

Using Verbal News with ESP Groups

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This study tries to analyze and emphasize what I believe are the basis for message comprehension and its applicability to verbal news listened to as an activity in a classroom situation with students of a foreign language for specific purposes (SFLSPs).

1. Introduction

Comprehension of verbal news like all language understanding is a result of the interaction between the listener and the content, its presentation, form, and context.

Thus, this paper will discuss some of the obstacles to such comprehension very often evaluated through recalling news items, which can be very useful to teachers of ESP (or any other language) in Schools, Faculties or Departments -as it has been my case with students of Journalism, Tourism, Advertising, Social Studies and others- who want to go deeper into analysing sources of misunderstanding, error production, or even lack of comprehension.

2. Looking back briefly

Not so long ago theories and research on language comprehension dealt with “la langue” in Saussure’s meaning, researchers’ interests lay in language as a system and studied it in clauses that were separate and out of context. This led to their decisions as to which factors were most important in the process of comprehension.

More recently, the field of investigation has widened to coherent texts which, inserted into a more natural context, are analyzed; what

renewed the view on, for example, which are the most significant characteristics of the process of comprehension, and the interaction between text and reader, and writer and text, and the context of which the text is part, has been the discipline “Discourse Analysis”.

I would like to mention here, for purposes we will see later on, both points of views which Wittgenstein held. The early Wittgenstein (1922) saw language as a picture of reality; the later Wittgenstein (1953), instead, emphasized language as a convention, as a game, where meaning was what one had determined what the language should mean. Thus, the meanings of the words which had earlier been seen as being objectively applicable and invariable became fortuitous and only determined by the language game to which they belonged.

But the meaning of a word is *not* fortuitous, something varying and being externally changed. According to these most recent studies of “Discourse Analysis”, Wittgenstein went too far. Every word has a meaning within a limited area of application (which is our concern as ESP teachers), every word is an inheritance from the past, and its limitations are determined by that part of reality beyond the type (specific purposes) of language to which the word belongs.

How, then, should comprehension of foreign languages for specific purposes (FLSP) be characterized and how should it be taught/learned?

Well, if we assume that language’s main function is to communicate something to somebody, then we must, in order to grasp what is to be understood, teach *that* specific language in the *concrete situation* of its usage.

3. Examining Verbal News

Suitable for a study of this kind is the comprehension of radio/TV news, for four reasons:

- 1st* The process takes place within a well-defined situation, well-known to everyone and recurring daily.
- 2nd* Most people have a genuine interest in trying to understand radio/TV news.
- 3rd* The news texts follow fixed rules in their construction and constitute a clearly discernible narrative subgenre.
- 4th* For the most frequently occurring news events there exist well developed schemes of comprehension.

In addition, there arises a particular psycho-philosophical hindrance: the new and the unknown can only be fully grasped against the background of, and in relation to, what is already known by the human being. Therefore anyone who wants to communicate a message to other/s must connect it systematically with what makes up his audience's established and experienced world (*Weltanschauungstheorie*).

As far as I can guess -in order to apply this theoretical issue to organising, tutoring, or carrying out practical classes with ESP groups, some of which I have previously mentioned -the major obstacles for full comprehension of news lie in the students' coming across a host of a) unknown or scarcely known information, b) social changes taking place, c) unexplained political decisions, d) odd or bizarre events, e) economical situations, etc... which should link a news message with a very diverse audience possessing different levels of knowledge, *having various* expectations, having undergone

heterogeneous experiences, and disagreeing opinions, *capacitating the students to apprehend the content*. Obviously this news message implies comprehension at its distinct levels: from individual simple/compound/complex lexical items to coherent narrations, from fragments to overlapping wholes, from superficial understanding to the more profound meaning. These levels interact in an intermingled manner. It is not a question of a sequential series of analysis, where one level must be dealt with before the process reaches the next stage. The process of comprehension works simultaneously from overlapping perspectives of the whole to analysis of fragments, and from these latter ones to synthesis of the whole.

In the world of news, where similar events are constantly being repeated, there are good didactic opportunities of developing schemes bound to a situation. The teachers' goal should be to group knowledge, concepts, associations which, on an amalgamating abstract plane, constitute a sort of prototype for the setting.

Distances in time and space have been overcome by technological progress but psychological and cultural barriers have not. News producers, in my opinion, do care much about casting their subliminal messages, but are they aware enough of their audiences' reactions related to their expectancies, experiences, and knowledge?

This state of affairs is highly reflected in lots of interviews where passers-by, people at work, or in public places of entertainment are, all of a sudden, questioned about extremely recent news commented on TV (*in the mother-tongue of both parts*). These people do show through their answers that, for some reasons we will see later on, they have missed the gist of such news. This "opacity of language" operating as a surface or series of data -from which TV watchers are unable to extract meaning, even less to interpret the news and subsequently come to any conclusions- brings forward the main

problem to be solved, that the text refers to concepts beyond the realm of the person's knowledge and/or experience annulling the basical condition of communication. It was this fact constituting my interest and consequently my starting point for this study which I would very much like to become a deeper and more empirical project around news comprehension with the purpose of trying to collaborate with my colleagues teaching a foreign language to specific students (FLSS's).

In conclusion, which are the problems we encounter when trying to help our FLSP's to really understand verbal news?

On the one hand we must take into account the linguistic context and how it is presented, and on the other hand the already settled listeners' knowledge, expectations, and experiences, and their interaction. Psychology explains that human beings' comprehension undergoes a process of "thought-wise-movement" at the point of intersection between the individual's conception of the world and the world s/he encounters; it is a matter of mutual interaction and from the hermeneutics we have already learned that *a)* the text, metaphorically speaking, is as active a participant as the reader/listener, *b)* the process of comprehension is not a passive one, *c)* nor is the text an inanimate object but the other way round, the text, *d)* demands, *e)* opens the way for ideas, *f)* presents an immense number of interpretative alternatives and *g)* it is, as a matter of fact, the reader/listener who is limited by previous knowledge, experience, expectations, plus by the social environment in which s/he lives. Jauss (1970) claimed that the text exists "only in the interaction between the communicative structure of the text and the reader".

4. Some characteristic features of News comprehension

1st) To specify *the first* typical feature, I will very shortly describe a classroom activity.

When I was preparing my Minor Doctoral Thesis in Rothenburg-ob-der-Tauber (Germany) one of the daily activities within the syllabus was to make us, participants of different nationalities, watch the TV evening news programme (a course requirement). That exercise was carried out all throughout three weeks, being substituted later on, by listening to radio news for clear didactic purposes. Note-taking was not allowed, and two exercises were based on the news comprehension; the first took place immediately afterwards, and it consisted of answering questions on the context avoiding as much as we could paying attention to grammar; the second, taking place that same evening, consisted of writing short texts using correct grammatical patterns and the highest possible number of lexical items identical to those heard in the news.

This experiment which I have put into practice in quite a few classes with the only variation of choosing radio news suitable for my specific students -whether they were future doctors or odontologists, engineers and economists at Renfe, EFL trainees, Schunk-und-Ebbe employees, and science teachers- has made me aware of some obvious psychological processes as well as subsequent pedagogical attitudes to be adopted.

First, the wealth of variety of what students remember: most of the participants could recall isolated facts, and separate lexical items; some of them could only memorize fragments, and a few of the participants recalled a great deal of all the news; this diversity not only responds, as we all know, to neurological capacities but can also be ascribed to the higher or lower social status of the participants.

Both reasons fall far beyond my domain.

Second, the learners' previous knowledge world-wide of current affairs, science and culture. It turned out to be those who were well-up in their general knowledge recalled more than twice as much as those who were scarcely informed, no matter how attentively all students were participating. The question of level of the foreign language was nearly irrelevant since these exercises were only planned out for small groups of high-intermediates in English or in German.

Third, another factor determining the students' news comprehension was the topic's typology:

- students tended to understand and recall themes concerning usual or familiar situations, such as a serious coach accident, information on AIDS, or the Olympic Games;
- the level of comprehension lowered with themes concerning farther off topics such as public vs private teaching, local industries abroad becoming more or less important, or cultural and artistic movements from historical times being commented;
- and finally, students hardly grasped the news content when these dealt with legal procedures, astronomy discoveries, or the European economic system crisis.

2nd) Once established and personally accepted, that individual comprehension is directly proportional to their knowledge and experience, we can go further setting that comprehension is the result of a recollection in connection with the implicit, subconscious question, "Is there any interpretation of this message that will make it meaningful in terms of what I

already know?”

Thus, our comprehension of messages involves the internal processing of an enormous amount of details and facts that does not occupy the centre of our attention in this study, though it is important to know that the processing or activation of this knowledge occurs in the periphery of our consciousness and constitutes the implicit underlying prerequisite for the assimilation of new information; this is what Polanyi (1987) called “tacit knowledge” which we are unaware of possessing and the way it becomes active. The process is so quick and automatic that we only realize it has befallen when we *fail* to comprehend what we have listened to. Not only is linguistic competence required for TV news comprehension but also subject competence, one factor often forgotten when we teachers carry out this activity with ESP’s and aim at investigating the “why’s” and “because’s” as well as when the groups are homogeneous and the results are based on fewer variants.

One clear example of the determining importance of knowledge is to be found in one of my exercises on some news about Iceland; 30% of the students at the Faculty of Medicine had difficulties in totally understanding and recalling the news content and details and the other 70% hardly remembered anything. A mini-questionnaire was passed out after the activity in order to correlate data, and 60% of the latter group mentioned lacked all sort of information about this country, nor could they place it on the map correctly. The former group had a certain amount of elementary knowledge about Iceland, however.

I have tried to describe the differences between how FLSP students discover news messages depending on their previous knowledge, and depending on how far or near the news content lies from their own microworlds.

Also something in the news itself causes similar recollection patterns to recur from student to student and from one item to another. I mean, usually a well-known person, or a well-known geographic place is the main and easiest information to be caught and recalled, that is to say, “who” or “where”. On the other hand students more often fail to understand “why”, “how” or “what for”.

3rd) Let us now have a look at what I consider another source of obstacle to fully grasp news in a foreign language: journalistic paralinguage.

I understand by a third obstacle “misunderstandings” or “distortions” of the original news content which are very seldom accidental, but rather, as recent research of Mass Media languages has demonstrated and as we all have been able to confirm up daily, are intentionally produced. By this I mean: the news is presented, its grammatical patterns collocated, lexical items chosen, a certain context enriched or left out plus certain visual representations added, descriptions given either in passing or in long obscure subordinate clauses; all this produces the previously mentioned misunderstandings, confusion, distortions, and obviously wrong conclusions.

I could summarize: comprehension of verbal news is dependent of some factors:

- the content of the news;
- the interaction between the news producer and the news listener:
- the proximity between the news content and the listener’s world; in the case of FLSPS, their microworld; and finally,



- the presentation of the news: language, visual representation added or not, and structure of the text.

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