

# Reading in our classes \*

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## One book, or more than one ?

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

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

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

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

## What is reading ?

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

### 1 *She missed him*

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

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

### 2 *What an idiot I am to teach!*

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

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

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\* Excerpts from *Intelligent ways of working with readings*, the author's article published in *The Teacher*, 1/2006

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

*She looked out across the sea*

Did you get a picture?

Do you hear anything connected with the scene?

Where there any body sensations?

Did you see colours?

How big was your picture?

What was *she* like?

Did any literary moments come to mind? (eg Thomas Hardy, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, a snatch from a film you have recently seen)

I would suggest it is hard for a normal human to read *She looked out across the sea* without creating a sensory representation of the moment described. It is impossible to read anything without producing one's own mental elaboration of it.

The elaboration can be sensory, literary, moral, political etc etc ...

When you read the words 'Osama Bin Laden' you may think of the Twin New York Towers, the Tora Bora caves, a brilliant horseman, an unassuming Saudi friend of the US fighting a holy War against the Russians in Afghanistan etc ... As these three words become a reality in your head from off the page, you are in a very real sense co-creating them.

## Reading in our classes

An odd bit of our technical EFL tradition is that we seem to be more interested in the text on the page than the transformed text in the student's head. So reading passages tend to be followed by blocks of so-called 'comprehension questions'.

These deal with what some people would call the 'facts' of the text and sometimes with linguistic aspects of the text.

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

**Father:** What time did you come home, then, Mary?

**Girl:** Oh, not sure, 'bout half one, I think.

**Father:** Half past one? I didn't hear you.

**Girl:** Came in quietly. Didn't want to wake you up.

### Elaborated text Comprehension Questions:

What time did Mary say she came in?

How old is Mary?

Where are they talking?

What time is it when they talk?

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

1. Tell the students to read the passage and the questions. Ask them to **cross out** all those they feel are irrelevant to **their** reading of the text.
2. Ask them to write five more questions to do with **how they imagined** the situation.
3. Pair the students. Within the pairs, A and B exchange question sheets. Student A asks B the uncrossed-out and added questions. They also work the other way round.

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

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

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