot, und das Bettzeug sah aus! Das mußte ich dreimal waschen, bevor es wieder weiß war. Die Kinder krabbelten um ihn herum und weinten: "Papa, Papa!" Dann hatte er zuviel weiße Blutkörperchen. Wo er sich die geholt hat! Zwei Jahre, und er war tot und ich allein. Wir waren zusammen wie die Kinder, immer gelacht, aber viel geschafft, viel geschafft.

Wenn ich nur laufen könnte, dann könnte ich meine Leute besuchen. Das ist nix, das Alleinsein. Ich wollte, ich wäre schon da oben.

Mich graut es vor der Nacht. Sie ist so lang, so lang! Und ich kann doch nicht schlafen. Ich dreh mich von einer Seite auf die andere und komme nicht weiter. Ich schaue die ganze Nacht auf die Uhr. Es ist eine Kuckucksuhr aus dem Schwarzwald, mein Konrad hat sie mir zum fünfzigsten geschenkt. Manchmal nachts spür ich ihn richtig in meinem Rücken, wenn ich mich dann zu ihm dreh, hat er sich auch grade umgedreht und liegt mir wieder im Rücken. Ich wache zehnmal die Nacht auf von der Blase, es ist das Wasser. Ich möcht nur wissen, was ich Böses getan hab in meinem Leben. Voriges Jahr haben wir fünf begraben! \*Quelle: *Hinterhofgeschichten*, S. 40.

### Semantic Organization Question

#### ORIENTIERUNG: DER ORT

An einem Sonntag (Zeile 5) waren Frau Prümm und die Schwiegertochter

- beim Kaffee, bzw. Mittagessen
- im Kino
- im Kasino

Suchen Sie Wörter aus dem Text, die auf Ihre Antwort deuten.

### Appendix B

Wondratschek's "Aspirin" is included in *BASIS* as a text for first-semester students.

### Preview Exercises

#### VORSCHAUAUFGABE: "ASPIRIN"

(In der Klasse)

Textart: \_\_\_\_\_

Hauptpersonen: 1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Wir lesen den Text einmal schnell durch (30 Sekunden)! Dabei notieren Sie 5 Wörter, die Ihnen wichtig scheinen. Danach werden wir bei geschlossenen Büchern versuchen, gemeinsam einen Satz zu bilden, der die Hauptidee des Textes ausdrückt.

#### ASPIRIN\*

von Wolf Wondratschek

Sie hat ein schönes Gesicht. Sie hat schöne Haare. Sie hat schöne Hände. Sie möchte schönere Beine haben.