

**TILTM 2020****Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication****THE LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH TO PREPARING  
TEXTUAL MATERIALS FOR TEACHING EFFICIENT  
COMMUNICATION**

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*Abstract*

Language teachers have always sought for ways to present the learning material in optimal forms helpful in elaborating students' linguistic feeling alongside systemic perception of discourse, i.e. to make it learner-centred. The author argues that in terms of effective communication a systemic vision and an intuitive perception of speech make two sides of the same coin. Proceeding from the importance of these aspects of communication, the author sets the purpose of systematizing the basic factors that provide for discourse communicative efficiency and their implementation in teaching practices connected with handling learning materials. This paper presents an integrated mode of working at textual materials (be it oral or written) mostly based on the advances of American and Russian psycholinguistics and functional linguistics. Using elements of psycholinguistics, as well as the functional and comparative methods of linguistic analysis, the author groups together the factors: (a) associated with the probability of the addressee resorting to a message, (b) affecting the completeness of the addressee's familiarization with the message, (c) affecting the difficulty of text comprehension. The paper emphasizes that these text parameters have to be taken into account in learning material preparation, for making the teaching process adequately orientated towards learners' communicative needs. In conclusion, the paper states that linguists still have to study quite subtle facets of text processing and develop further investigation of speech features that synergistically determine the rhetorical impact of verbal interaction between communication partners.

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**Keywords:** Communication, factors of communicative efficiency, psycholinguistics, learning materials, text comprehension, rhetorical impact,



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## 1. Introduction

One of the basic principles of efficient linguistic education is the adequate selection and preparation of learning materials, in particular texts for study. In fact, we can hardly yield positive results in language teaching without presenting the learning materials in optimal forms helpful in elaborating students' linguistic feeling alongside systemic perception of discourse, i.e. without an explicit learner-centred vision of teachers' efforts.

The said learner-centred approach ("when learners are at the centre of the activities" (TKT, 2015)) to the textual material preparation has always been the focus of teachers' practical and research interests. The works by J.S. Chall, A. Cunningsworth, I.R. Galperin, D. Garinger, S. McGrath, E.S. Polat, T. Scovel, L.E. Sheldon, A. Skierso, E.N. Solovova, M. Spratt, B. Tomlinson, P. Ur and many others have laid the groundwork for elaborating the adequate applied procedures of text selection, evaluation and adaptation for proper handling by students. The mere fact of the establishment of international associations, like MATSDA (The Materials Development Association), specially designed "to contribute to the development of quality materials for learners of second and foreign languages" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 7) testifies to the significance of the task of working out viable principles, forms and methods of the result-orientated learning materials preparation for better language acquisition.

In the present-day academic community, the priority of practical or theoretical sides of education is no longer a disputable question, since it is generally agreed that the practical needs and aims of education must be thoroughly analysed theoretically, which supposes the inalienable unity of theoretical and practical issues of teaching. Therefore, the author of this work sees her task in highlighting the theoretical aspects of a very practically valid topic which is not yet completely covered - that of the factors relevant for selecting good textual materials.

This paper covers the issue of such factors within the framework of psycholinguistics.

## 2. Problem Statement

It is acknowledged that the ultimate goal of language study is the communicative competence of future specialists whose discursive activities should be rhetorically efficient in pursuing their communicative purposes.

In terms of effective communication, a systemic vision and an intuitive perception of speech make two sides of the same coin. The decades-long teaching experience has proved that the most eloquent and persuasive young people usually display both of these qualities. On the one hand, the conscious and well-structured projection of a verbal construct helps to keep discourse consistently channeled to the speaker's initial communicative purport. On the other hand, communication is a process prone to various modifications due to the multifaceted turns and switches arising in a live interaction of the parties; hence the value of the intuitive skill of the proper spontaneous reaction whenever new communicative circumstances appear.

With this in mind teachers have to work out a clear-cut vision of the factors influencing text communicative value and their implementation in teaching practices so as to select those texts for learning which can properly serve the task of enhancing students' rhetorical skills (both systemic and intuitive).

Disclosing such text features to students, we introduce them to the basics of speech psychological impacts. Therefore, the present paper outlines the issue of the learner-centred mode of handling textual materials, which is highly relevant for teaching efficient communication.

### **3. Research Questions**

The research questions set in the present work are:

- Which text characteristics determine its communicative and psychological effectiveness?
- Which methods of text processing should make the basis for the selection of learning materials for students of English?
- How can the said text characteristics be used in teaching practices in order to facilitate memorisation for learners and contribute to their rhetorical efficiency?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to analyse the psycholinguistic and functional aspects of the factors determining text communicative value and didactic capacity viewed from the angle of their relevance to selecting proper textual materials for English language learners.

### **5. Research Methods**

The above stated purpose of the study calls for the use of methods of descriptive analysis, elements of comparative, cognitive and psycholinguistic analyses which suggest disclosing the psychologically relevant pragmatic peculiarities of speech activity. The integration of such analytical procedures shows the systemic interrelation of speech multiple characteristics alongside its dynamic variational features and puts text educational potential to the foreground.

### **6. Findings**

The task of improving students' linguistic competence, particularly rhetorical efficiency, ranks among the most topical issues of contemporary linguistic education, which makes the starting point for the present work. Selecting the materials adequate to achieving the learning purposes in class or in individual work demands that teachers should be not only linguistically but also psychologically competent and well aware of the markers that signal text correspondence to the relevant intentions of both teachers and students (Cunningsworth, 1984; Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991). To that end they have to acquire at least general knowledge on psycholinguistic basics of discourse effectiveness. We are mostly inclined to work at those texts which are methodologically "convenient" for training the recommendable verbal skills, especially if a text reveals a whole complex of interrelated rhetorical devices that mutually enhance each other.

Besides, the teacher's objective may lie in demonstrating the inefficient speech mode bearing in mind the idea of showing students which textual build-up and wording should be avoided as leading to communicative failure.

Taking everything together, we have to admit that a certain amount of psycholinguistic background has to be part of language teachers' professionalism. Thus, in reference to textual learning materials it is necessary to see how relevant they are to the desired result of study.

### **6.1. Communicative effectiveness of speech as a top priority in developing students' linguistic competence**

The traditional, generally accepted view of the communicative impact comes down to all kinds of changes, feedback, reactions that occur in relation to recipients and their environment as a result of the communication process. Such changes and feedback may be objective (e.g., involvement in some activity, organization or relationship, acquisition of an advertised product or service, voting for the promoted politician, etc.) or subjective (increased awareness, new aim setting, improved or spoilt mood and so on).

Furthermore, distinction is made between a communicative effect (impact) and a manipulation. The former is treated as the desire to make the addressee consciously accept our point of view, intentionally decide to do something or transmit information, etc.; while the latter suggests a hidden or disguised impact on the addressee's understanding of the situation, trying to elicit the desired reaction on his/her part without their being aware of such influence (Van Dijk, 2006).

From this perspective, the effect of communication is characterised as having a positive, negative or neutral *sign* (by analogy with mathematical symbols):

- a positive effect is observed when changes in the recipients' consciousness occur in the direction the addresser wants them to go;
- a negative effect leads to undesirable changes;
- a neutral effect results in a complete absence of change (a rare phenomenon that indicates the addressee's failure to perceive a message) (Ledeneva, 2017).

Apparently, seen within the psycholinguistic framework, qualifying a message as communicatively efficient is relevant in case of its positive effect that drives the recipient's vision of a situation closer to that of the sender.

Besides the above-mentioned sign of communicative effect scholars focus on the *degree of effectiveness*. To evaluate the sender's speech activity degree of effectiveness they apply particular procedures of its measurement introducing a special index of performance which objectivates the communicative purpose success rate.

Calculation of the said index is a serious challenge for scientists, since it is exposed to a cumulative influence of numerous direct and indirect indicators, semantic increments and psychological nuances. However, researchers specializing in this area agree that a more or less objective evaluation of such subtle impacts is possible. This problem has gained special attention from psychologists, psycholinguists, methodologists, mathematicians, etc.

### **6.2. Factors accounting for text communicative effectiveness**

The works by such scientists as J. Bransford, A.C. Graesser, T.A. van Dijk, W. Kintsch, W. Chase, K. Anders Eriksson and many others have elaborated the basics for the proper analysis of text effective

influence on people's consciousness. They substantiated both theoretically and experimentally a few groups of text effectiveness factors.

▪ **Factors associated with the probability of the addressee resorting to a message:**

- availability of a communication channel (a possibility of watching a TV program, listening to the radio, the cost and circulation of a printed source, etc.);
- the recipient's attitude to this media (for example, some people do not watch TV or read newspapers on principle, while others prefer a limited range of TV or radio programs or newspapers and magazines);
- the recipient's attitude to the subject of the message (for example, he or she is interested only in sports, culture, politics or other topics to which the recipient has been made accustomed, the range of problems and language of which are closer to him);
- the recipient's attitude to the communicator (the credibility and reputation of the communicator and those groups on whose behalf he or she is speaking, the interest and availability of his previous messages, etc.);
- availability of information about this message received from other sources (an abstract, an announcement, a review, etc.).

▪ **Factors affecting the completeness of the addressee's familiarisation with the message:**

- difficulty in understanding a message;
- interest arising in the process of perceiving the information;
- importance of the information being reported to the recipient;
- volume (duration) of the message (Bransford & Johnson, 1972; Chall et al., 1996; Chase & Ericsson, 1982; Graesser et al., 1980; Kintsch et al., 1974).

The enumerated factors should be seen as some kind of drivers that stimulate people's interest and attention to the covered information alongside its availability, the possibility for its perception and appropriate conditions for communicative activity. Being aware of their significance helps teachers select and process the right texts for students to achieve the desired result of learning.

According to psycholinguistic developments from the above scientists, the leading position tends to be taken by the factor of "difficulty in understanding" - both objective (when the extent of text understanding is evaluated by the researcher who applies certain analytical procedures in the course of experiments) and subjective (when it is the recipient who estimates the extent of the text difficulty based on his/her personal impression, which may not guarantee the true correlation between the text incorporated essence and the information elicited by the recipient).

Whether people lose or retain interest in reading/hearing to the text in full and thinking it over, mostly depends on the subjective difficulty in understanding it. Evidently, giving complex analytical materials to students of junior years will be futile in terms of their professional comprehension of the text essence since they are not qualified enough to grasp it. Besides, feeling helpless in conceptualizing the information presented, students become bored and displeased, which in itself affects their study in a negative way.

However, for instructive and informative messages to be effective the objective difficulty of communication is of fundamental importance, since it is obvious that the message will be ineffective unless the recipient fully understands its content.

- No less significant are **factors of the addressee personal parameters** that affect the difficulty of text comprehension.

These range from biologically conditioned characteristics (age, gender, physical and mental state) to largely socially determined characteristics (way of life, occupation, education, socially determined roles in communication, social medium, locality, other conditions). Any producer of a text fit for language study is always orientated towards some group of recipients, which is supposedly able to understand it and make certain analytical and communicative operations over it (Ledeneva, 2017; Ponomarenko, 2012). The appropriate choice of textual learning materials meant for the target group is based on a variety of criteria, with the factors of recipients' personal parameters largely determining the feasibility of others. The target groups may be relatively small (for example, if it is about purely professional information) and, conversely, it may include a vast majority of recipients (for example, if it is about ordinary matters, popular and not demanding any special knowledge or preparation for perception). It is qualified experts who can give a well substantiated conclusion as to the involvement and intensity of the above factors in every definite situation: with the help of specific analytical operations they reveal the text author's goals versus prerequisites for its perception by specified recipients.

### **6.3. Psycholinguistic methods of text efficiency evaluation**

Basing on the comparison of the addressee's mental and emotional peculiarities with text comprehension difficulty, American scientists developed methods of evaluating the so-called "readability" of a material. Since the 1920s these studies have focused on elaborating the "*readability formula*" – a regression equation that links the evaluation of text difficulty to the number of its structural elements (average sentence length, percentage of rare words, etc.) and at the same time corresponds to recipients' presupposed educational level (Chall et al., 1996; DuBay, 2004). For about a century of such studies psycholinguists have invented hundreds of formulas describing the structural and vocabulary markers that define text comprehension difficulty.

Methods of experimental study of text characteristics and the *degree of text comprehension* described in scientific literature are also relevant to the issue set in this paper. The study of the difficulty in understanding textual materials (both written and oral) gave rise to a detailed laboratory investigation of the text comprehension process; sample surveys have been conducted and large numbers of various kinds of texts compared (Heydari & Riazi, 2012). The tasks involved in the survey of people's verbal behavior during comprehension experiments determine the applied analytical methods which result in quantitative evaluations of the investigated characteristics, including that of text difficulty. For practical teaching purposes the data produced by such scientific analysis are significant as they give promising guidelines for determining how speech material should be organized so that the average representative of the target audience could adequately interpret it.

The evaluation of the reader's understanding of a text under analysis includes two main stages. Initially, the recipient perceives the given text in general, and then he/she gets the tasks which can not be implementable without proper semantic comprehension. Among them are the following tasks:

- 1) perform an action indicated in the message;
- 2) restore the missing elements in the text (*close procedure*);
- 3) render or summarise the text;
- 4) answer questions to the text content;
- 5) select statements that do/do not correspond to the content (*True - False*);
- 6) retell the text in your native tongue (used, for example, when reading foreign language texts in a study course).

Different processing operations increase the possibility of recollection. Human cognitive activity is inalienable from memorizing capabilities which ensure the possibility for the brain to perceive coherent speech by building up semantic and structural links between both adjacent and distant phrases in discourse. Besides, for developing the skill of discourse comprehension, memorizing the necessary information (that is, intended and well realised keeping in mind) is more valid than mechanical cramming. It is common knowledge that simple narrative texts are easy to remember while descriptive ones are more difficult to memorize (Graesser et al., 1980; Young, 2019). Comprehending the meaning of a text the addressee brings it into line with his/her background knowledge, thus facilitating memorization and forming semantic increments in mind.

The factor analysis of speech was developed in further research projects (Akeroyd et al., 2014; etc.). It revealed numerous factors, with some of them being prone to intelligent interpretation, and others not.

Proceeding from these factors and with the ultimate goal of the task based learning in mind, language teachers will surely equip the learning process with viable textual materials that facilitate building up the students' required competences.

## 7. Conclusion

Summarising all the above, we have to emphasize that in fact teachers' activities are strongly connected to psychological basics of human cognition and communicative interaction, in terms of both teacher-student and student-learning-material relations. The factors of text communicative effectiveness presented in this paper must be taken into account by language teachers for the sake of:

- enhancing students' personal and professional interest, their readiness to invest efforts in processing the information incorporated in a text,
- stimulating them to achieve progress in mastering both linguistic and professionally related skills through working over linguistic materials,
- developing their memorising abilities.

Linguists and psychologists still have to study quite subtle facets of text processing and develop further investigation of speech features that synergistically determine the rhetorical impact of verbal

interaction between communication partners. They will also have to extend the possibilities for the numerical measurement of communicative impacts.

Having said that, we insist that at the present stage of the science of language, psycholinguistic aspects of text processing are very helpful for language teachers, since they give viable data on optimising work over textual learning materials, selecting the appropriate pieces of speech for analysis and various processing operations, and facilitating students' memory work.

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