

Toward a Text-Centered Approach to Reading

Ding Xin-shan
Yantai Teachers' College

In teaching reading, two approaches are rather traditional: the word-centered approach and the sentence-centered approach. The former is mainly concerned with the selection and rate of introduction of vocabulary, and the latter, reflecting audiolingual methods, shifted the focus onto sentence structures. We now realize that exclusive use of such approaches results in reading courses that are a mere extension of supplementary exercises for vocabulary improvement and grammar, with all the logical meaning and cultural content lost in a jumble of words and structures. In other words, such approaches only leave students with unbalanced linguistic skills.

What approach are we taking in the teaching of reading? Of course, no educator would admit that his is word centered or sentence centered. But the fact is that the approaches adopted by many teachers are not so different from the two mentioned above. Most of the comprehension questions and practice exercises are designed at the lexical or grammatical level. Skills or techniques for obtaining logical meaning are seldom taught in a systematic way. Students may be able to identify a large number of words in isolation and explain their grammatical functions but they are unable to assign appropriate meaning to these words with regard to how they are used in context. Their sense of logical relationships is so weak that they are often at a loss when asked to answer *why* or *how* questions that cannot be answered by direct quotation from the reading selection.

Therefore, developing new approaches to help students comprehend paragraph and textual meaning in addition to lexical and grammatical meaning is of immediate concern to teachers of reading.

In the past few years, I have been engaged in the teaching of advanced reading. I have employed a text-centered approach to teach students how to work on logical relationships, and it has proved to be rather beneficial.

Why emphasize logical relationships?

From the viewpoint of contrastive rhetoric, the ways in which native speak-

ers of English express ideas are derived from the oral rhetoric of their Greek and Roman cultural forebears. They are sure to be different from the ways in which Chinese students of English think and reason and order their ideas in written form. These differences in logical relationships are very likely to cause interference with the students' own language conventions or habits. So it is absolutely necessary to consider these cultural aspects of logic and rhetoric in our teaching of reading.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in analyzing the way sentences work in sequence to produce coherent stretches of language. It is suggested that a text is not just a string of sentences bound into a large grammatical unit. "A text is best thought of as a unit of a different kind: a semantic unit. The unity that it has is a unity of meaning in context" (Halliday and Hasan 1976:293). To call a sequence of sentences a "text" is to imply that the sentences display some kind of mutual dependence or logical relationships. If we can help students identify these relationships they will be able to "see through" the internal logical structure of a text and grasp the textual meaning.

What to teach

What should we do if we are to teach logical relationships in a systematic way? In some reading textbooks, there might be a brief discussion of the use of connectives, such as *however*, *moreover*, *therefore*, etc. In other textbooks, devices such as example, definition, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect are cited. It is not easy to have a complete list of logical devices. But I think the actual number of such devices is limited, and we can reassure our students that the logical relationships they encounter in reading recur constantly and are limited in number. If they learn to identify a definite set of logical relationships with the help of logical devices, they will be able to cope with any relationships found in their readings.

As Halliday and Hasan (1976:294) point out, "In any text, every sentence except the first exhibits some form of cohesion with a preceding sentence, usually with the one immediately preceding. In

other words, every sentence contains at least one anaphoric tie connecting it with what has gone before.” Based on this understanding, I have sorted out 22 logical relationships after examining and analyzing many reading passages. They are as follows:

GENERALIZATION (GEN.)	AMPLIFICATION (AMP.)
INTERPRETATION	EVALUATION
COMPARISON	RESTATEMENT
CONTRAST (CON.)	RESULT (RE.)
DEFINITION	ALTERNATIVE
INFERENCE (INF.)	EVIDENCE (EV.)
EXEMPLIFICATION (EX.)	ILLUSTRATION (ILL.)
CAUSE	ANSWER
SUMMARY (SUM.)	PARALLEL IDEA (PAR.)
RELATED ACTION	RELATED IDEA (REL.)
CONCLUSION	SPECIFICATION

How to teach

1. Present pairs of sentences illustrating each of the relationships.

a. Originally there was an abundance of white pine in American forests. However, so many uses have been discovered for this wood that the supply of white pine is becoming smaller and smaller. (CONTRAST)

b. Randolph grew up in New York and knew its secret charms and hidden faults. He did not even care about the world that people told him existed beyond New York’s limits. (AMPLIFICATION)

c. Our bodies are strengthened not by what we eat but by the food that we digest. Similarly, our minds are developed not by what we read but by what we understand. (COMPARISON)

d. Conversation centered around “I” should be infrequent and chosen wisely. People may think that you have an exaggerated idea of your own worthiness if you speak often of yourself. (CAUSE)

e. A steer is slaughtered principally for its meat; but the hide is used for leather, the bones for fertilizer, the hoofs for glue, the hair for brushes, and the blood for tonics. A useful purpose is served by practically all parts. (GENERALIZATION)

f. The fighter plane’s great speed actually works against the pilot. He cannot sight and fire conventional guns efficiently, because he does not have enough time. (INTERPRETATION)

g. Mosquito control is desirable for two reasons. First, the bite of the mosquito is irritating; second, it may cause the spread of malaria. (ILLUSTRATION)

h. Domestic animals are often capable of learning tricks, but they are unable to pass these acquired skills on to their offspring.

Thus, each animal knows only those tricks that he has been taught. (RESULT)

i. If an interviewer spends all the interview time expressing his own opinion, he will obtain little of the information he requires from the interview. A good interviewer is a good listener. (CONCLUSION)

j. A college graduate and an intelligent man, George worked diligently and effectively; yet he worried that he was not doing as well as he should. It seemed that his worry came from lack of confidence. (INFERENCE)

Ask the students to explain the relationship of the second sentence in each pair to the sentence preceding it. Initially, you may present only pairs with logical devices, as in examples a and c.

2. Present paragraphs. When students are able to identify the relationships of paired sentences, they can progress to work on paragraphs. For the sake of clarity, students can indicate in the margin the relationship of each sentence to the one preceding it. Caution should be taken that students should not only be alerted to such signals as *also, but, for example, etc.*, they must also work hard to recognize relationships not indicated by such obvious signposts.

Example One:

Each civilization is born, it culminates, and it decays. There is a widespread testimony that this ominous fact is due to inherent biological defects in the crowded life of cities. Now, slowly and at first faintly, an opposite tendency is showing itself. Better roads and better vehicles at first induced the wealthier classes to live on the outskirts of the cities. The urgent need for defense had also vanished. This tendency is now spreading rapidly downwards. But a new set of conditions is just showing itself. Up to the present time, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this new tendency placed the home in the immediate suburbs, but concentrated manufacturing activity, business relations, government, and pleasure in the centres of the cities. Apart from the care of children and periods of rest, active lives were spent in the cities. In some ways the concentration of such activities was even more emphasized, and the homes were pushed outwards even at the cost of the discomfort of commuting long distances. But, if we examine the trend of technology during the past decades, the reasons for this concentration are largely disappearing. Still more, the

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Skills or techniques for obtaining logical meaning are seldom taught in a systematic way.

rel. reasons for the choice of sites for cities are also altering. Mechanical power can be transmitted for hundreds of miles, and men can communicate almost instantaneously by telephone.

ill. The chiefs of great organizations can be transported by airplanes. Theaters can present plays in every village, and speeches can be broadcast. Almost every reason for the growth of cities, concurrent with the growth of civilization, has been profoundly modified.

sum. (From Whilehead 1967:96.)

Example Two:

After millennia of growth so slow that each generation hardly noticed it, the cities are suddenly racing off in every direction. The world population goes up by two percent each year and city population increases by four to six percent. Athens is one example of this visible acceleration, growing by three dwellings and 100 square metres of road every hour. There is no reason to believe that this pace will slacken. As technology gradually swallows up all forms of work, rural areas are shrinking, as they have shrunk in Britain, and the vast majority of the people move into the city. In fact, in Britain only about four or five percent of the people live in rural areas. All through the developing world the vanguard of the rural exodus has reached the urban fringes, and there they huddle, migrants in the favelas and barrios of Latin America, in the shanty towns of Africa, and in those horrifying encampments one sees on the outskirts of Calcutta and Bombay. We are heading towards an urban world.

(From Whilehead 1967:152.)

In making such classifications, we sometimes find that relationships fall into more than one category. And sometimes it is difficult to reach an agreement on the classification. But that does not devalue our classification scheme as discussion or argument can only make things clearer.

3. Alter the order of sentences. As a variation of the two examples above, you may arrange some disconnected sentences in vertical order and ask the students to put them in logical order explaining the relationship between each adjacent pair of sentences. This practice

is quite interesting and challenging. Students usually enjoy doing it very much.

Directions: Put the following sentences in logical order and indicate the logical relationship of each sentence to the one preceding it.

Example One:

1. However, nobody had seen one for months.
2. He thought he saw a shape in the bushes.
3. Mark had told him about the foxes.
4. John looked out of the window.
5. Could it be a fox?

Example Two:

1. Another may be that they want a second, less expensive car for other members of the family to use.
2. What appears to be a "cream puff" may prove to be a "lemon."
3. People buy used cars for several reasons.
4. Whatever the reason, buying a used car is often a headache.
5. One may be that they have a limited amount of money to spend.

Conclusion

The devices introduced here are workable, and they provide a foundation for further development. Hopefully, the methodology presented in this article will encourage more studies that will result in the refinement of the text-centered approach.

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Ding Xin-shan is an assistant professor and dean of the English Department at Yantai Teachers' College in Yantai, China. He teaches linguistics and has contributed articles to various linguistic journals.