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Learning how to read in English as a foreign language: issues in Italian secondary school teaching and the role of strategy instruction

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INTRODUCTION

Learning to read in English as a foreign language is a very demanding activity, especially when it takes place in school, which is in itself a challenging environment. Teachers are faced with the arduous task not only of teaching new grammar rules and vocabulary, but they also have to help students understand the meaning of what they read depending on the purpose and the communicative context in which they are using the language. Developing proper reading skills is a long process which requires interest, motivation and perseverance, because only by practicing continuously can one become a better reader.

The aim of my thesis is to explore the teaching of reading in English in Italian secondary schools and the role of strategy instruction. This work consists of three chapters: the first two provide the background and some important theories in the field of second language reading are discussed, while the third chapter presents a small-scale investigation which I conducted in a private secondary school in Padua. Chapter 1 deals first with the nature of reading, which is analyzed in its two main components, the process and the product. Then I consider some classifications of various skills which constitute the act of reading and are necessary to achieve comprehension at different

levels of text analysis; in addition, I compare the ability to read in a second or foreign language with the ability to read in one's first language, focusing on the language threshold theory and the transfer of skills. The second section of Chapter 1 introduces some issues about the teaching of reading in English classes and suggests one possible framework for teachers; then I discuss the choice of reading materials and the evaluation of texts which best suit students' needs and learning goals, distinguishing between text as a linguistic object and text as a vehicle for information. Finally I investigate the practice of language assessment, presenting a number of possible methods for testing reading and the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as a means for elaborating teaching and assessing guidelines.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the second language learning strategies which can be successfully employed by students who want to become proficient in English. First of all I introduce the idea of the 'good language learner' which was developed in the 1970's and influenced most of the following studies on strategic learning. In particular I focus on the specific characteristics of successful learners which can be taught to less competent students in order to facilitate their language acquisition and to enhance their reading skills. Afterwards, I provide an account of direct and indirect learning strategies for reading which have been seen to have a positive effect on achieving comprehension. Metacognition, in particular, is given great importance because it leads to self-awareness and autonomy, which are two crucial aspects in the learning process. The final part of this Chapter deals with the definition of strategy instruction and suggests possible approaches to integrating learning strategies into English reading lessons.

In Chapter 3 I report the results of my research on the teaching of reading in Italian secondary schools, which I conducted last April at the private institute "Don

Bosco” in Padua. Since last year I had the opportunity to participate in English lessons during a 75-hours traineeship in that school, I could observe some interesting dynamics which took place in class and I was especially struck by the way reading comprehension was treated. For this reason I decided to prepare two questionnaires, one for English teachers and the other for a class of second-year students (aged 15-17) in order to understand how they perceived reading instruction and the role of learning strategies. This study cannot be taken as a sample of all Italian schools, but it certainly highlights important issues in the teaching of English and the development of reading skills.

To conclude, many researchers have investigated the teaching of reading in a foreign language and many empirical studies have tried to demonstrate the usefulness of strategy instruction, without being able though to draw universally generalizable conclusions. As a complex human activity, learning how to read is no easy matter and teaching it is probably even harder, considering all the different variables which affect this process. Therefore, teachers can try to find the most suitable methods only by interacting with their students day by day and adapting lessons to the learners’ needs in that particular situation. Yet, reading can also be very stimulating and fascinating because it allows people to communicate through distance and time.

CHAPTER 1

Developing reading skills in English as a second language

“We read to know we are not alone.”
C.S. Lewis

When we think about reading we probably imagine ourselves sitting on a comfortable couch with a book in our hands. However this is not the only occasion on which our eyes and minds deal with a written text: we can read the newspaper in the morning, advertisements on the street, the menu at the restaurant and many other types of printed information in everyday life. The act of reading, in fact, can take place for two main reasons, which are reading for pleasure and reading to obtain new information. In both cases this human activity reveals itself as a widespread social practice which is also culturally determined. In our society, literacy is fundamental to survive and to be able to interact with other persons, especially if we think that every single word we read has been previously written by someone else who wanted to communicate a message and, most probably, to obtain a reaction from his or her readers. All this becomes obvious if we consider that language - and all the activities connected with it - is the unique and

extraordinary characteristic that distinguishes human beings from all the other animals on Earth. And what is language used for? Communication. Babies start to be social individuals the moment they are born, and as they grow up their ability to communicate through language develops. The ability to read is one of the aspects of language use and, just like speaking or writing, it requires a certain amount of practice and teaching to improve, something which usually happens in one's early years of school. Adults perceive reading as an automatic activity and usually very little importance or attention is given to the actual cognitive process through which they actively construct the meaning of what they are reading: it is solely a matter of habit. Hence, when do we realize how complex reading can be both as a mental and linguistic activity? If we think about our first days at school, when teachers were teaching us to read, we can certainly remember how difficult it was to read a word aloud, trying to decipher the right pronunciation and then the meaning of it. The same difficulty can be felt when we are beginners in a new foreign language: Italian students who learn English at school, for example, find themselves experiencing the same uncertainties about language as when they were starting to learn Italian at five or six years old. The aim of this chapter is to describe the nature of reading, first of all concentrating on the reading process in general and then focusing on the teaching of reading skills in English as a foreign language¹.

1.1 Defining reading

According to the American educator William S. Gray (1960), who has analyzed the process of reading in one's own language, the major aspects of reading can be

¹ In this paper I will refer to English as a 'second' or 'foreign' language using both terms with the same meaning - even though a 'second language' has a stronger social role and greater importance in a linguistic community than a foreign language - because this distinction does not affect my discussion on reading.

classified under “four headings” that represent “a psychologically coherent unit”: word perception, comprehension, reaction to what is read and fusion of new ideas and old. The reading act starts with the printed word, which arouses in the reader associations of both meaning and pronunciation. The sequence of words and their meanings become a sequence of ideas, which lead to the comprehension of a line, a sentence and so on until the entire passage has been read and understood. After the meaning is recognized the reader starts reacting thoughtfully to the ideas acquired and is now able to assimilate new information and fuse it with ‘old’ knowledge. This is certainly a very brief and overly simplistic description of the reading process from a physical and psychological point of view, which instead has been carefully examined by Gray and many other researchers of the subject - including psychologists, linguists and educators. Since the aim of this paper is to investigate the nature of reading in relation to pedagogical purposes, I will start from a more general point of view. Hence, one must distinguish between the two most important aspects to keep in mind when reading is concerned: the **process** and the **product**.

1.1.1 The process of reading

The process, as described above, starts when the reader is faced with a written text, establishing a relationship whose final result (product) is the understanding of meaning. Alderson (2000: 3) says that “the process is likely to be dynamic, variable, and different for the same reader on the same text at a different time or with a different purpose in reading”. When we decide to read something, we usually expect to receive new information from the text and, depending on what we are looking for, there are many ways of reading, which Grellet (1981: 4) summarizes in the following list:

- Skimming: quickly running one's eyes over a text to get the gist of it.
- Scanning: quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information.
- Extensive reading: reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding.
- Intensive reading: reading shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more of an accuracy activity involving reading for detail.

In addition, the author points out that these different ways of reading are not mutually exclusive: in fact readers can handle a text by first skimming over it before deciding to scan a particular paragraph to look for specific information. Later Broughton *et al.* (1988) describe similar ways of reading, claiming that extensive reading sometimes groups together activities like survey reading, skimming and superficial reading. 'Extensive' means that the amount of text is the greatest possible and read in the shortest time: "It is by pursuing the activity of extensive reading that the volume of practice necessary to achieve rapid and efficient reading can be achieved" (1988: 92). On the other hand, intensive reading stands for the study of text content and language, including "the attitudes and purposes of the author, and of the linguistic means that he employs to achieve his ends" (1988: 93). It is called intensive because the texts in question are not very long and the reader aims at detailed comprehension.

Considering the fact that most reading is done silently, researchers have found difficulties in recognizing the exact steps in the process and even after many empirical studies have been conducted on many different readers, there is no theory which can wholly explain or predict what really happens between eyes, brain and text. Goodman (1969) engaged with the problem by externalizing the process and concentrating on the mistakes a reader made when reading aloud. A very complex skill, reading aloud is not

the same as reading by yourself; in fact you need first to recognize the black marks on the page and then reproduce the exact pronunciation of words. It requires a greater effort and clearly pronunciation is not always necessary to reading comprehension. For this reason this kind of investigation cannot be completely exhaustive and tends to distance itself from the real question. In Broughton's *et al.* (1988) terms "it must be recognized that reading aloud is primarily an oral matter [...] for those who teach foreign languages it is closer to 'pronunciation' than it is to 'comprehension'". However, Goodman's kind of approach, which is called 'miscue analysis', is an alternative to the psycholinguistic research on eye movements, which approaches the reading process from a strictly physical point of view. In Smith's work *Understanding reading* (1971), where you can find a detailed account of the linguistic, psychological and physiological aspects of "the complex human skill of reading" (1971: vii), the brain is said to have a decisive role in the working of eyes:

[...] Trying to control eye movements in reading may often be like trying to steer a horse by its tail. If the eye does not go to what we think is an appropriate place in reading, it is probably because the brain does not know where to put it, not that the reader is unskilled in transferring his gaze to the right place at the right time (Smith 1971: 104).

Moreover, it is difficult to study the reading activity also because there are many variables which affect both reader and text, rendering every single reading act unique in its nature. We do however know that when reading is related to education and foreign language acquisition, teaching is carefully planned around those basic skills that students need to know in order to achieve comprehension, improve their abilities in English and reach the proficiency level required by school.

It has been widely argued (see Alderson 2000: 16-20) that readers can approach a text by following two different models of processing: the **bottom-up** model and the **top-down** model. The first approach begins with the recognition of the printed word, then the graphic stimuli are decoded to sound and finally meaning is reached. It represents a gradual process in which every single 'subprocess' leads to the following one in this pre-determined sequence. The reader has only a passive role as decoder of graphemes into phonemes into syntactic units and in the end into semantic patterns. This kind of model derives from the behaviorist theories of Skinner in the 1950s; he claimed that in the acquisition of language a child first has to receive a visual stimulus, and then he or she produces a response which must be reinforced by adults and their knowledge. This schematic description of knowledge acquisition influenced the teaching of languages, providing teachers with a new method. Behaviorism was then strongly criticized by the linguist Noam Chomsky, who contrasted Skinner's theories by formulating his own that stresses the role of one's cognitive abilities and inborn characteristics in the process of language acquisition. From this different point of view there derive top-down approaches, which start with the active participation of readers in the process of reading, focusing especially on the previous knowledge one brings to the text. This 'schema-theoretical' orientation - supported by several researchers and empirical studies - is based on the activation of 'schemata' which in Alderson (2000:17) are defined as "networks of information stored in the brain which act as filters for incoming information".

Carrell (1983) analyses some issues in the role of schemata - or background knowledge - in second language comprehension. The first specification she makes is that we must distinguish between 'content' schemata and 'formal' schemata. The former refers to the background knowledge of the content area of a text: if we read a story about

a woman at the supermarket, for example, we automatically activate our schema of actions and situations which usually take place in a supermarket. On the other hand 'formal' schemata rely on the reader's background knowledge of the rhetorical structures of different types of texts: in this case, when we read a fairy tale we expect to read about non-human creatures with magical powers and wait for the happy ending.

Experience tells us that schematic expectations about a written text are not always compatible with the actual and final interpretation of the text and the reader is continuously asked by the writer to re-elaborate new information. In order to achieve efficient comprehension, the reader needs to be able to use his or her prior knowledge - schemata - and relate it to the textual material. Both models - bottom-up and top-down - are valid and, as long as we consider the different situations in which they are activated by the reader, we can also see them interacting in the reading process. If the text presents completely different things from what we already know, for example, the bottom-up model could be the right approach to use because the reader starts from new information to infer meaning; this model is also referred to as 'data-driven'. At the same time, top-down processing is called 'conceptually-driven' because cognitive skills guide the reader towards comprehension. According to Carrell (1983: 86), and other researchers who study the psychological processing of reading, content and formal schemata "may each affect comprehension in the processing of texts in one's native language or in English as a second language" but there are still some uncertainties about how they interact effectively and how much each of them affects comprehension.

What we are sure is that another issue is relevant in the research of schema theory, that is the distinction between 'cross-cultural' and 'culture-specific' schemata. As the names suggest, we are referring to the validity of background knowledge either as

common knowledge - shared by the cultures of both the reader's native language and the second/foreign language - or as culturally determined knowledge. The cultural specificity of text must be taken into account when teaching reading in a foreign language, as Carrell explains:

Over and above any difficulties presented by the linguistic structure of the text [...] EFL/ESL readers may have additional comprehension difficulties due to their lack of prior familiarity with the content area of the text. However, lack of prior familiarity with the content area of the text [...] need not necessarily signal cultural specificity of the content schemata. [...] Content schemata may be absent within as well as across cultures (1983: 89).

It is thus clear that the investigation of content and formal knowledge and its application in the field of second language reading teaching must also be related to individual differences among students. Pre-reading activities may be useful to plug gaps in English culture as well as in widespread basic knowledge.

Beside the top-down and bottom-up types of text approach the so-called 'interactive model' has been more recently formulated. This rejects a serial processing in favour of a parallel interaction of the reading components. In her Constructivist Model Bernhardt (1991) detects the following text-based and extratext-based components, which interact in second language text reconstruction: phonemic/graphemic features, metacognition, syntactic feature recognition, intratextual perceptions, word recognition and prior knowledge (taken from Ridgway 1994). As we can see, the elements that come into play in the relationship between reader and text are almost always the same, the difference lies in the way researchers think our cognitive skills work. Alderson (2000) presents a clearer account of the different theories on text processing, telling us that no theory has been completely discarded yet and different studies or experiments continue to

be conducted in order to find the best possible explanation of reading as a complex human activity.

1.1.2 The product of reading

Comprehension, meaning, understanding and knowledge are all synonyms for the final result of the reading process, its product, which varies as well depending on what happens between text and reader. This must be taken into consideration especially when teaching and assessing reading comprehension in a foreign language, since variables such as the reader's purpose and motivation in reading a text affect the outcome of the process itself.

Following the theory of 'meaning potential' by Halliday (1978) and Widdowson (1979) we understand that meaning does not exclusively reside in the printed text, but it is the final proof of the reader's active role in the process of reading. As Alderson (2000: 6) discusses, a text by itself has only a potential value to be transformed into certain knowledge and it is the reader's task to give that potentiality a real and valid interpretation. This is why it can be asserted that different meanings are realized by different readers or by the same reader who changes attitude towards the same text, realizing a different process. As a consequence, it is essentially necessary to investigate not only the nature of a written passage but also the way readers, in this case Italian students of English, interact with what they are reading.

Reading comprehension takes place at different levels of understanding which Gray (1961) distinguishes between reading 'the lines', reading 'between the lines' and reading 'beyond the lines'. The first level corresponds to the literal meaning of the text, the second to inferred meanings and the last one to readers' critical evaluation of text.

This represents another example of how different products can derive from a single reading act. Several studies concerning this topic try to give these levels a hierarchical organization, starting from the easiest to the most difficult: readers first learn to understand the literal meaning, then they are able to infer meanings and only later can they approach a text critically. This gradual process seems logical but as Alderson (2000: 8) asserts, it does not always correspond to reality. In the field of foreign language acquisition the question becomes even more interesting, considered that reading abilities have already been acquired to some degree in one's own language and the levels of understanding should already be familiar to the student.

It is well known that a third component comes into play when reading is concerned: the writer. Since language can be used in a great number of ways, the author of a passage can decide to make his/her message explicit or implicit in order to awake various reactions in the reader. The more implicit the meaning is the more skilled the reader should be to critically analyze the text. It is very important to distinguish between an ironic comment and a serious statement, otherwise the reader could completely misunderstand the meaning originally conveyed by the writer. Broughton *et al.* (1988) argue that there are three kinds of relationships which concern written texts: the first between the author and his or her text, the second between the reader and the text, and the third between the text and the culture. The author's attitude and purpose underlie the understanding of his or her work and the culture - anthropologically speaking- of the community in whose language the text is written must be familiar, at least at some degree, to the reader. A reader needs to know how a foreign language works, not only syntactically but also from a wider point of view, and this is why in English classes some time is devoted to the teaching of English culture. This point has also been previously

discussed when speaking about different schemata. The relationship between reader and text is probably the most articulated and it will be better analyzed later in my dissertation. In sum, a good reader in a foreign language is aware of these elaborate relationships and can use metacognitive abilities to reflect on reading. The important thing to keep in mind is that the reading process is like a game with three players: the reader, the text and the writer. We can only try to predict what happens in this complex interaction; what is certain, instead, is that it cannot be exclusively a matter of language knowledge and researchers have clearly demonstrated how reading presupposes specific skills.

1.2 Reading skills

The definition of ‘skill’ in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (Pearson Education Limited, 2003) is “an ability to do something well, especially because you have learned and practiced it” and the first example which follows the definition cites “Reading and writing are two different skills”. So, what does being able to read mean? What are the skills required to become good readers? Many reading researchers have tried to recognize all the lesser skills that one needs to learn in order to best comprehend a written passage and some of these theories are discussed in Alderson (2000). Since this chapter is about the teaching of reading skills in English as a second language, I will take into consideration the work of Munby (1978), in which we can find the following taxonomy of ‘microskills’, which has been especially important for material design and language tests in second-language acquisition:

- recognizing the script of language;
- deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items;
- understanding explicitly stated information;

- understanding information when not explicitly stated;
- understanding conceptual meaning;
- understanding the communicative value (function) of sentences and utterances;
- understanding the relations within the sentence;
- understanding the relations between the parts of a text through grammatical cohesion devices;
- interpreting a text by going outside it;
- recognizing indicators in discourse;
- identifying the main point or important information in a piece of discourse;
- distinguishing the main idea from supporting details;
- extracting salient points to summarize (the text, an idea etc.);
- selective extraction of relevant points from a text;
- basic reference skills;
- skimming;
- scanning to locate specifically required information;
- transcoding information to diagrammatic display.

In order to develop these abilities, students have to acquire a certain sensibility to the text and reflect on what kind of communicative act is taking place in their relationship with written language. Whether we agree or not with this list, it certainly represents an attempt to distinguish between the several reading skills, and aims to help teachers of a foreign language to prepare effective activities and exercises in reading comprehension. In this classification it is important to notice that there are different levels of text analyses, just like there can be different levels of understanding. A text is usually processed starting from the strictly linguistic point of view, which includes the semantic patterns of lexis,

the grammatical system and the syntax; then the reader goes deeper into the passage and looks at more general phenomena, like cohesion and coherence among paragraphs, in order to distinguish how information is organized; the final step is that of extracting global meaning on the basis of what the writer is saying and the reader's purpose in reading that specific passage.

One approach that has been followed by research on skills - as explained in Alderson and Urquhart (1984) - is that of giving learners a series of passages to understand in terms of meaning levels and asking them questions afterwards, in order to see if identifiable factors pointing at corresponding reading aptitudes emerge. However, doing a comprehension test is different from reading in a more natural situation, and investigation carried out using this method can sometimes be misleading. Lunzer and Gardner (1979) support this thesis and criticize the separation of reading skills, considering this activity as a global aptitude to be acquired instead of a natural hierarchic order.

As we can see, there is no final agreement among researchers and probably it will never exist. Certainly when linguists analyze reading subskills referring to text comprehension tests, they are focusing solely on the product and not the process. Teachers are indeed more interested in understanding how students deal with a passage in a foreign language, in order to help them learn the best strategies to achieve comprehension, and a good starting point could be the comparison between reading in one's own language and reading in English as a foreign language. In the following section I will discuss some theories on the acquisition of reading abilities in a target language in order to see if there might be a correspondence with the development of skills in first

language reading and to what extent the latter can be transferred to second language learning.

1.3 Second language reading and language threshold

Schemata and reading skills play a key role in the study of second or foreign language acquisition, in particular when research tries to understand to what extent cognitive skills and learning strategies in first language reading are transferred to the foreign language. This issue was handled in 1984 by Alderson, who raised the question as to whether reading in a foreign language is a reading problem or a language problem. There were already existing studies in the field, which supported both hypotheses, but none of them could assert the superiority of one factor over the other. For this reason, Alderson concluded that further research was needed. Carrell (1991) presents a study to determine whether second language reading is equal to first language reading added to second language proficiency ($L2 \text{ Reading} = L1 \text{ Reading} + L2 \text{ Language Proficiency}$). She chose two groups of university students, one made up of English native speakers studying Spanish as foreign language and the other made of Spanish students with English as second language. The study attempts 'to take into consideration the wide variety of factors which comprise "reading comprehension" and its assessment' and uses a reading comprehension test with two texts (one in English and the other in Spanish) and ten multiple-choice questions each. Her investigation led to the conclusion that:

[...] while both factors - first language reading ability and proficiency in the second language - may be significant in second language reading, the relative importance may be due to other factors about the learner and the learning environment (Carrell 1991: 168).

Carrell's results imply the existence of the so-called 'language threshold' or 'short-circuit hypothesis' which asserts that a certain level of second or foreign language proficiency must be reached by readers in order to be able to transfer reading abilities from their first language into second or foreign language reading. In other words, an Italian student who possesses good reading skills in Italian must 'cross' the threshold of sufficient linguistic knowledge of English before he or she can become a good reader in the foreign language. Therefore language is a major factor influencing reading in a foreign language and solid first language reading skills cannot compensate for the lack of language competence. In practice, things are not so easy to explain, and researchers, who try to prove or even determine this threshold, have difficulties in claiming universally valid results. As was said before, there are too many variables and too few data to take this theory as the only possible one.

A second hypothesis comes into play regarding Alderson's (1984) original question: the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH). In an article by Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) it is compared with the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LTH) - which I have just discussed - and it is defined as follows: "Reading performance in a second language is largely shared with reading ability in a first language". In this sense, once reading skills are acquired in a language they are automatically available when reading is carried out in another language and the linguistic knowledge of the second has no influence in the reading process. This time we do not speak about 'comprehension' because it is obvious that whenever we read a text in English, for example, we need to know at least some vocabulary and grammar to understand its meaning. In effect, this hypothesis was supported especially by the studies on bilingual learners who already possess literacy in both languages. Following their own study, Bernhardt and Kamil

(1995) suggest that second or foreign language knowledge is important as well as reading ability and therefore both hypotheses are appropriate; however there are other influential factors which must be taken into consideration, such as the reader's interest in topic and background knowledge. An important outcome of the study presented in this article is that:

[...] second language reading is not merely an impoverished version of L1 reading, but that it is indeed a process that requires some unique reading capacities and lexical and grammatical flexibility. That performance hinges on specific (and limited) knowledge shows what care must be taken in assessing performance in a second language (Bernhardt and Kamil 1995: 31).

In this sense, teachers of English as a foreign language have the crucial role of helping students develop their reading capacities in a new language, which has its own characteristics and difficulties and requires great effort on the part of the learners. Now that the point has been made clear, it is time to deal with the issues concerning the teaching of reading skills.

1.4 Teaching reading in English classes

Following an important reform of the national education system in Italy, which started in 2003, the teaching of English - as a compulsory subject - characterizes the so-called 'first cycle' of education, which lasts eight years, from the first year of primary school until the last year of middle school. During the 'second cycle', which constitutes the last five years of school education, English continues to be studied, but it can be either substituted or accompanied by one or more other foreign languages (usually Spanish,

French or German), depending on the course of studies chosen by the student². As we can see, Italian children are faced very early with the learning of a second language and this means that they are asked to develop at least two literacies at the same time. Considering the previous discussion on the transferability of reading skills from the native to the second or foreign language, we are led to conclude that with this kind of education system children learn to read in Italian and English drawing on the same cognitive and reading abilities, which are gradually taught to them. Since the social context requires a greater knowledge of the first language, we can claim that literacy in Italian would develop and improve faster and with better results in comparison with English literacy, also because the time devoted to the latter is significantly shorter. Moreover, if we consider Skinner's theory about language acquisition (see above in 1.1.1), the linguistic input (or stimulus) received by Italian learners in their everyday life facilitates the development of abilities in their first language.

This issue becomes more complicated if we consider that nowadays in Italian classrooms there are many non-Italian native speakers, such as the children of immigrants, who are learning our language as a second language. As this paper is concerned with the reading of English as a foreign language in Italian secondary schools, it is not my intention to distinguish between Italian native speakers and speakers of other languages, first because the majority of students have Italian as their first language, and second because the reading process and the development of reading skills is already affected by many other personal variables. Moreover, learning to read in English as a second language always implies the acquisition of new abilities, which is not necessarily connected with one's native tongue.

² Information taken from the official website of the Italian Ministry of Education: <http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/web/istruzione/famiglie/ordinamenti> (last accessed on 18th November 2012)

Whether we read in our own language or in English, the initial steps of the reading process, which have been previously described in 1.1, follow the same physical ‘mechanism’ identified by Gray (1960) - I am referring to people who are not visually impaired - and what differs, instead, are the schemata which start to form in our minds, one ‘set’ referring to Italian and another to English. These different sets of schemata - which can be classified as ‘content’, ‘formal’ and ‘linguistic’ knowledge - interact with each other and all together contribute to the reaching of the final reading product. A good metaphor to understand this operation is thinking of our brain as a cupboard with many drawers: when students, for instance, read a text in English, they ‘open’ the drawer which contains prior knowledge of that specific language, but, at the same time, they can also access information in another drawer, which refers, for instance, to formal text organization in Italian, in order to achieve better comprehension. In other words, the process of reading in a foreign language should not be dealt with separately from the complex function of learners’ cognitive skills.

The methods to process a text, which one chooses to adopt when reading, such as scanning or skimming, can be used in English as well as in Italian, but the purposes for reading in one language, in a precise way, might be extremely different from those motivated by the other. Indeed, let us think about the importance for an Italian child of being able to read in Italian and let us compare it with his or her ability to read in English: the first language gains over the second because the social and cultural context demands a stronger and quicker development of specific reading skills in order to deal with everyday life. Moreover, it is more likely that students would find reading in Italian more entertaining and pleasant than reading in English, just because they have not yet achieved fluency and automaticity in this second language.

So, what are the reasons for learning English at school? The Italian Ministry of Education declares³ that children must acquaint themselves with the reality of the European Union from their first cycle of studies and therefore they need to acquire a second language which will certainly turn out to be important in their future lives as European citizens. Language means communication and nowadays English has become one of the main tools - together with Internet and the World Wide Web - to communicate with people all around the world.

Once the importance of learning reading abilities in English are established, I would like now to concentrate on the teaching of reading at the second level of secondary school, with learners aged between fourteen and nineteen (who will also be the target subjects of my case study in Chapter 3). By this time students should have reached level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (which will be discussed later in this Chapter), knowing specific vocabulary and basic grammar rules, as well as having developed the logical and critical thinking required to deal with more difficult texts, such as authentic pieces of English literature. During these five years of secondary school students are expected to improve their abilities in order to reach level B2 of competence in English or another foreign language of the European Community. It is well known that in the field of education in general, and foreign language acquisition in particular, it is almost impossible to find the best valid teaching method for all students, since their learning ability is subjected to many variables, like age, gender, personality, beliefs, motivation, aptitude, learning style and so on. It is, therefore, the second language teacher's task to provide students with the best possible means to approach a text effectively and become good English readers. For this reason, I will discuss different

³ Ibid.

strategies or approaches suggested by Neil J. Anderson, who is Professor of Linguistics and English Language at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah and has great experience in the field of teaching English to second language learners⁴. Then I will consider the studies of other researchers, giving emphasis in particular to those common findings which can help other teachers prepare their English reading classes.

First of all, Anderson's (1999) teaching 'philosophy' includes the following eight strategies, which he employs during ESL/EFL reading classes: activate background knowledge, cultivate vocabulary, teach for comprehension, increase reading rate, verify reading strategies, evaluate progress, build motivation and select appropriate reading materials. He calls this approach 'ACTIVE', which reminds us of the first six strategies (it is their acronym) and of the students' attitude towards reading as "an active process and not a passive skill" (1999: 4).

To start with the first strategy, we have already seen how prior knowledge influences readers' success in understanding a text, but we should also consider that bias and misinformation can have a negative influence on students, who can consequently be led to misconceptions and distorted meaning. This is why teachers should constantly monitor reading classes and prepare pre-reading activities, in order to let learners activate their schemata or help them form new ones. Anderson (1999) argues that schemata are proved to enhance reading comprehension and reading skills and he suggests some techniques, which can be used in class, such as pre-reading discussions on the topic in question, asking students for predictions on what they are going to read, and semantic mapping. The latter refers to brainstorming the topic of the text, which means starting from a key word, chosen by the teacher, and then making students suggest related words,

⁴ For further information please visit <http://linguistics.byu.edu/directory/nja3/> (last accessed on 1st December 2012).

which are expected to be found later while reading the passage. All these activities should make the reading comprehension easier and, at the same time, they can encourage students' interest and motivation, by lowering expected difficulties.

The second strategy, 'cultivate vocabulary', does not need to be explained, as it clearly refers to the acquisition of words in the second language. As Anderson (1999: 26-28) explains, vocabulary learning can be promoted by classroom activities like "rote memorization and repetition", "guessing words in context", "using mnemonic techniques" and "word structure analysis". However, apart from these tasks, which lead directly to English vocabulary acquisition, the important thing to bear in mind is that the best way to make students learn new words is making them read extensively: the more texts are read, the more words one can recognize and remember. This last point is valid not only for second language reading, but for the first language as well, especially because useful reading skills can be trained in both languages through the constant exposure to varied literature.

The third strategy identified by Anderson (1999) poses comprehension at the centre of teaching. Students must develop their reading comprehension skills, not just because they are asked to accomplish a precise task (such as answering a reading comprehension test), but because they need to become aware of the exact process that leads them to final meaning. In Anderson's words:

[...] Meaning is reached when the reader integrates personal background knowledge, purpose for reading, reading strategies, and the text to get meaning. Teachers facilitate the process by teaching learners how to do this. One possibility that teachers can consider is to get readers to monitor their reading comprehension by being cognitively aware of what

they are doing when they read and then being metacognitively able to discuss how they have arrived at comprehending the text (Anderson 1999: 39).

Metacognition, in this case, is the ability to think about how reading works and, once achieved, it reflects the active participation of students in English reading classes and their development as good readers. In planning their lessons, teachers should not only concentrate on intensive reading activities, which aim at the close analysis of a short text, but they should also take into consideration that their students need to learn how to transfer their abilities to “extensive reading contexts” (1999: 43). The importance of reading extensively also stands at the base of the so-called ‘Content-Based Language Instruction’ approach, which asserts that second language learning does not stand by itself, but, instead, it serves to learn other things or subjects. In this kind of instruction, content knowledge is given greater importance over the strictly linguistic analysis of texts, and thus second language is acquired in a more indirect way. It may happen in Italian schools that teachers of English plan, for their reading lessons, to use the same topic which is being already used by teachers of other subjects, in order to facilitate learning. For instance, during a reading activity the English teacher can present a text which speaks about the same historical period as that being studied in History classes, yet focusing on specific events related to the English-speaking world. The result of this interrelation among school subjects is that of helping students, on the one hand, to increase their background knowledge before reading in a second language and, on the other, to situate the text - and consequently the entire reading activity - in a wider context. Other teaching strategies which are suggested by Anderson (1999) to monitor comprehension are: asking students direct questions while they read; making them formulate questions to check if their reading is developing successfully; making them

summarize texts in order to highlight general textual organization and different levels of understanding (e.g. literal vs. metaphoric); making them identify transition words (connectors) to explain, for instance, relations among paragraphs or ideas (1999: 47-49).

‘Increase reading rate’, which is Anderson’s (1999) fourth strategy, is achieved by reading as much as possible and very frequently in order to acquire a certain degree of automaticity and fluency. In the second level of secondary school, students should find reading in English an easier task in comparison with the lower school years, and they should now be able to direct their effort towards improving their reading speed. This ability becomes even more important if we consider that the last years of school are meant to prepare learners for possible academic language studies, which certainly require greater concentration on content comprehension and linguistic proficiency, both aiming at rapidity in accessing the most information in the least time possible. Apart from possible future needs, fluency in reading also prevents learners from becoming easily bored by school materials. Once again, the best method to develop reading rate is fostering extensive reading outside the classroom and constant study of English in order to strengthen reading skills: “By reading faster, the reader is encouraged to read more and, with more reading, comprehension improves” (Anderson 1999: 59).

The ‘V’ of Anderson’s ‘ACTIVE’ teaching method stands for ‘verify strategies’. Teachers first have to spend some time explaining which cognitive and metacognitive strategies can be used to achieve text comprehension, and then they should periodically verify if students keep using them whenever they read in English. Since Chapter 2 of my paper will be devoted to learning strategies for reading, I will leave the discussion of this topic open.

The sixth teaching strategy reminds teachers to evaluate students' progress by assessing both quantitative and qualitative aspects of language acquisition. The first aspect refers to the actual amount of linguistic knowledge and reading ability acquired by learners, which must later be confronted with the progress expected in the English school syllabus. The second kind of evaluation, which looks at teaching quality, enables teachers understand if their pedagogic methods are felt to be helpful and successful by students, in other words, if classes' needs are met in English reading lessons.

Finally, Anderson (1999) gives important advice about three remaining issues: building motivation in students, planning for instruction and selecting appropriate materials. The first aspect probably requires the greatest attention, because we know that we can be the best teachers ever, but our students will not learn anything without real motivation. In addition, it is well known how the school environment and its complex mechanisms can definitely demotivate students in learning whatever subject, since testing and knowledge assessment are often felt to be stressful and highly challenging. In order to maintain language acquisition interesting and fruitful, we should first understand what motivation really is. Irwin (1991) proposes the following model to calculate motivation:

$$\text{MOTIVATION} = \frac{\text{EXPECTED REWARD}}{\text{EXPECTED EFFORT}}$$

and states that "motivation can be increased by increasing the expected reward or by decreasing the expected effort. The greatest amount of motivation would result from doing both of these things" (1991: 145, quoted from Anderson 1999: 102). By reward the author intends every teaching act which leads students to appreciate the reading activity - such as overt and regular praise from the teacher -, while effort stands for learners' lack

of reading skills, which can impede their progress. Motivation plays a key role also in the development of learning strategies and therefore this topic will be further discussed in the next Chapter. The role of teachers lies in fostering the right attitude towards their pupils, providing them with interesting activities, which aim to satisfy real purposes (such as reading the text of a popular song to understand its meaning), teaching reading strategies for comprehension and, probably most important of all, making students participate in their own construction of reading ability as active players.

The importance of a learner-centered teaching method has increased since the grammar-translation method - which “grew up in the early to mid nineteenth century” (Johnson 2001: 164) and characterized the teaching of foreign languages in Italy until the 1960s - was criticized and devaluated, because it favoured language instruction over learners’ necessities. Critics of grammar predominance in language instruction claimed that this kind of approach could not enhance fertile communication between teacher and students, preventing the latter from developing autonomy and self-awareness in learning. To come back to our issue, one may assume that the more interest and entertainment a pupil can find in reading in English, the better results he or she will achieve. For this reason, it is essential that every single lesson is shaped around those reading activities which best awake students’ participation, such as group work and discussion or challenging games.

Finally, in the last chapter Anderson (1999) points out that teachers need a lot of practice to plan and execute good reading classes, especially because there are several factors to keep in mind when choosing materials. Therefore, it is now worth looking in detail at what teachers should consider when selecting texts and reading activities.

1.4.1 Reading materials and evaluation of texts

Nowadays, students of English as second language in secondary school often possess a textbook, an exercise book and a grammar book, which have been chosen by the teacher at the beginning of the school year and often constitute the ground for English lessons. A textbook is usually divided into thematic ‘units’, each presenting different activities aimed at developing reading as well as writing, listening and speaking skills, by concentrating on a specific topic (e.g. food, sports, holidays and so on). Very frequently grammar rules and exercises are already included in a single coursebook, so that grammar books and exercise books become superfluous or remain unused. The fact that teachers are provided with this kind of material does not mean that they cannot decide to suggest different activities; instead, it is desirable that they give their own contribution to materials development. Moreover, as far as reading classes are concerned, in exercise books there are many ready-to-use written passages, which are usually accompanied by related pre-, while- and post-reading tasks, but it could be a good idea if teachers could give students the possibility to choose other texts to be analyzed in class, but only as long as they represent authentic texts. Considering the choice and use of coursebooks in English teaching classes, Harmer (2007: 146-147) suggests four attitudes towards these books, which teachers could take in order to prepare their lessons in a creative way: the first alternative consists in simply omitting what is not useful for the class; the second is replacing coursebook’s activities with other materials prepared by the teacher; the third approach can be expanding the existing materials with additional exercises and the last attitude is adapting what is in the book to the class’ needs. In this way learners can actively participate in materials selection, by deciding what they are most interested in reading.

Authenticity of reading materials is an important factor to take into consideration, but it is also a notion which is sometimes difficult to understand. As Wallace (1993) points out “as soon as texts, whatever their original use, are brought into classroom for pedagogic purposes they have, arguably, lost authenticity” (1993: 79). As a rule, authentic texts are written for English native speakers and they are not always easily accessible for second language learners; this is why teachers often feel the urge to adapt the language of such texts to their student’s level of proficiency in English, renouncing authenticity. However, Anderson (1999: 119) finds a solution to this problem by suggesting that teachers should at least maintain an “authentic use of the passage”, which means that, at the end of the lesson, the instructional objective of a reading activity must be really achieved. If students have been able to develop a specific reading skill and can comprehend the adapted text, then authenticity has been respected.

Another aspect to take into consideration regarding material selection is text genre. Considering what we have said before, about making students read extensively, it is necessary that readers are faced with different kinds of English texts, so that they can also compare different language uses. Anderson (1999: 120), for instance, reports that during his reading classes he has “used articles from hair style magazines and car magazines in addition to the usual sources such as textbooks and journal articles”, because he thinks that “students should be encouraged to see reading in English not only as an academic experience but also as a source of pleasure”. By varying materials, teachers can prevent learners from becoming bored and stimulate their critical thinking and knowledge. The same criteria should be considered when planning exercises and other reading activities: the more skills students will be asked to ‘trigger’, the more lively

and successful their learning will be. This is why reading tasks that go beyond a standard analysis of a text, are usually preferred by students.

Nuttall (1996) identifies three criteria which should be considered when evaluating texts: suitability of content, exploitability and readability. The first criterion refers to the importance of learners' interest in what they are asked to read, and this has been already mentioned as a key factor in the development of reading abilities, and consequently in the success of reading classes. The second criterion invites the teacher to choose texts which serve the purpose of the reading lesson, which means that students, in the end, can really improve their competence as English readers. This approach reminds us of Anderson's (1999) ideas about materials authenticity and exploitation. Texts can be exploited in many ways and, in fact, it often happens that during a reading class the main pedagogic objective is not achieving reading comprehension in particular, but, instead, learning a new grammar rule by looking at its actual use in written English. The role of text in teaching reading will be more clearly discussed in the following subchapter. The third and last aspect which affects text choice is readability, a term which usually refers "to the combination of structural and lexical difficulty" (Nuttall 1996: 174).

In 1987 Carrell wrote an article called *Readability in ESL*, in which she argued that none of the readability formulas which had been proposed until that moment by reading researchers could explain to what extent a text could be considered more or less difficult. "The two most common factors in the formulas" were, in fact, "word length/frequency/familiarity on the one hand, and sentence length on the other" (1987: 22), while other important variables, such as text content, format and organization were completely ignored. Sharing the same opinion, Castello (2008) argues that "readability is [...] a multifaceted concept" which cannot be effectively approached, unless you consider

important factors such as reader's interest, motivation and purpose in reading. These 'personal' variables are not always easy to interpret and, for this reason, reading difficulty is usually measured only through verifiable linguistic data concerning words and sentences. Researchers have been trying to develop new readability formulas which could include the most reading variables possible, but their results always depend on the specific context in which field-testing is conducted. These formulas were used by teachers and materials developers who wanted to understand how difficult texts could be adapted to match to second language readers' competence; nevertheless, they assumed, erroneously, that comprehension could be scientifically calculated through mathematical equations. As Carrell (1987: 27) asserts, "Comprehension" is a complex term which not only means different things to different people, but it is a complex concept which covers multiple behavioral and cognitive factors". As argued at the beginning of this Chapter, meaning does not reside exclusively in a text, but it derives from the interaction "between the content and structure of the author's message and the experience and prior knowledge of the reader" (1987:24). In other words, it is highly risky to intervene on a text at the level of syntax or vocabulary, with the intent of simplifying its comprehension, since coherence and cohesion - which are extremely important aspects of language use - could be negatively affected by these interventions. This is especially true if we consider that texts serve primarily communicative purposes and we cannot interfere with the natural flow of communication between author and reader. One safer method to reduce linguistic difficulties in reading classes is, for example, preparing pre-reading activities which aim at making students develop background knowledge on the topic of the text. Moreover, teachers are always present to monitor the comprehension process and so they can promptly intervene when students have problems in understanding a difficult passage.

To sum up, the preparation of materials and evaluation of texts, which are to be used in English reading classes, is not an easy task. There are of course many variables to be taken into account, but as long as teachers are able to concentrate on pupils' needs and to predict their response to reading activities, they will always benefit from valuable hints to make the best choices possible. Clearly, in order to make reading lessons effective, second language educators must not exempt themselves from continuous self-evaluation and critical judgment.

1.4.2 The role of text in language teaching

Teaching reading in English as foreign language can mean different things, depending on the goals set by teachers at the beginning of a reading class. The certain thing is that we need a text and a powerful approach to deal with it. The most widely exploited way of reading a text in class is going down the page, analyzing every single sentence and often translating from the target language into Italian the difficult passages. Students are often asked to look at language use, vocabulary, syntax and so on, or they must reflect on the general structure of the text, in order to understand how ideas are organized. This kind of reading process is also called 'intensive', and it often concentrates on the development of comprehension skills. As comprehension is an individual process, teachers need to find a way to monitor students during the reading activity, and one useful method is using comprehension questions after the first reading, which can help students realize what is not clear about the text, by underlining the most important points. However, comprehension questions cannot stand by themselves and, in fact, the most important step in this activity is the discussion of answers between the teacher and the whole class. It is showing the reasons for one answer instead of another that highlights the

process of meaning construction in students' minds and provides the opportunity to express doubts and encourage learners to overcome their difficulties: teachers "must help them [students] to see questions not as attempts to expose their ignorance, but as aids to successful exploration of the text" (Nuttall 1996: 182).

Day and Park (2005: 61) describe the development of reading comprehension questions as a good exercise to "help students interact with the text to create or construct meaning". The authors first identify a taxonomy of six types of comprehension - literal, reorganization, inference, prediction, evaluation and personal response - and then suggest five forms of questions which can be used to approach a text - yes/no questions, alternative questions, true or false, Wh- questions and multiple choice. In this article is very well explained which kind of question best enhances a specific level of understanding and how teachers can exploit this activity to improve the teaching of reading skills. Among other important considerations, this final remark should be underlined:

"Regardless of the level of comprehension or the form of the questions, teachers and materials developers need to make sure [...] that students keep the text in front of them while answering questions on the text. They should always be able to refer to the reading passage, for we are interested in teaching reading comprehension, not memory skill" (Day and Park 2005: 67).

Reading comprehension questions should not be confused with comprehension testing, which is to be introduced only later in the teaching process. To sum up, reading comprehension can be achieved in different ways, but what needs to be kept in mind is that a text represents a common ground in the author-reader interaction; for this reason,

learners should always have at their disposal the most effective methods possible to access a written passage in order to understand the meaning of what they are reading.

This kind of second language approach - through comprehension questions - poses the text as a linguistic object (TALO), but there are other cases in which text is treated as a vehicle for information (TAVI). Johns and Davies (1983: 10) believe that students who are learning to read in English “shall concentrate in the first place on *information* rather than language, on *overall meaning* rather than points of detail, and on what is *known* rather than what is not known”, which means that the understanding of text content should be given greater importance in comparison with language instruction. In effect, intensive reading and strict text analysis should be used only at an early stage of English learning, when learners do not yet possess strong linguistic competence and reading abilities. The TALO method, indeed, “may be actively interfering with the formation of good language-learning strategies” (1983: 10), since it prevents English students from relating what they are reading to other texts on the same topic, and leaves them unprepared for self-study and reading at home. The TAVI method, on the other hand, enhances cognitive as well as metacognitive abilities which can help students examine different texts, by relying on the knowledge already acquired during previous English reading classes or classes of other school subjects. In this sense, students are involved in a more practical use of reading activities and can be faced with more interesting texts, which deal with already known topics. John and Davies (1983) reflect on the same aspects which Anderson (1999) later considered in his work, such as ‘teaching for comprehension’, probably because as second language instructors they all experienced the same problems with second language readers and tried to find the best methods to

make their students achieve language proficiency as well as long-term skills improvement. In Macalister's (2011) words:

[...] In order to teach learners how to read, there needs to be a focus on developing skills and strategies that will assist future reading; recognizing conjunction relationships such as cause-effect, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from their context, and predicting likely content are examples of such foci (2011: 162).

As we can see, teachers must develop a certain sensibility towards texts which are going to be used in English reading classes, but there are a wide number of suitable activities they can suggest to their students. Furthermore, reading assessment and testing can be used to monitor the development of specific skills as well as to promote more effective student learning.

1.5 Reading assessment

One important aspect of the teaching of any foreign language is the assessment of students' progress. Written and oral classroom tests are usual practices used by teachers to verify whether their pupils have learnt what has been taught, but it is not always easy to prepare this kind of activity, especially as far as reading assessment in English is concerned. "Reading assessments are meant to provide feedback on the skills, processes, and knowledge resources that represent reading abilities" (Grabe, 2009: 353) and they should not be confused with language tests, which are instead "prepared administrative procedures that occur at identifiable times in a curriculum when learners muster all their faculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated" (Brown, 2004: 4). In this sense, teachers can decide to monitor their students'

construct of reading abilities without necessarily subjecting them to stressful and anxiety-provoking classroom tests, which could be felt as a negative experience and discourage language learning. “Informal” assessment, for instance, aims at observing students’ performance regularly during English classes, by asking questions, commenting on reading comprehension tasks or providing other kinds of feedback, in order to facilitate participation and create a comfortable environment in which students do not feel formally under examination. Nevertheless, considering the complex nature of reading in a foreign language, teachers need to plan assessment carefully, first setting their goals, which do not always consist in assigning marks, but can often include monitoring skills development in order to verify teaching effectiveness and possibly to improve reading instruction. In the diagram below we can visualize the relationship among testing, teaching and assessment.

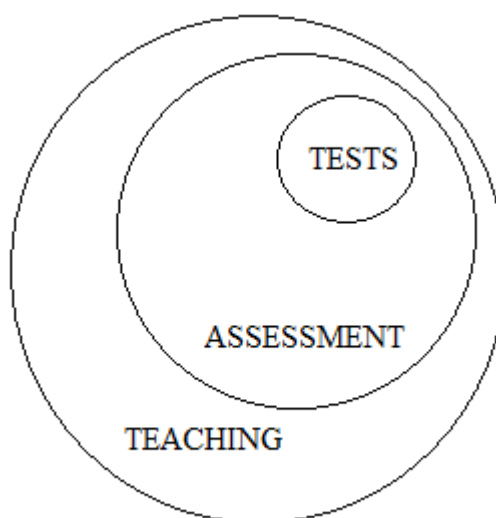


Figure 1. Tests, assessment, and teaching (Brown, 2004: 5).

Another useful distinction concerns the function of assessment: formative and summative. As the word suggests, formative assessment aims at “evaluating students in the process of ‘forming’ their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to

continue that growth process” (Brown, 2004: 6) and can help teachers regulate their teaching methods on the basis of the class’ needs. On the other hand, summative assessment is carried out at the end of a unit of instruction, in order to test students’ achievement of learning objectives, but it does not indicate what measures should be taken in the future. Usually informal assessment has a formative function, while formal tests (which imply the assignment of marks) are summative. It may be argued that this distinction is not always as sharp as it seems, and, in fact, it is only a matter of deciding the purpose for assessing.

Before analyzing specific techniques for assessing reading, there are another two concepts which should be borne in mind. The first important dichotomy is that of “norm-referenced” and “criterion-referenced” testing, which refers to the different scoring of test-takers depending on the test’s purpose. In the first case, learners are evaluated in relation to a standard rank, as happens in standardized tests and public examinations such as TOEFL (the Test of English as a Foreign Language), which means that a candidate’s scores are interpreted with reference to the performance of the other candidates in classification order. In the second case, students are graded following their performance on established learning goals and in relation to specific criteria, which is exactly the situation of classroom tests. Through criterion-referenced tests teachers can verify whether the teaching objectives of English classes have been met by their students. Nowadays, secondary school students are often faced with both kinds of tests, as many teachers integrate English lessons with activities specifically developed in preparation for language certifications, which represent a common way to assess proficiency in every skill; further in this Chapter I will discuss the widespread descriptors of reading ability.

The other important difference to take into consideration is that between “discrete-point” and “integrative” testing methods. When preparing a test, teachers have to decide whether they want to evaluate a particular skill or consider an overall analysis of language competence. This means that assessing students on reading comprehension may consist of asking them to employ all their abilities to understand the meaning of a text or focusing on a specific ‘microskill’ which represents a discrete part of the reading process. As has already been argued, many researchers have tried to identify all the different ‘steps’ in achieving comprehension (see 1.2), but there are others who support a more global view of language proficiency - also known as the “unitary trait hypothesis” - which leads instead to integrative testing (Brown, 2004). Matthews (1990: 515), for instance, criticizes Anderson’s (1990) attempt to use skill taxonomies for the construction of reading tasks and argues that “if texts are carefully chosen and tasks are sufficiently global then the relevant enabling skills will be naturally sampled”. In this sense, assessment should not try to investigate the complex nature of the reading process (or processes), but should concentrate more on the product. Nevertheless, there are other aspects which influence the preparation of good tests and further complicate teachers’ task of evaluating their students.

Urquhart (1987: 387-388) discusses ‘reading comprehension’ and its assessment in terms of ‘comprehensions’ and ‘interpretations’, defining the first as “the different products of the reading process, the results of the different standards which readers set themselves, partly because of their purpose in reading, and partly because of the nature of the text”, and the second as “the different readings of the same text made by the same reader at different times” or by different readers. In particular, the author focuses on the role of background knowledge (or schemata), which has been proved to affect crucially

the understanding of a text (see 1.1.1), claiming that what a teacher expects from his or her students' comprehension of a written passage in English as a foreign language does not always correspond to the actual results. As a consequence, reading tasks should be designed to prevent readers from running into possible misinterpretations or facing tricky questions which certainly do not help the analysis of a text. Moreover, teachers should not forget that meaning resides in the interaction between the reader and the text, and thus students may arrive at different conclusions depending not only on their reading abilities, but also on their knowledge structures. Weir (1997: 46), commenting on the article by Urquhart (1987), concludes:

“Because of the difficulty of testing ‘interpretations’, we may have to limit ourselves to testing ‘comprehensions’, in which case we must accept that we will only be able to assess a limited part of reading ability, information retrieval from the text rather than from pragmatically inferred meaning beyond the text.”

The design of post-reading activities can be very similar to the design of test items and, in fact, teachers could use the same exercises both for teaching and for assessing students. However, there are four major differences between teaching and testing which have been detected by Nuttall (1996: 212-214). First of all, during a test students do not receive any support and, on the contrary, are forced to work alone in order to show what they have learnt. During an English lesson, the teacher is a constant presence in the process of acquisition and helps students overcome possible difficulties in accomplishing reading tasks. As a consequence, classroom tests put learners in a more stressful situation which could also influence the outcome of their performance. Second, tests discriminate between students in so far as some may find it more difficult and challenging to do well

than others who are more proficient. This discrimination is also reflected in the assignment of marks, which inevitably classifies students on the basis of their abilities. On the other hand, while teaching all learners are at the same level and can even help each other, thus facilitating the acquisition of reading skills. Third, it is impossible to test everything which has been taught and so a test represents a sample of what the teacher has done during reading classes. Moreover, the assessment of skills does not precisely correspond to their teaching (as could be the case of teaching and testing content knowledge) and texts presented in tests should be different from those used during the lessons. Finally, the consequences derived from testing are not to be found in teaching: students can either pass or fail an exam, while reading activities performed in class have the only purpose to learn the language. These are some characteristics which distinguish testing from teaching; now we should consider what is typical of good tests.

Harmer (2007) identifies five aspects of language tests which should be considered: face validity, reliability, practicality, washback/backwash effect and motivation. Validity refers to the ability of a test to show that it really serves the purpose for which it has been designed. For instance, when students are faced with a reading test, they should be confident that it will efficiently measure their reading abilities. Good tests should be reliably marked, which means that the result would not change if the examiner were another person. The only way to ensure the highest degree of reliability would mean providing tests which imply only mathematical scoring, since the subjectivity of teachers inevitably affects their response to students' own production. However, even though teachers may make mistakes while marking a test, they should not automatically lose their reliability as examiners. When preparing a test, teachers should consider how practical it would be for students to take it and therefore they should avoid overly long exercises

which could impede a positive performance. The washback effect occurs when teaching is modelled on testing and not the other way round. Teachers should first plan their reading lessons and then develop proper tests which aim at assessing students' progress. In the end, motivation in learning a language can also be influenced by testing, which should not be considered as a way of hindering students, but as a moment of verification that leads to the awareness of strengths and weaknesses and the consequent learning improvement.

Considering what has been said so far about language testing in general and reading assessment in particular, it is now worth looking at some techniques for testing reading in English.

1.5.1 Methods for testing reading

Every researcher in the field of second language reading would agree that one 'best method' to assess reading does not exist, but there are several techniques which could be successfully used by teachers to measure their students' abilities. The following list includes some of the most commonly used methods which are mentioned and analyzed in detail by Alderson (2000).

Cloze: it consists of a passage in which every n-th word has been deleted and students have to restore the missing words either using their knowledge or choosing from a group of words.

Gap-filling (or rational cloze): it is similar to the cloze test, but the words deleted are chosen by the examiner on some rational basis (for example according to the grammatical function).

Multiple-choice: a text is followed by some questions with multiple possible answers among which students have to choose the correct one on the basis of their comprehension of the text.

Matching: two sets of items have to be matched, such as headings to their corresponding paragraphs.

Ordering: students have to put a scrambled set of words, sentences, paragraphs or texts into the correct order.

Dichotomous items: students have to decide whether a statement is true or false according to the text it refers to; as an alternative the exercise could consist of answering yes/no questions.

Editing: students are presented with a passage in which a number of errors have been introduced and they have to identify them.

C-test: it is a variant of cloze formats in which the initial letter or syllable of a targeted word remains, and students have to complete it.

Cloze elide: another alternative to the cloze test consists of inserting useless words into a text which students have to recognize and delete.

Short-answer: students are asked to answer specific questions with a brief response (different from Yes/No or True/False).

Free-recall: after having read a text students have to write down (or orally report) all the information they can remember from the text without looking at it.

Summary: students have to summarize either the entire text or specific parts, highlighting main ideas which are relevant.

Gapped summary: the text is already provided with a summary in which some words are missing and students have to restore them.

Information-transfer: it consists of transferring required information from the text into graphic forms, such as diagrams, charts and tables.

As we can see teachers can choose from a great variety of test formats, depending on their purposes and students' needs. Each technique has advantages and disadvantages which should be taken into account when planning reading assessment, especially as far as marking is concerned. Those tests which involve other language skills (such as writing and speaking) might be more difficult to be evaluated and could also require greater effort on the part of students. Nevertheless, nowadays teachers are provided with a considerable amount of materials which assist them not only in the preparation of successful reading classes, but also in the administration of tests. Another tool which helps schools develop language teaching is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) which I will discuss in the following section.

1.5.2 Using the CEFR in teaching and assessing reading

Between 1989 and 1996 the Council of Europe undertook a major project called 'Language learning for European citizens' which aimed at providing guidelines for the development of language learning, teaching and assessment across Europe. One of the most important results of this project was the elaboration of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which "was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency"⁵. In particular, this framework divides language

⁵ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp (last accessed on 22nd May).

proficiency into six stages of development: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. Each level corresponds to specific communicative competences acquired by the learner, progressing from basic (A) to proficient (C) skills. As communication is probably the main purpose for learning a language, the approach adopted by the CEFR is action-oriented in so far as users are seen as ‘social agents’ who accomplish specific language tasks in a determined context. To give an example of reference levels, I report here the descriptors for reading which are included in the self-assessment grid under the part about ‘understanding’ (Council of Europe 2001: 26-27):

A1	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.
A2	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.
B1	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.
B2	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.
C1	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.
C2	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.

Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid.

As we can see, each level gives important information about the kinds of texts learners should be able to read according to the respective difficulty of achieving comprehension. Teachers can plan English reading lessons on the basis of their students’ level of proficiency and set objectives, content and methods according to these European indications. In addition, the exploitation of the CEFR for the design of Italian secondary school English syllabuses offers the opportunity to place language teaching and learning in a wider context, so that students can be stimulated to develop their skills not only for

imminent purposes (such as a classroom test) but also for their future experiences with English. It has been argued before that Italian students need to learn English as a foreign language because of its crucial role in our globalized society, and therefore the teaching of this language should not be left to chance but instead be organized carefully.

One last remark about the framework of reference developed by the Council of Europe is that it seems to encourage a learner-centred method of teaching, because it provides useful guidelines for teaching not only for teachers, but also for students with specific means for self-assessment and self-monitoring of one's own progress through the suggestion of language learning strategies for every skill. Hence, students of English are supported not only in the development of cognitive abilities which characterize the acquisition of a foreign language, but also metacognitive skills which can make them become aware of the learning process and achieve independence in the construct of their language competence. The following Chapter will deal with the concept of the 'good language learner' and the role of language learning strategies.

CHAPTER 2

Good English readers and second language learning strategies

“Reading without reflecting is like eating without digesting.”
Edmund Burke

Teaching English as a second language is a challenging task for every teacher, especially if we consider the fact that it is not only a matter of selecting and organizing the content of a lesson, but it is also important to concentrate on the learners themselves and their attitudes towards the subject. As has been recognized by many researchers in past decades, a learner-centred method of teaching is probably the best way to encourage students to develop autonomy in their learning process, but it is often difficult to find pedagogic techniques that are successful with every learner. “Language learning is a difficult journey across a demanding landscape by extremely complex beings who behave in complicated ways” (Oxford and Lee 2008: 315); therefore, it is necessary to focus our attention on second language learners and how they face their learning process. As has been argued in the previous Chapter of this thesis, learning English can be successful only

if students manage to participate actively in this process and become aware of their strengths and weaknesses as second language learners. It goes without saying that a foreign language is acquired in very different ways by different people, since there are many variables which affect the learning process, such as the inborn characteristics of students (e.g.: age, gender) and the social context in which the language is learnt (see Nuttal, 1996; Alderson 2000; Griffiths, 2008). As a consequence, it is not possible to formulate a theory of second language acquisition that can be universally valid for all learners of English, but we can still consider some factors which characterize successful learners in order to attempt to encourage poor learners to develop the same abilities.

Since the early 1970s there has been, in the field of second language acquisition, a growing interest in the study of the so-called ‘good language learner’ (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975), which has led to the identification of various strategies used by second language students who appear to have a natural inclination towards acquiring a language other than their first one. Researchers have aimed at showing the cognitive and metacognitive processes which determined the acquisition of a foreign language, in order to develop more efficient teaching strategies and help learners cultivate self-awareness and autonomy in their learning. This Chapter deals with the findings of this kind of research and aims to investigate learning strategies for reading in English and how they can be fostered in high school students in order to help them become good second language readers.

2.1 The ‘good language learner’

In every classroom there are students who receive higher marks than their less ‘talented’ peers, but this does not necessarily mean that the latter do not study enough or

are not good at learning a particular subject; in fact, there can be many other reasons why it takes much longer for one learner to improve his or her language competence than another. It has been already said that certain teaching methods may not be suitable for all students and the personal background of individuals affects their learning abilities. A number of researchers have been interested in identifying what factors teachers should attend to when they are teaching a second language to a class, such as the cognitive processes which characterize the construction of meaning during a reading task or the ability to solve language problems. In other words, teachers have been asked to find out what 'secrets' their most successful students have, in order to share them with low-rated learners. A pioneer in this particular field of studies is Joan Rubin, who discussed in her influential article "What the "good language learner" can teach us" (1975) the characteristics of successful second language learners and what we can learn from their behaviour, assuming that the ability to learn a language can be improved by looking at those who achieve better results. At the beginning she mentions three variables on which good language learning depends: aptitude, motivation and opportunity.

At the time of the article's publication aptitude was considered "a stable cognitive characteristic of those individuals who a knack or talent for learning other languages" (Ranta, 2008), following the work of Carroll (1965) who stated that this variable could be used to predict language learning success by testing learners with the Modern Language Aptitude Test (Carroll and Sapon, 1959). However, other critics have more recently rejected Carroll's opinions, arguing that aptitude is not a fixed indicator and it can be improved by training, as well as other personal characteristics.

The second aspect mentioned by Rubin (1975), motivation, is probably the most important variable among the three and there has been a considerable amount of research

conducted on motivational factors which affect language acquisition. Ushioda (2008: 19) defines motivation simply as “what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, and to persist in action” and it can therefore be found in almost every human activity. Nevertheless, motivation is not merely a personality trait, and it is affected by various aspects as much as it influences second language acquisition. From a social-psychological perspective, language learners can be more or less motivated by the social context and their linguistic community, and they can change their attitudes towards the target language culture, depending on their learning goals and purposes. Two Canadian social psychologists, Gardner and Lambert (1959), studied the acquisition of French by English-speaking high school students in Canada and they have recognized two different motivational orientations in the learning process: integrative and instrumental. The first type of motivation reflects a real interest in the target language as a vehicle to better understand the different culture and people, while the second considers the practical advantages of learning that particular language (for example, finding a job). This research inspired other studies which were more to do with educational perspectives and the classroom environment. One of the most famous results was the distinction between “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” motivation, as reported by Dörnyei (1994):

Extrinsically motivated behaviours are the ones that the individual performs to receive some extrinsic reward (e.g., good grades) or to avoid punishment. With intrinsically motivated behaviours the rewards are internal (e.g., the joy of doing a particular activity or satisfying one’s curiosity) (1994: 275).

The concept of reward has already been mentioned in the first Chapter where I have reported Irwin’s (1991) equation about motivation (see 1.4), but if we compare the two theories we can say that extrinsic rewards - as intended by Irwin - are less incisive than

intrinsic motivation or, at least, cannot sustain students' interest only by themselves. Good language learners are strongly motivated thanks to integrative and intrinsic factors especially because they understand that the learning process depends strongly on their self-determination and regulation. These two last aspects can lead to successful learning results when the social environment, made up of teachers and peers, is threatening. Furthermore, the "failure to recognize the self as agent in controlling thought and thus motivation can lead learners to become trapped in negative patterns of thinking and self-perceptions, with detrimental consequences for their motivation" (Ushioda, 2008: 27).

Opportunity, which is the last variable mentioned by Rubin (1975: 43-44), "includes all those activities both within and outside the classroom which expose the learner to the language and which afford him an opportunity to practice what he has learned". When I was at high school, for example, my English teacher used to tell us that if we could manage to listen to the BBC news at least for five minutes a day, we would certainly improve our listening skills as well as vocabulary knowledge. This is a good example to explain how a student of English as a foreign language can create an opportunity to strengthen his or her language competence, by engaging in a voluntary activity concerning the target language. As far as reading skills are concerned, a good language learner can become a better English reader by reading, for instance, authentic texts which are not directly related to the school programme, such as novels, magazines or song lyrics. This particular attitude towards the new language fosters students' motivation, interest and autonomy in the learning of English, because it gives them the opportunity to find more suitable and personal ways to approach the subject. Moreover, Rubin (1975: 43) mentions a universally acknowledged truth when she writes that "the best language learning occurs in the country/region where the language is spoken" and

this is confirmed by the theories of Skinner about language input which I mentioned in the first Chapter: the greater stimulus one gets from the target language in a specific social context, the better and faster one will learn that language. Nevertheless, it must be said that things have changed remarkably since the 1970s and today people have many more opportunities to be surrounded by target language input than before. Nowadays, if one wants to read an English newspaper, for example, one just needs to switch on the computer and find the right website. It is clearly very important that teachers encourage their students to reflect critically on the language learning process, so that they can gradually become autonomous learners. Little (1991: 4) defines autonomy as a “*capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” and he claims that learners’ autonomy should be the logical outcome of every learner-centred method of teaching. Students of a foreign language who have the possibility to organize their own learning, by choosing, for instance, activities they like, will be much more motivated and will improve their language skills faster than students on whom language instruction is strictly imposed by the teacher and the school syllabus. At this point it is clear that aptitude, motivation and opportunity, which interact with each other in the learning process, are the basic characteristics of good language learners.

The next step consists in observing what kinds of strategies have been recognized by Rubin (1975) in her first examination of good language learners and their cognitive processes in language acquisition. In her article we can find that the ‘good language learner’:

1. is a willing and accurate guesser;
2. has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication;
3. is not often inhibited;

4. is prepared to attend to form;
5. practices;
6. monitors his/her own and the speech of others;
7. attends to meaning.

Although these statements are only theoretical, they give us an idea of the direction one should take if one wants to become a good language learner, and the concept which is implied by all these strategies is that successful learners are perfectly aware of what they are doing and try to achieve their goals in the best way possible. As Johnson (2001) explains, Rubin's work represents the basis for further research on learning strategies which were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s and aimed at classifying specific techniques that could be taught to foreign language learners in order to improve different abilities. To mention another important contribution in the field of successful learning, Naiman *et al.* (1978) conducted a large-scale study to verify whether Rubin's strategies were effectively used by good learners and if they could represent a fruitful source in teachers' hands. They observed and interviewed two groups of foreign language learners, one made up of English speaking adults and the other of pupils learning French at school and in the end their findings partly supported Rubin's hypotheses. Furthermore, a major conclusion they drew from their research was that the best way to obtain information about learning strategies is not mere observation of learners, but interviews and questionnaires on their learning habits:

[...] They had hoped that watching pupils in class would give them plenty of information on strategies. But this did not happen. [...] most of what happens goes on in the head. Reading and listening are the obvious examples of covert language behaviour (Johnson 2001: 150).

In this sense, only good language learners themselves can make learning strategies explicit, for instance, by explaining aloud the thinking involved in the accomplishment of a reading task.

Following the model of language acquisition adopted by Naiman *et al.* (1978) in the study mentioned above, the socio-linguistic context and the L2 environment play only a marginal role in the learning process - which “consists of consciously employed strategies and techniques, and unconscious mental processes” (1978: 8) - thus giving learners’ personal characteristics greater importance over sociological aspects. Nevertheless, considering the fact that these ideas were developed more than thirty years ago, there are more recent studies which do not accept this kind of approach to language acquisition and reject in particular the emphasis placed on unconsciousness in the learning process. Schmidt (1990), for instance, claims that consciousness plays an important role in learning a second language, particularly as far as learners’ awareness is concerned. As a matter of fact, perception, noticing and understanding, which are three levels of awareness mentioned in Schmidt’s article, result from conscious processing of new information and can facilitate the acquisition of a second language, especially at an early stage of this complex process. In this sense, “unconscious mental processes” (Naiman *et al.* 1978) constitute only a part of the language learning process and they cannot be considered the only means to interiorize new linguistic forms. Another perspective on second language acquisition and good language learners is that of Norton and Toohey (2001), who focus especially on the social context:

[...] we approach the explanation of the success of good language learners on the basis of their access to a variety of conversations in their communities rather than on the basis of their control of a wider variety of linguistic forms and meanings (Norton and Toohey, 2001: 310).

In this view, the specific social, historical and cultural context in which the language learner is situated shapes his or her personal traits and learning styles, thus affecting beforehand the learning process and outcome. To go back to our high school students, the acquisition of English as a second language also depends on the social relationships which are formed in the classroom, on the one hand between the teacher and his or her pupils, on the other among classmates. As a consequence, the success of a language learner cannot be separated from the time and place in which he or she is situated.

So far I have discussed the role of good language learners in second language acquisition theories, it is now time to look into the characteristics of successful second language readers.

2.1.1 The good second language reader

In the first Chapter I have investigated how reading skills are acquired by learners of English as a foreign language, explaining the process of reading through different models and approaches. Keeping in mind Rubin's (1975) concept of the good language learner, we can now see what strategies are used by second language readers to ensure comprehension. Schramm (2008) reports on a study that she conducted few years before (2001) on German students reading in English, whose behaviour was analysed by collecting think-aloud data, and identifies three levels of action: the higher level activity, which means the contextualization of the reading task; the reader's specific goal for interaction with the author, which aims at meaning construction; and the action to secure comprehension when problems prevent the reader from reaching his or her goal. From this point of view, it is clear that good language learners face the reading activity with a goal in mind, which accompanies them throughout the entire cognitive process.

Therefore, it is important to teach students to establish their reading goals before starting reading, so that comprehension can be facilitated by giving the task a specific direction.

In particular, Schramm (2006), comparing first language with second language cognitive processes, realizes that successful L2 readers activate “a higher percentage of background knowledge strategies such as inferences, predictions, and elaborations than low-rated students who used a higher percentage of phonetic decoding”. This means that good language learners can develop top-down approaches faster than poor readers, who only make use of bottom-up models of reading. The activation of pre-knowledge is indeed a good strategy to achieve better results in reading, as was suggested by Anderson (1999) in his recommendations for teachers (see 1.4). Furthermore, Schramm (2001, 2006) argues that successful L2 readers are able to use their background schemata through “integrative elaborations”, which serve the reading goal, rather than “associative elaborations”, which are instead distant from the task purpose. In this sense, once the reading goal is set, the good reader manages to create a mental model which helps him or her integrate information in the text with prior knowledge, in order to ensure comprehension. On the other hand, poor readers tend to focus on particular details which are not important for the reading purpose, thus making useless associations of textual elements with personal experience. In Schramm’s (2006: 26) words: “ [...] it is not the use of pre-knowledge in general, but the particular functions and orchestrated ways of using pre-knowledge that are characteristics of successful L2 reading”.

On the second level of action mentioned before, good readers can understand the message conveyed in the text, thus engaging in an efficient relationship with the author, which lets them successfully relate written information to their own goals. Understanding the intentions of the author, in fact, is extremely important also for the construction of a

propositional textbase, especially as far as global coherence is concerned. As Schramm (2006) explains, there are three steps in the process of meaning comprehension which can be strategically taken by second language readers. The first step is “the pre-lexical and lexical level” on which recognized letters are decoded into graphemes and finally into words. The second step is called “the semantic-syntactical and intersentential level” for which a certain proficiency in the second language grammar is needed, in order to establish local coherence between clauses and sentences. At this point, strategic readers can transfer their knowledge of morpho-syntax from their first language into the foreign language to be acquired. The final step is represented by “the paragraph and text level”, which usually represents a challenging task for second language learners, especially when they have to answer comprehension questions about global text construction. For instance, paragraphing in English can be different from paragraphing in Italian because of culture-specific text forms and it is, therefore, necessary to obtain as much information as possible about the target language before reading. Good readers pay attention to pre-reading activities which can help them overcome potential difficulties in text comprehension or meaning construction. To go back to the third aspect of Schramm’s (2008) action-level perspective, we can say that successful readers are not inhibited by comprehension problems and they always try to find the best solutions possible to overcome them, while focusing only on those difficulties which prevent them from achieving the reading goal. On the other hand, less successful readers “tend to worry about comprehension problems that are not relevant to the pursuit of the reading goal” (Schramm, 2008 reporting Schramm, 2001) and so they can find it more difficult to accomplish the task.

A final remark about reading and good language learners should consider metacognition as another important process for successful second language readers. There are many possible definitions for this skill and the simplest is probably saying that metacognition is “thinking about thinking” (Anderson, 2008). If we apply this concept to second language acquisition, we can assume that learners who reflect upon their learning certainly have much more chance of becoming good readers than those who do not. Being able to control our own cognition is a learning strategy which leads to self-awareness and autonomy, two characteristics that play a crucial role in second language reading. Anderson (2008) identifies five components which constitute metacognition in language learning: preparing and planning for learning, selecting and using strategies, monitoring learning, orchestrating strategies and evaluating learning. To start with the first metacognitive component, students may prepare and plan for learning by activating prior knowledge, which means, for example, bringing their own experience to the text they are going to read; the second component, selecting and using strategies, is typical of learners who think attentively and consciously make decisions about their learning process; the third and fourth steps in metacognitive awareness consist of monitoring one’s own development in the acquisition of a second language, by checking, for instance, whether appropriate strategies are being used, and orchestrating strategies, so that they can work together in the most profitable way possible; finally, language learners should be able to self-assess their learning results, in order to recognize successes as well as their failures. “Strong metacognitive skills empower language learners: when learners reflect upon their learning, they become better prepared to make conscious decisions about what they can do to improve their learning” (Anderson, 2008: 99); the development of metacognition is strictly related to learning strategies which will be discussed in the following section.

One final thing that should be underlined is what Schramm (2006: 28) reports from other studies which aimed at comparing L1 and L2 readers: “L2 readers’ strategy awareness and reported strategy use are more closely related to a general reading proficiency than to learner language variables and socio-cultural factors”. This means that good language readers manage to develop metacognitive strategies that help them become independent both from the teacher and from the classroom environment. In other words:

[...] Getting good results from studying depends on learners going beyond what teachers and programs provide and developing the kind of metacognitive behaviour which will enable them to regulate their own learning (Anderson, 2008: 108).

Now that an overview on good language learners and good second language readers has been provided, we can analyse in detail research about learning strategies in the field of second language acquisition.

2.2 Strategic second language learning

Language learning strategies are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990: 8). This definition of learning strategies implies the theoretical assumption that learning a second language is a cognitive process which can be consciously influenced by learners themselves. It has been demonstrated also by researchers on the ‘good language learner’, such as Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975), that more successful students employ certain ‘tactics’, while they are learning a second language, which could be taught to less successful learners. The most important concept related to learning strategies is that they are consciously chosen by the learner,

something which distinguishes them from learning ‘skills’ which are instead automatic abilities. In other words, “the goal of language learning strategies is the facilitation of learning”, while “skills relate to the manner in which language is used” (Griffiths, 2008: 86). However, the border between ‘strategies’ and ‘skills’ is not completely clear and, in fact, it can also be argued that “strategies are cognitive processes that are open to conscious reflection but that may be on their way to becoming skills” (Grabe, 2009: 221). In the first Chapter I have analysed the classification of reading skills by Munby (1978), claiming that they are necessary steps towards the comprehension of a text, but if we consider the process of reading in a foreign language, it becomes evident that at the beginning learners must pay attention to what they are doing and only later abilities, such as skimming or scanning, will become automatic. In this sense, it seems that learning strategies are fundamental components in second language acquisition, especially for beginners and less ‘skilled’ learners.

Before illustrating her taxonomy of language learning strategies, Oxford (1990) identifies twelve general characteristics which underline the importance of these tools in the field of learning and teaching a foreign language.

FEATURES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Language learning strategies:

1. Contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
 2. Allow learners to become more self-directed.
 3. Expand the role of teachers.
 4. Are problem-oriented.
 5. Are specific actions taken by the learner.
 6. Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
 7. Support learning both directly and indirectly.
 8. Are not always observable.
 9. Are often conscious.
-

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10. Can be taught.
 11. Are flexible.
 12. Are influenced by a variety of factors.
-

Source: Oxford, 1990: 9.

As we can see from the table reported above, the first feature of language learning strategies is their contribution to the main goal, which is the acquisition of communicative competence. Authentic communication takes place when learners are able to use the foreign language in a meaningful way, which means that they actively attend to the outcome of their learning process. Students who want to learn English, for instance, can use specific strategies to achieve grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence in that language so that they can use it in a natural way, by transferring their knowledge into successful communication. Another factor which leads to good communicative competence is self-direction in learning. The acquisition of a language will not be successful unless learners take responsibility for their own learning process outside the classroom. If high school students are learning English as a second language, they are laying the foundation for the acquisition of a competence which must be cultivated day after day, not only as a school subject but as a means to communicate with speakers of this language through written or oral texts. As a consequence, teachers cannot be mere 'instructors' who stand above their students telling them what to do and giving homework for practice, but they should "welcome their new functions as facilitator, helper, guide, consultant, adviser, coordinator, idea person, diagnostician, and co-communicator" (Oxford, 1990: 10). This kind of relationship between teacher and students is a rich ground for the development of strategic good language learners.

Learning strategies are specifically used to overcome language problems, as long as the finding of a solution reflects a deliberate action, which means that learners choose

individually what strategies best serve their purposes. Furthermore, I have already underlined the importance of metacognition in the process of learning a second language and there are metacognitive strategies which aim at helping students plan and evaluate their progress by fostering self-awareness and self-regulation. The ability to think about one's own learning process is not easy to develop and it requires a certain level of proficiency and background knowledge in the foreign language, as well as mental agility. Oxford (1990) lists metacognitive strategies together with social and affective strategies because they all represent an "indirect" way of learning, as opposed to "direct" learning which is instead made up of cognitive, memory and compensation strategies. There are, indeed, factors indirectly affecting the acquisition of a second language - such as the social context and the learner's emotional state - that sometimes pass unnoticed in favour of pure mental processing of the target language. Later in this Chapter I will analyse specific strategies which belong to these two main groups - direct and indirect - and can be used to improve reading comprehension in English as a foreign language.

Going on with Oxford's (1990) features of learning strategies, she claims that observability in the field of language acquisition requires great effort on the part of researchers and teachers, since many language learning processes, including exploited strategies, remain in the learners' mind, sometimes even at an unconscious level and it is, therefore, very difficult to retrieve them. In order to obtain information about learning strategies, researchers have used think-aloud protocols, which imply the ability of learners to refer explicitly to what they are thinking while there are accomplishing a language task, verbal reports and questionnaires. However, it is impossible to give a complete account of strategies which are chosen by students, also because they may be using them without being aware of it and not able to describe what they are actually

doing. Oxford (1990), for instance, has developed a questionnaire called the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), which aims at showing students' mental behaviours in learning a foreign language. This can be a good starting point for strategy instruction, which requires not only the knowledge of as many strategies as possible, but also directions for the orchestration of these strategies to achieve language proficiency. Oxford's SILL has been used also by other researchers, such as Griffiths and Parr (2001: 250), who conducted a study to "explore how language-learning strategy theory relates to the practice in terms of learners' and teachers' perception". The conclusion they draw from this investigation is the following:

[...] students have been shown to use a wide range of LLS strategies, some of them quite frequently. Perhaps one way for us, as teachers [...] might be to work to increase our awareness of our students' strategy usage and needs, in order to be able to facilitate the language-learning process more effectively in line with contemporary eclectic developments in the theory and practice of English language teaching (Griffiths and Parr, 2001: 253).

Once they have been acquired, learning strategies can be used very flexibly and students can decide how to combine them in order to accomplish their language tasks. As was argued above, the choice of which strategy or strategies could best help a learner overcome his or her language problems depends on a series of personal variables, such as age, sex, nationality, learning style, motivation, purpose for learning etc., but it has been also demonstrated by empirical studies that "higher level students do, indeed, report significantly more frequent use of language learning strategies than do lower level students" (Griffiths, 2008: 89). For this reason, it is desirable that a learner-centred

method of teaching includes the instruction of language learning strategies, considering all the important characteristics which have been explained so far.

Although researchers may not agree on a single classification of learning strategies, they all present these particular tools as an important aspect of learning which can really facilitate the acquisition of a second or foreign language. As this paper is concerned with the development of reading skills in English, I will now look into some strategies which can help students become good strategic readers.

2.3 Reading strategically

As discussed in the first Chapter, reading is a complex human activity, both as a mental and a linguistic process, which becomes even more complicated when we are learning a foreign language. Learners develop reading skills starting from low-level processes, such as word identification and decoding, but the final outcome - the product of reading - remains meaning construction. Written texts can be extremely insidious in their form or content, and so readers need the support of specific strategies which aim at facilitating comprehension. "A reading strategy can be described as any interactive process that has the goal of obtaining meaning from connected text, and reading skills operate within the context of such reading strategies" (Hudson, 2007: 107). Basic reading comprehension strategies could be, for instance, inferring the meaning of an unknown word from the context or accessing background knowledge to predict what one is going to read. To be able to read a text in a foreign language, one should first acquire a certain linguistic competence, so that reading abilities can be transferred from first language to target language (Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis), as has been discussed in 1.3. On the other hand, strategies for successful reading can be exploited from the very beginning of

the learning process, especially those regarding the affective and social environment. Following the definition provided by Hudson (2007), reading strategically means being able to make automatic processes - skills - interact with more conscious devices - strategies - in an effective way. Good language learners have certainly much more chance to become successful readers as well because they are already used to thinking about their learning process and to engaging actively with meaningful results. Less skilled learners, however, can still have the opportunity to benefit from strategy instruction during foreign language classes, so that they are able to deal with their learning difficulties.

Which are, then, successful strategies for reading? Many researchers have tried to classify strategies by conducting empirical studies on students learning to read in a foreign language, but there is not yet a universally valid repertory that puts them all together. Oxford (1990), for instance, has identified a total of one hundred and sixty-two language learning strategies and among them she lists fifty strategies which could be useful for reading. Obviously, strategies are not meant to be used all at the same time and during the same task, but students should find their own way of dealing with these tools in order to understand the meaning of a text. Moreover, it can be claimed that strategy choice also depends on the reading purpose and this is why it is extremely important that readers establish a goal before starting any reading activity. In general, the more experienced a reader is the more effective strategies he or she can use to achieve comprehension.

In Block's (1986: 485) words, "comprehension strategies indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand". Clearly, in order to detect strategies it is necessary to make these mental processes explicit, as has been done by Block (1986),

who conducted a study aimed at describing the comprehension strategies used by nonproficient readers in English as a second language. Using the think-aloud procedure, she registered students' responses in approaching a given text and identified two different modes of response: "extensive" versus "reflexive". In the extensive mode, readers try to deal with the author's message, focusing on understanding his or her ideas, not on relating the text to themselves in an affective or personal way; in the reflexive mode, readers relate affectively and personally, focusing on their own thoughts and feelings, thus directing their attention away from the information in the text. Both modes can lead to successful comprehension, even if a reflexive response could confuse the reader and move him or her away from the real message conveyed by the author. Following her research, Block (1986) categorizes strategies into two main levels - general comprehension and local linguistic strategies -, specifying, moreover, what kind of approach distinguishes each strategy. Here I report the complete list presented in Block's article, leaving out quoted examples from her collected data:

General strategies (comprehension-gathering and comprehension-monitoring)

1. **Anticipate content:** The reader predicts what content will occur in succeeding portions of text. This strategy can occur in either mode but occurred more frequently in the extensive mode.
2. **Recognize text structure:** The reader distinguishes between main points and supporting details or discusses the purpose of information. Responses occurred in the extensive mode.
3. **Integrate information:** The reader connects new information with previously stated content. Responses occurred in the extensive mode.
4. **Question information in the text:** The reader questions the significance or veracity of content. Responses were in the extensive mode.

5. **Interpret the text:** The reader makes an inference, draws a conclusion, or forms a hypothesis about the content. Responses, though more frequent in the extensive mode, did occur in the reflexive mode.
6. **Use general knowledge and associations:** The readers in this study used their knowledge and experience (a) to explain, extend, and clarify content; (b) to evaluate the veracity of content; and (c) to react to content. Responses were frequently in the reflexive mode.
7. **Comment on behaviour or process:** The reader describes strategy use, indicates awareness of the components of the process, or expresses a sense of accomplishment or frustration. Because readers' responses reflect self-awareness, this strategy was not classified by mode.
8. **Monitor comprehension:** The reader assesses his or her degree of understanding of the text. This strategy occurred in the extensive mode.
9. **Correct behaviour:** The reader notices that an assumption, interpretation, or paraphrase is incorrect and changes that statement. This is a combination of the strategies of integration and monitoring since the reader must both connect new information with old and evaluate understanding. This strategy occurred in the reflexive mode.
10. **React to the text:** The reader reacts emotionally to information in the text. Responses occurred in the reflexive mode.

Local strategies (understanding specific linguistic units)

11. **Paraphrase:** The reader rephrases content using different words, but with the same sense. This strategy was used to aid understanding to consolidate ideas, or to introduce a reaction.
12. **Reread:** The reader rereads a portion of the text either aloud or silently. The use of this strategy usually indicated a lack of understanding; however, rereading may also have given the reader time to reflect on the content.
13. **Question meaning of a clause or sentence:** The reader does not understand the meaning of a portion of the text.
14. **Question meaning of a word:** The reader does not understand a particular word.

15. Solve vocabulary problem: The reader uses context, a synonym, or some other word-solving behaviour to understand a particular word.

It is important to notice that these strategies derive from students realizing what they understand from the text, by expressing aloud their reactions while reading. In this sense, metacognitive awareness of the reading process plays a crucial role in the development of reading strategies, as has been argued by Carrell (1989). Less proficiency in reading does not necessarily mean lack of strategic behaviour, as has been demonstrated by Block (1986), but it can, instead, indicate scarce awareness or unsuccessful organization of reading strategies. As Anderson (1991) affirms:

[...] strategic reading is not only a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but also the reader must know how to use a strategy successfully and orchestrate its use with other strategies. It is not sufficient to know about strategies; a reader must also be able to apply them strategically (1991: 468-469).

As far as strategy training is concerned, teachers should consider this result when preparing second language reading lessons, paying attention to what their students can already do before teaching them ‘pre-packaged’ strategies. Although there can be similarities among learners concerning the reading process, they are still different individuals and their attitudes toward a text can vary considerably. In fact, Block’s (1986) investigation led to the division of nonproficient readers into two groups based on the following patterns of strategy use: integration, recognition of aspects of text structure, use of personal experiences and associations, and response in extensive versus reflexive modes. The first group, called the “Integrators”, are able to integrate information, recognize text structure, respond in an extensive mode and monitor their understanding

consistently and effectively. The second group of readers, the “Nonintegrators”, on the other hand, fail to connect information, are not aware of text structure and tend to rely more on personal experiences, responding in a reflexive mode. From this analysis of second language readers it can be concluded that those belonging to the first group can more easily improve their reading skills and have greater success in reading different types of text. Nevertheless, Block (1986: 483) states precisely that “these patterns are intended to reflect group tendencies and do not apply with equal consistency for every participant”. Again, it has been demonstrated that second language learners all have the same chance of becoming good readers as long as they become attentive agents of their learning processes. Since the reading strategies presented by Block (1986) relate more to academic contexts where students are asked to learn and memorize the content of what they are reading, now I would like to focus on more practical reading strategies which can be used with high school students of English as a foreign language in Italian classrooms.

2.3.1 Strategies for reading in a foreign language

Previously in this Chapter I introduced Oxford’s (1990) classification of learning strategies, which I find very clear in its structure and explanation of possible applications to the four language skills - listening, reading, speaking and writing. From a general point of view, she distinguishes between memory, cognitive and compensation strategies - that directly deal with the target language - and metacognitive, affective and social strategies - that affect language learning in an indirect way. It is now worth looking into some of the strategies for reading suggested by the author, so as to gain an idea of what students can do during a foreign language class to strengthen their reading skills.

First of all, memory strategies are used to store new information, so that students can retrieve them whenever necessary. For instance, if a class is working on a text about London sightseeing and then students are asked to remember all the different places mentioned, it could be a good strategy to make a semantic map, by grouping concepts into a diagram, using keywords and creating mental images of what has been read. Thus, learners who manage to elaborate the text in such a personal way will find it easier to understand and memorize important information which can be also reused after proper and gradual reviewing.

Cognitive strategies aim at understanding and producing new language and involve many different means connected with input and output abilities. Let us suppose that a language task consists of reading a text and then answering comprehension questions: first, it could be useful for students to read the passage several times until they are really sure they have understood the required information; second, they can look for main ideas or specific details by skimming and scanning; third, important concepts can be fixed by taking notes while reading; fourth, difficult paragraphs can be translated into the first language; finally, students should try to reason deductively to derive the meaning of what is written, by activating their background knowledge. Of course, this is only one example of how to deal with a similar reading exercise and it does not constitute the rule. Furthermore, Oxford (1990) gives a much longer account of possible strategies involving cognitive processes, including activities such as summarizing and highlighting. It always depends on the reader what kinds of strategies best suit his or her reading purposes.

The last group of direct strategies, compensation techniques “allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge” (Oxford, 1990: 37). Students of a foreign language need to realize that it is not always necessary to understand every

single word of a text to be able to comprehend the overall meaning; guessing, for instance, is a good way to approach unknown vocabulary and it relies on the ability to use linguistic or other clues in the text. For instance, if an Italian student finds the sentence ‘The landlord asked Paul to pay the rent as soon as possible’ in an English text and he or she does not know the meaning of the word ‘landlord’, but he or she knows that ‘rent’ means ‘affitto’, it becomes evident that the subject of the sentence must be the owner of a house. To guess the meaning of a word or a sentence from the context is therefore a good compensation strategy which can be based either on linguistic patterns, such as word order and grammatical features, or on other hints, such as similarities between first and target language, knowledge of target language culture and text structure. This kind of strategy can be very fruitful especially for beginners, but they can also represent potential threats if students do not pay enough attention to the learning process, failing, for example, to verify their inferences with the teacher. It is in this case that indirect strategies come into play.

Metacognitive strategies play a crucial role in second language acquisition, in particular as far as students’ control of their own cognition is concerned. I have already discussed the importance of self-awareness and regulation in language learning for strategy development and among Block’s (1986) general strategies we can detect three ways in which students demonstrate their use of metacognition: by commenting on behaviour or process, monitoring comprehension and correcting behaviour (see 2.3 for further details). Finding out about language learning, organizing, setting goals and objectives, identifying the purpose of a language task, planning for a language task, seeking practice opportunities are all characteristic habits of successful readers who actively engage with the target language and the reading process. Moreover, Oxford

(1990) mentions self-monitoring as a good strategy to make students aware of their own mistakes and language difficulties. For instance, after the teacher has corrected a reading comprehension test he or she could ask the students to write down errors in their notebooks: this kind of activity helps learners work on their language weaknesses so that they may be able to avoid finding the same problems in the future. Another useful metacognitive strategy is self-evaluating, because it allows students judge their own language progress in reading in English. In Oxford's (1990) words:

[...] As applied to reading, self-evaluating might consist of learners' assessing their proficiency in a variety of ways. For instance, learners might consider whether their speed or comprehension is acceptable at this point. They might estimate whether their reading skills have improved since last check. They might consider what proportion of a reading passage they understand [...] (1990: 162)

Since high school students learning English could find some difficulties in employing this last technique, a valid alternative could be making them first evaluate another peer's reading progress and then exchange results. Comparison with classmates helps learners to expand their knowledge and also gives them the possibility to think about different ways of acquiring a foreign language.

Cooperating with peers is listed by Oxford (1990) among social strategies, which aim at situating the language learning activity in the social environment. Students who learn English at school are surrounded by other individuals facing the same problems and sharing the same feelings about the acquisition of a foreign language. It is therefore recommended that learners interact with each other to improve language skills and to avoid competitiveness and rivalry in the classroom. Moreover, less successful learners could benefit from working with more proficient peers who can help them solve problems

regarding the accomplishment of a specific task. Reading activities, for instance, can be accomplished by working together on the text, asking questions and discussing possible answers regarding its meaning. Asking the teacher or more proficient learners for clarification or verification should encourage students overcome language difficulties and make them feel supported in the learning process. Furthermore, successful readers are able to empathize with people from the target culture by reading authentic texts (e.g. English magazines or newspapers) and practicing their skills outside the classroom. As a social activity, reading can also represent an emotional effort on the part of students, who can still be helped by the last set of indirect strategies.

First, affective strategies aim at lowering the anxiety caused by the learning practice. To give some examples, before reading a complex text, the anxious students could use progressive relaxation, deep breathing or meditation to relax their nerves; furthermore, music and laughter have a good influence on readers' moods and mental states. Second, students should use self-encouragement strategies, such as making positive statements to themselves, taking risks wisely and rewarding themselves, in order to persevere in a favourable learning development. Without any doubts, self-confidence and self-esteem are precious factors which positively influence the acquisition of a foreign language. Finally, Oxford (1990) suggests that learners understand their own feelings, attitudes and motivations so that they can better manage their security when engaging with a language task. Readers who feel tension or fear before approaching a text in English should pay attention to their physical state, in order to find the means which can help them turn this emotional state into a more positive one. If students are not able to overcome affective difficulties by themselves they could share their feelings with

someone who could assist them in the learning process, such as the teacher, a peer or a parent.

In sum, reading in a foreign language can be approached by students with a great number of strategies, whose final aim is creating the best foundation possible for a successful learning outcome. Together with the development of reading skills, students should be encouraged by teachers to use various reading strategies to improve comprehension and thus become successful and proficient readers. In the following section I will investigate some issues related to strategy training and instruction.

2.4 Strategy instruction

One last topic regarding strategic second language acquisition concerns the organization of strategy instruction. It has been already argued that students can be helped to develop their language skills and proficiency by teaching them effective strategies, but this is certainly not an easy task for teachers. Strategy training, in fact, demands much time and great patience to show satisfying results, both on the part of learners and of their instructors. Nevertheless, researchers have demonstrated that integrating strategy instruction in foreign language classes is worthwhile, since it can lead to better learning (Kern, 1989; Janzen and Stoller, 1998; Farrell, 2001). Moreover, it is not only a matter of giving students a descriptive list of potential strategies, but, more importantly, making them actively reflect on their learning process, which means fostering them to develop metacognitive awareness. As already discussed, good language learners may already be using certain strategies - such as those transferred from their first language - but they may not be able to orchestrate them autonomously in the most fruitful way. In this sense,

teaching learning strategies to secondary school students requires specific training for teachers and effective models to follow when preparing for language classes.

Before discussing practical suggestions for introducing strategy instruction into reading classes, I would like to mention two general issues which have been discussed by researchers and should be taken into consideration. First of all, we should distinguish between “explicit” (or “direct”) and “implicit” (or “embedded”) strategy instruction. Explicit teaching of strategies aims at informing students of “the value and purpose of strategy training” (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990: 153), involving them in a conscious development of strategic thinking. On the other hand, in implicit learning strategy instruction teachers provide students with “activities and materials structured to elicit the use of the strategies being taught” (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990: 153), without explaining to them what the final goal is. Although these two kinds of approaches both present advantages and disadvantages, Chamot (2008) claims that “most researchers agree on the importance of explicitness in strategy instruction” (2008: 273) because it enhances students’ ability to deal with strategies. The second issue concerns the difference between “integrated” and “discrete” (or “separate”) strategy instruction. As reported by Chamot (2008), researchers do not agree yet whether teachers should teach learning strategies during their regular language classes or whether they should devote specific lessons to the development of strategic processing. A separate course on learning strategies would mean making students focus on the language acquisition experience, without connecting it with content learning, which is already in itself a demanding activity. On the other hand, theoretical instruction on learning strategies could be more easily interiorized by learners through proper contextualized practice:

[...] it is generally acknowledged that learning in context is more effective than learning that is not clearly tied to the purpose it intends to serve. The former enables the learner to perceive the relevance of the task, enhances comprehension and facilitates retention. Seen from this perspective, for learners who do not immediately appreciate the relevance of learner training, the more integrated the learner training, the more effective it should be. (Wenden, 1987: 161)

In this view, if we think about Italian schools and how the English syllabus is usually structured, it could be claimed that strategy instruction, if any, is usually implicit and integrated into language teaching. Moreover, English coursebooks adopted in class sometimes provide activities which implicitly introduce learning strategies to achieve, for instance, better comprehension of the language unit to be studied. In order to demonstrate these last considerations, a case study will be presented in Chapter 3 which aims at investigating whether any kind of explicit strategy instruction is provided by English teachers during reading classes in Italian secondary schools.

Since the 1990s a number of models for teaching learning strategies have been developed in the field of second language acquisition, depending on the characteristics of target learners and their learning goals. To give some examples, in her article Chamot (2008), who is a leading figure in English as a second language secondary education¹, takes into account three models which are currently used: the Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction Model (SSBI) by Cohen (1998); the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) by Chamot (2005); and the model by Grenfell and Harris (1999). Following the table reported by Chamot (2008: 270) about the different activities involved in these models, I will conduct a brief analysis of the features they share, because I believe that they can represent a good basis for my discussion of the teaching of

¹ For more information please visit the website of the George Washington University at <http://gsehd.gwu.edu/faculty/search/userprofile/auchamot> (last visited on 20th March 2013).

reading strategies. First, students should be helped by the teacher to identify the strategies they already use in familiar tasks, so that they can become more aware of their learning style. Then the teacher can share his or her own experience as strategic learner, involving the class in a discussion about new strategies and presenting multiple opportunities for strategy choice. Finally, after practising new strategies, learners should manage to organize and use them autonomously whenever necessary and to evaluate their progresses towards effective learning and improved language proficiency. However, these represent only general guidelines for teaching learning strategies to improve every kind of language skill, while it is necessary that teachers of a foreign language adapt these suggestions to their students' needs and purposes in learning.

Now that some background information about strategy instruction has been discussed, it is time to focus on the teaching of learning strategies for readers in English as a second language.

2.4.1 Teaching reading strategies

In the first Chapter of my thesis I have analysed some important aspects to take into consideration when teaching reading in English as a foreign language, such as the selection of materials and activities which best enhance the development of students' reading skills. Furthermore, among his suggestions for an "ACTIVE" model of teaching (see 1.4), which have been presented as a good way to deal with learners' needs as readers, Anderson (1999) mentions strategy instruction, training and verification as a crucial step to help students achieve text comprehension. As far as reading comprehension is concerned, metalinguistic awareness, which "means the ability to reflect on language knowledge and structure and being able to act on or manipulate that

knowledge consciously” (Grabe, 2009: 225), works together with metacognition of the learning process to constitute the foundation of strategic reading. It has already been argued that good readers use many different strategies to construct the meaning of a text, especially in first language contexts; however, lack of second language knowledge can prevent students from developing effective reading strategies, as in the case of Italian secondary school learners of English. It is, therefore, the teachers’ task to choose the best method possible to introduce strategy instruction in the class. Kern (1989), for instance, believes that explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies can improve learners’ ability to comprehend second language texts, especially if training aims at bringing strategies already employed in first language reading into “conscious awareness” (1989: 136). Moreover, Kern (1989: 144) has demonstrated through his study that specific strategy instruction may not only enhance the development of text processing skills, but also “override the effect of language proficiency limitations on readers’ use of effective reading strategies”. Considering all these positive implications, it could be now worth looking into a particular model of teaching which aims at integrating strategic reading in second language instruction.

Janzen and Stoller (1998: 253) are in favour of a direct (or explicit) and integrated approach to reading strategy instruction which differs from more traditional methods, insofar as “it develops student knowledge about the reading process, introduces students to specific strategies, and provides them with opportunities to discuss and practice strategies while reading”. In fact, reading activities provided by English coursebooks that are often used in Italian schools usually consist of (1) pre-reading exercises which introduce the topic (activation of background knowledge), (2) the actual reading of the text, (3) the review of new vocabulary, and (4) comprehension questions. In Janzen and

Stoller's (1998) opinion, this traditional type of instruction is not effective enough to strengthen students' strategic behaviour as foreign language readers, and so they advise teachers who are planning strategic reading instruction to focus on the following four steps:

- adoption of materials;
- preliminary selection of strategies to emphasize in the classroom;
- detailed lesson-planning;
- ongoing adaptation of instruction to meet students' needs and the demands of the text.

The first step consists of carefully choosing the texts to be presented in class, by considering, for instance, text complexity, level of difficulty and students' interest in the topic. I have already discussed important issues connected with materials selection and the role of text in language teaching in the first Chapter; for further details see 1.4.1 and 1.4.2. After a text has been selected, the teacher should decide what strategy or strategies he or she wants to emphasize during the reading lesson. Since there is a great number of strategies that could be taught, instructors should be able to choose those which are more suitable for their classroom, looking attentively at students' characteristics (for example, language proficiency and experience in reading), the demands of the text itself (content and genre) and reading goals. It must be kept in mind that the final outcome of strategy instruction for reading is enabling "students to monitor their comprehension and to become more self-aware readers" (Janzen and Stoller, 1998: 258). Therefore, teachers need to plan in advance their lessons, in order to achieve the best learning results possible. Although explaining reading strategies to secondary school students may be very complicated, empirical studies have demonstrated that with the right amount of time

and patience it is possible to improve strategic abilities and become good second language readers (Farrell, 2001). Moreover, teachers can bring their own experience as successful readers to the classroom, by showing in practice the strategies they would use in reading a specific text and then making students analyse them aloud. In this way, learners can be led towards a gradual participation in the process of strategy instruction and later they will also manage to reflect on and explicitly describe their own application of reading strategies. The final step suggested by Janzen and Stoller (1998) underlines the importance of continuous adaptation of instruction and strategies choice in order to help learners expand their repertoire of strategies lesson by lesson. In fact, this kind of approach allows instructors to revisit their planned lessons every time students' needs change and to go back to previous steps very easily.

As with the teaching methods discussed in the first Chapter, strategy instruction cannot be introduced in a classroom as a pre-packaged model which is valid for every kind of learner, but instead it must be shaped to students' abilities and necessities as foreign language readers in formation. Even though many researchers and educators have developed different multiple-strategy approaches to strategy instruction which aim at teaching specific sets of comprehension strategies (see Grabe, 2009: 230-240 for a detailed list), nobody can say whether one is better or more effective than another, because it always depends on the classroom context in which it is used. As a consequence, trying to integrate strategy training in second language teaching can be a very demanding (and sometimes also frustrating) task for teachers, who certainly should not expect immediate success. Nevertheless, one positive final remark states that "strategic reading instruction provides a meaningful solution to at least two central educational dilemmas: how to motivate students to participate in classroom activities and

how to go beyond teaching content to the more central issue of teaching students how to learn” (Janzen and Stoller, 1998: 264).

To sum up, in this Chapter I have investigated learning strategies and possible approaches to strategy instruction in reading classes, starting from an analysis of the so-called ‘good language learners’ and their attitudes towards learning a second or foreign language; in the following Chapter I will present a small-scale case study which aims at showing whether the Italian syllabus for teaching English in secondary schools includes directions for reading strategy instruction, whether teachers encourage their students to use reading strategies, and whether pupils are aware of strategic behaviours they could adopt to become better readers.

CHAPTER 3

Teaching reading in EFL and the role of language learning strategies: a case study on teachers' and students' perspectives

3.1 Context

This chapter presents a small-scale investigation of the reading habits of secondary school students and the teaching methods adopted by teachers during English lessons with particular attention to learning strategy use and instruction. My study aims at analyzing a real classroom situation in order to discuss whether students use learning strategies when they accomplish reading comprehension tasks or when they study English in general, and how English teachers deal with the teaching of reading and strategy instruction in their classrooms. This research was inspired by the traineeship I undertook in December and January 2012 in a private secondary school of Padua, “Istituto Don Bosco”, during which I had the opportunity to observe and take part in real English lessons and I could understand how the language was taught. In particular, I noticed that

reading comprehension had a marginal role in the lessons and it seemed as if it were used only to achieve other goals such as vocabulary acquisition or explanation of grammar rules. Moreover, I realized that teachers did not explicitly mention language learning strategies which could help students improve their reading skills and text comprehension in English. As a consequence, I decided to investigate the teaching of reading in English as a foreign language in Italian secondary schools, considering both teachers' methods and perspectives and their students' attitudes towards strategic reading and learning.

3.2 Methodology

In the field of applied linguistics there are several methods of research, which can be divided into three main categories: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research. 'Quantitative research' tends to apply a scientific method to social science, by collecting numerical data and analyzing them mainly through statistical procedures. On the other hand, 'qualitative research' focuses on non-numerical data which are more open to interpretation and researchers have to give a meaning to the results. In addition, Dörnyei (2007: 24) adds a third approach to research - 'mixed methods research' - which "involves different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels". For the purposes of my research, I decided to adopt a mixed methods approach because it allowed me to collect both numerical data, as in the case of the use of reading strategies by students, and also open-ended answers which reflected teachers' opinions on different topics. Moreover, as my investigation represents a particular situation and the data collected are certainly limited, I could draw conclusions only according to my own experience, interpreting the results on the basis of what I could observe in class.

My research was conducted at the private school “Istituto Don Bosco” in Padua where I chose a class of second year students (15 female and 11 male) aged between 15 and 17, who first completed a reading comprehension task and then filled in a questionnaire about language learning strategies for reading in English. The questionnaire was based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) for speakers of other languages developed by Rebecca Oxford (1990) and was made up of two parts, one related to reading for comprehension and the other one to learning English. Each part contained twelve statements and students were asked to decide which response described best their experience as English learners. There were five responses among which students could choose: 1) Never or almost never true for me; 2) Usually not true for me; 3) Somewhat true for me; 4) Usually true for me; 5) Always or almost always true for me. The answers had to be recorded on a separate worksheet so that in the end I could easily access the data; moreover, in order to facilitate students’ comprehension of the questionnaire I decided to translate it into Italian. The final section of this investigation included some questions about background information of students, which helped me understand better their characteristics both as individual English learners and as a class.

In order to encourage students to focus on their habits as readers and language learners I decided to ask them first to read the following text (level B1) and then asked them to answer true/false questions¹ before completing the questionnaire:

¹ The reading test is available at http://www.examenglish.com/PET/pet_reading3.htm (last accessed on 29th April 2013).

READING COMPREHENSION TEST

Read the following text.

Explore the Villages around Hartbridge

Many visitors come to Hartbridge to see the wonderful art galleries and museums, the beautiful buildings and the fantastic parks. Few people go outside the city, and so they miss out on experiencing the scenery and the fascinating history of this beautiful area. This brochure will tell you what you can see if you take a short bus ride out of the city.

Camberwell

The historic village of Camberwell was once the home of the wealthy Hugo family. They lived in a huge country house, Camberwell Court, and owned all the land in the area. The family sold their house in the 1940s, and it is now open to the public. You can spend a whole day walking around the house and gardens. There is a small exhibition about the family, a children's play area, a gift shop and a restaurant. But the village of Camberwell is also worth a visit. There are some beautiful cottages with well kept gardens, and there is a small church which dates back to the eleventh century. To get to Camberwell, take Bus 46 from the Bus station. Buses leave every two hours.

Hidcot

Hidcot is an attractive village situated on the River Owell. Wildlife lovers should visit the Nature Park to the south of the village, where there are large numbers of rare birds and flowers. However, you will probably see plenty of wildlife from the bridge in the village centre! In Hidcot, you can take a two-hour river cruise - a great way to see the countryside and learn about the local wildlife from a guide. If you prefer to explore the river by yourself, it's well worth walking one and a half miles along the river to the pub 'The Boat' which cannot be reached by road. Here, you can hire small boats and explore the river at your leisure. To get to Hidcot, take Bus 7A to Reeford. Hidcot is half way between Hartbridge and Reeford.

Tatterbridge

The beautiful village of Tatterbridge was home to the children's writer Jane Potter, whose stories of Benjamin Bear are loved by adults and children around the world. Jane Potter's home is now a museum and tea shop, and is well worth a visit just for its wonderful gardens. It also has a gift shop where you can buy souvenirs and books. Tatterbridge has a number of interesting shops including an excellent cake shop, and 'Wendy's Giftshop' where you can find lots of unusual gifts made by hand by local artists. Lovers of Jane Potter's books should also walk to the Green Valley woods, which have not changed since Jane Potter wrote her stories there one hundred years ago.

To get to Tatterbridge, take Bus 4 from outside the cinema. It takes about 40 minutes to get there.

Moordale

This old industrial village is the highest village in the area. Here in the hills, coal was found in the late eighteenth century, and people came here in great numbers to take it out of the ground and transport it to the nearby towns. Many industries grew up in the area, including a paper factory and a cotton factory. The

industries all closed down in the nineteenth century, and since then Moordale has gone back to being a quiet farming village. However, if you walk from the village centre up the steep hill to the north, you can still see the paths where horses used to carry the coal. There is a four mile walk around the village which has some amazing views, but walkers are must be careful as the path is steep in places and they could slip. To get to Moordale, take Bus 7A to Reeford, and then take the number 38 bus to Moordale.

Read the following statements about the text and decide if they are true or false.

- | | | |
|---|----------|----------|
| 1. It is unusual for visitors to visit the villages near Hartbridge. | T | F |
| 2. The Hugo family allows people to visit their current home. | T | F |
| 3. The leaflet advises visitors not to spend all day at Camberwell Court. | T | F |
| 4. You can hire small boats from the bridge in Hidcot. | T | F |
| 5. You can take the bus directly to 'The Boat' pub near Hidcot. | T | F |
| 6. The leaflet says that the gardens are the best part of Jane Potter's home. | T | F |
| 7. Jane Potter wrote her books in the Green Valley woods. | T | F |
| 8. You can visit the paper factory and the cotton factory in Moordale. | T | F |
| 9. You will see horses on farms as you walk around Moordale. | T | F |
| 10. You can get to all four villages directly from Hartbridge. | T | F |

All students managed to complete the reading task in 20 minutes and as soon as they had finished it I gave them the following questionnaire, explaining the instructions in Italian:

QUESTIONARIO SULLE STRATEGIE DI APPRENDIMENTO PER LA LETTURA IN INGLESE

Questo questionario è rivolto a studenti di inglese come lingua straniera. Troverai delle affermazioni riguardo lo studio e la lettura in inglese. Per favore leggi ogni affermazione e scegli la risposta (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) in base a ciò che si addice di più alla tua esperienza.

1. Mai o quasi mai vero per me
2. Solitamente non vero per me
3. In qualche modo vero per me
4. Solitamente vero per me
5. Sempre o quasi sempre vero per me

MAI O QUASI MAI VERO PER ME significa che l'affermazione è molto raramente vera per me.

SOLITAMENTE NON VERO PER ME significa che l'affermazione è vera meno della metà delle volte.

IN QUALCHE MODO VERO PER ME significa che l'affermazione è vera per te circa la metà delle volte.

SOLITAMENTE VERO PER ME significa che l'affermazione è vera più della metà delle volte.

SEMPRE O QUASI SEMPRE VERO PER ME significa che l'affermazione è vera per te quasi sempre.

Rispondi in base a quanto meglio l'affermazione ti descrive. Non rispondere come pensi dovresti essere o come altre persone pensano tu debba essere. Non ci sono risposte giuste o sbagliate a queste affermazioni.

Scrivi le risposte sul foglio di lavoro (pagina 3). Lavora il più veloce possibile senza distrarti. Se hai qualche domanda non esitare a chiedere.

Grazie e buon lavoro!

PART A: leggere per comprendere.

1. Leggo il titolo di un testo.
2. Penso a relazioni tra ciò che conosco già e nuove cose che leggo in inglese.
3. Cerco di prevedere cosa sto per leggere.
4. Leggo le domande di comprensione prima di leggere un testo.
5. Sottolineo informazioni importanti nel testo.
6. Prendo appunti mentre leggo.
7. Rileggo il testo più volte.
8. Prima scorro un brano in inglese (leggo velocemente) poi torno indietro e leggo attentamente.
9. Guardo velocemente un testo per cercare le idee principali.
10. Cerco di non tradurre parola per parola.
11. Faccio delle ipotesi sul significato di parole sconosciute.
12. Il contesto mi aiuta a capire parti del testo più difficili.

PART B: studiare inglese.

1. Ripasso le lezioni di inglese.
2. Cerco di trovare più modi possibili per usare la lingua inglese.
3. Noto i miei errori in inglese e li uso per migliorare.
4. Presto attenzione quando qualcuno parla in inglese.
5. Cerco di trovare dei modi per essere uno studente di inglese migliore.
6. Pianifico i miei impegni per avere abbastanza tempo per studiare inglese.
7. Cerco opportunità per leggere il più possibile in inglese.
8. Ho dei chiari obiettivi per migliorare le mie abilità in inglese.
9. Rifletto sui miei progressi nello studio dell'inglese.
10. Pratico l'inglese con altri studenti.
11. Faccio domande in inglese.
12. Cerco di imparare la cultura di parlanti in inglese.

FOGLIO DI LAVORO

Segna la risposta (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) per ogni affermazione accanto al numero corrispondente.

1. Mai o quasi mai vero per me
2. Solitamente non vero per me
3. In qualche modo vero per me
4. Solitamente vero per me
5. Sempre o quasi sempre vero per me

PART A

1. ____

2. ____

3. ____

4. ____

5. ____

6. ____

7. ____

8. ____

9. ____

10. ____

11. ____

12. ____

PART B

1. ____

2. ____

3. ____

4. ____

5. ____

6. ____

7. ____

8. ____

9. ____

10. ____

11. ____

12. ____

INFORMAZIONI GENERALI

- Et : _____
- Lingua madre: _____
- Lingue che conosci:

- Da quanto tempo studi inglese?

- Come valuteresti la tua conoscenza generale dell' inglese in confronto a quella dei tuoi compagni di classe?
Eccellente Buona Sufficiente Scarsa
- Quanto   importante per te diventare competente in inglese?
Molto importante Importante Non importante
- Ti piace imparare l'inglese? SI NO
- Ti piace leggere in inglese? SI NO
- Leggi testi in inglese al di fuori della scuola? SI NO
Se s , quali tipi di testi leggi?
 - libri;
 - riviste;
 - giornali;
 - testi di canzoni;
 - siti internet;
 - social networks;
 - altro:

- Sai cosa sono le "strategie di apprendimento"? SI NO
- La tua insegnante di inglese ha mai parlato di "strategie di apprendimento"? SI NO

As far as teachers are concerned, I prepared the following questionnaire about the teaching of reading in English and the role of learning strategy instruction, which was given to all five secondary school teachers:

TEACHING READING IN ENGLISH AND THE ROLE OF LEARNING STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

Dear teacher,

My name is Gloria Burchiellaro and I am writing my final thesis to graduate in *Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane* at the University of Padua. Since I would like to become an English teacher, I am conducting a study about the teaching of reading in English as a Foreign Language at secondary school, focusing in particular on the role of learning strategies. The following questionnaire is meant to collect information about your experiences as an English teacher at secondary school and your answers will be very important for my research. As the results of this study will remain confidential, I ask you to be as honest as possible in your answers; do not hesitate to contact me with any comments.

The questionnaire is made up of 35 questions, some of which are open-ended, and others which are multiple choice; you will also find questions followed by a 5-level scale which refers either to your agreement on a statement or to the frequency of occurrence. Please, choose the options which best reflect your opinion. I really appreciate your contribution and the time you spend to share your experiences with me.

Thank you, and I hope you will enjoy the questionnaire.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

Personal background

1. How long have you been teaching English to secondary school students (aged 14-19)?

2. Have you attended any training courses which dealt with reading instruction? YES NO

If so, when and where?

3. Have you attended any training courses about learning strategies? YES NO

If so, when and where?

4. What kinds of texts do you read yourself in English outside school?

Reading instruction

5. Which of these skills do you focus on most during your English lessons? Please number them in order of importance from 1=most to 4=least.

___ Listening ___ Reading ___ Writing ___ Speaking

6. Which do you think are the most important goals of reading activities in class? Please number them in order of importance from 1=very important to 4=least important.

___ learning new vocabulary;

___ learning new grammatical structures;

___ practising reading skills;

___ learning to analyse a text.

7. Some English lessons should be exclusively devoted to the teaching of reading comprehension.

Strongly agree (SA) - Agree (A) - Neither Agree nor disagree (N) - Disagree (D) - Strongly disagree (SD)

Methods

8. How many hours a week do you teach English to a single class?

9. How often do you carry out reading activities with your students?

every lesson

once a week

once or twice a month

never or almost never

10. Teachers should read new English texts aloud to the class.

Very frequently (VF) - Frequently (F) - Occasionally (O) - Rarely (R) - Never (N)

11. Students should read aloud to the whole class. VF F O R N

12. Students should read silently on their own. VF F O R N

13. English course books present sufficient reading materials. VF F O R N

14. Teachers should present students with authentic English texts. VF F O R N

15. Students should be encouraged to translate into Italian what they have read. VF F O R N

16. Students should be encouraged to read extensively outside the classroom.

Strongly agree (SA) - Agree (A) - Neither Agree nor disagree (N) - Disagree (D) - Strongly disagree (SD)

17. Students should be encouraged to read for pleasure. SA A N D SD

18. My students are aware of their reading abilities. SA A N D SD

19. After students have read something, how often do you ask them to:

Very frequently (VF) - Frequently (F) - Occasionally (O) - Rarely (R) - Never (N)

a) answer reading comprehension questions? VF F O R N

b) write something about or in response to what they have read? VF F O R N

- c) answer oral questions about or orally summarize what they have read? VF F O R N
- d) talk with each other about what they have read? VF F O R N
- e) do exercises which focus on vocabulary or grammar rules? VF F O R N

Learning strategies for reading

20. Reading comprehension can be improved by using learning strategies.

Strongly agree (SA) - Agree (A) - Neither Agree nor disagree (N) - Disagree (D) - Strongly disagree (SD)

21. Teachers should discuss strategies for reading with students. SA A N D SD

22. Strategy instruction should be taught explicitly. SA A N D SD

23. Strategy instruction should be integrated into English lessons. SA A N D SD

24. Teaching text analysis in English can help students improve their reading skills.

SA A N D SD

25. My students use reading strategies. SA A N D SD

26. My students are aware of their use of reading strategies. SA A N D SD

27. Working in pairs or in small groups is a good way to improve reading comprehension among students.

SA A N D SD

28. Have you ever devoted a whole lesson to reading strategies? YES NO

If so, what strategies did you present to the class?

29. Does your English syllabus include strategy instruction for language learning? YES NO

If not, do you think it would be useful to include it? YES NO

Why? / Why not?

30. Please select the strategies you usually teach your students:

- reading the title of a text;
- trying to predict what they are going to read;
- reading comprehension questions before reading the text.
- activating background knowledge before and while reading;
- underlining important information in the text;
- taking notes while reading;
- re-reading the text various times;
- skimming a text and then reading it carefully;

- scanning a text to look for the main ideas;
- trying not to translate word-for-word;
- guessing unfamiliar words;
- using the context to understand difficult passages.

Reading assessment

31. Do you think it is important to assess reading proficiency in English? YES NO

Why? / Why not?

32. How often do you assess reading comprehension?

- every lesson
- once a week
- once or twice a month
- never or almost never

33. Which of the following standardized reading assessment task formats do you use to assess reading?

- cloze;
- gap-filling formats (rational cloze formats);
- C-tests (retaining initial letters of words removed);
- cloze elide (removing extra word);
- text segment ordering;
- text gap;
- choosing from a “heading bank” for identified paragraphs;
- multiple-choice;
- sentence completion;
- matching (and multiple matching) techniques;
- classification into groups;
- dichotomous items (T / F / not stated, Y / N);
- editing;
- short answer;
- free recall;
- summary;
- information transfer (graphs, tables, flow charts, outlines, maps);
- project performance;

- skimming;
- scanning.

34. What are the goals of assessing reading in your class?

- to assign marks;
- to modify my teaching methods;
- to inform parents of students' progress;
- to identify students with reading difficulties;
- other (please state):

35. How frequently do you assess reading in English classroom tests?

Very frequently - Frequently - Occasionally - Rarely - Never

The questionnaire is complete. Thank you for the thought, time and effort you have put into completing it.

For any further comments or information you can contact me:

GLORIA BURCHIELLARO **mobile phone:** 3492559632 **e-mail:** gloria.burchiellaro@virgilio.it

Considering the amount of data collected, it is possible to draw conclusions only about this particular situation, whether it reflects a generalized tendency of all Italian schools or not. In any case, useful information about the teaching of reading and strategy instruction can be derived from the results and could be used in the future to improve the English syllabus and related teaching methods. In this sense, this kind of research could be defined as “action research”, because it directly derives from my involvement in a real classroom environment as “participant observer” and aims at identifying particular aspects of the teaching of English which seem to be neglected, such as explicit strategy instruction for reading. As a consequence, by questioning students and teachers I have not only been able to observe and describe the dynamics of English teaching in secondary school, but I have also found the opportunity to make teachers reflect on possible

enhancements or specific interventions to adapt their teaching methods, especially as far as reading comprehension is concerned.

3.3 Findings

First of all I will discuss the results of the students' questionnaire, looking into each statement in order to investigate the average frequency of use of specific learning strategies; secondly I will analyse teachers' answers, focusing in particular on common and strongly differing opinions; finally, I will try to relate the students' results with those of the teachers to realize whether their perspectives on teaching and learning how to read are similar or at least go in the same direction.

3.3.1 Students' results

In the table below I have reported the average frequency of use of strategies (rounded up and down to one decimal place) for reading and learning English as stated by students. First, in order to calculate the average related to each strategy I have used Excel to create a table where I collected all the students' responses (from 1 to 5). Then, following Oxford's (1990: 300) key to understanding averages I have highlighted the strategies which have an high average frequency of use - over 3.5 -, which means that they are usually, always or almost always used. We can see that reading the title of a text and using the context to understand difficult passages are the most frequently used strategies adopted by students when reading in English, followed by other three highly frequent strategic behaviours: re-reading the text various times, guessing unfamiliar words and trying not to translate word-for-word. On the other hand, taking notes while reading is felt to be the least used strategy to achieve comprehension, probably because it

is more often related to oral or written activities which need faster retrieval of information from a text.

PART A: leggere per comprendere.	
1. Leggo il titolo di un testo.	4.3
2. Penso a relazioni tra ciò che conosco già e nuove cose che leggo in inglese.	3.1
3. Cerco di prevedere cosa sto per leggere.	2.7
4. Leggo le domande di comprensione prima di leggere un testo.	3.4
5. Sottolineo informazioni importanti nel testo.	2.7
6. Prendo appunti mentre leggo.	1.9
7. Rileggo il testo più volte.	3.8
8. Prima scorro un brano in inglese (leggo velocemente) poi torno indietro e leggo attentamente.	2.8
9. Guardo velocemente un testo per cercare le idee principali.	2.2
10. Cerco di non tradurre parola per parola.	3.7
11. Faccio delle ipotesi sul significato di parole sconosciute.	3.8
12. Il contesto mi aiuta a capire parti del testo più difficili.	4.4

Going on to the second part of the questionnaire, five strategies seem to be frequently chosen by students to improve their language learning: paying attention when someone is speaking in English; reviewing English lessons; trying to find out how to be a better learner of English; trying to find as many ways as I can to use my English; noticing my English mistakes and using that information to help me do better. Considering the high frequency of use of these strategies, it could be argued that these students have a certain awareness of their progress as language learners and try to improve their skills by paying attention to their performances; nevertheless, they seem to prefer a “solitary” kind of learning, because practising English with other students is reported as the least used strategy. This last result could depend on the fact that teachers may not encourage them to

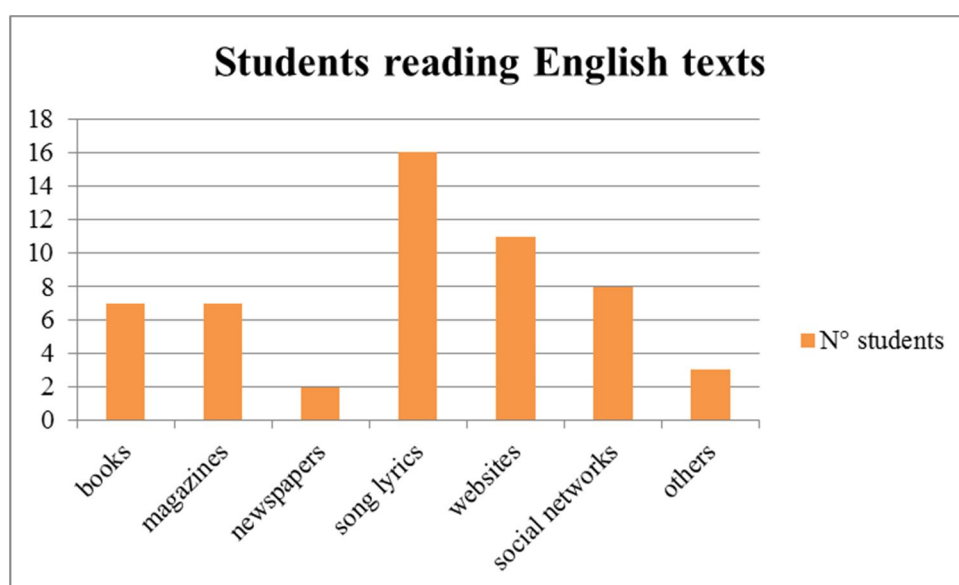
work in pairs or groups, which is instead usually recommended as a good social strategy to enhance students' participation and motivation (see 2.3.1).

PART B: studiare inglese.	
1. Ripasso le lezioni di inglese.	3.9
2. Cerco di trovare più modi possibili per usare la lingua inglese.	3.7
3. Noto i miei errori in inglese e li uso per migliorare.	3.6
4. Presto attenzione quando qualcuno parla in inglese.	4.3
5. Cerco di trovare dei modi per essere uno studente di inglese migliore.	3.9
6. Pianifico i miei impegni per avere abbastanza tempo per studiare inglese.	2.7
7. Cerco opportunità per leggere il più possibile in inglese.	3
8. Ho dei chiari obiettivi per migliorare le mie abilità in inglese.	3.1
9. Rifletto sui miei progressi nello studio dell'inglese.	3.3
10. Pratico l'inglese con altri studenti.	2.6
11. Faccio domande in inglese.	3.3
12. Cerco di imparare la cultura di parlanti in inglese.	3.1

In general, it could be concluded that the students at this secondary school have a strategic attitude towards learning and reading in English and are in a way aware of their habits as language learners. However, it must also be noted that all of them report having been studying English for ten or more years, which means that they have already developed a certain confidence with a foreign language and the mechanisms of learning. Moreover, these students attend a high school focusing on foreign languages, which means that they might be expected to have an aptitude for learning English and should also be more motivated to become proficient.

If we look at their background information, most of the students think they have a good proficiency in English as compared with other students, two of them feel they are excellent, while the rest rate their competence as fair. In addition, for all students it is

important or very important to become proficient in English and they all state they enjoy learning the language, except for one student. Five students do not like reading in English, although three of them admit reading English texts outside school, such as books, song lyrics, websites and social networks. In the diagram below we can see that many students prefer reading song lyrics, website and social networks, probably because they are more interested in these kinds of texts, which are widespread and especially attract young people.



Finally, only four students declare not to know what learning strategies are, while all the others (except for one student) confirm that their English teacher has spoken about learning strategies in class. Considering these results, the students in this class seem to have mostly the same opinions about the learning and reading of English, probably because they have had the same experiences with the language during their school career. The data would certainly be different if we considered other schools where the teaching of English has less importance in favour of other subjects or students have a very

difference background and confidence with foreign languages. It is now time to look into teachers' questionnaires to find more information about the role of reading and strategy instruction in English.

3.3.2 Teachers' results

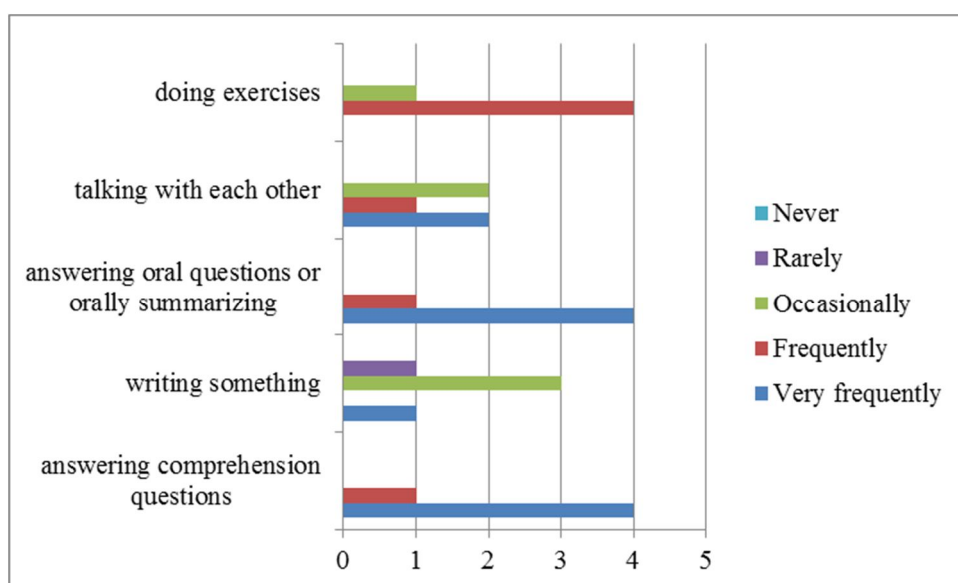
In the school I chose for my research there are five English teachers who work with secondary school students and they all agreed to complete the questionnaire about the teaching of reading. The majority of these teachers have been teaching English to secondary school students (aged 14-19) for more than ten years, while one of them has been working only for three years. The first questions I asked them were about their personal background and experience as English teachers, because I was particularly interested in understanding what kinds of training courses they had attended: two teachers claim to have taken part in courses about reading instruction and learning strategies, another two teachers have received training only about learning strategies, and one teacher has never attended any of these courses. From these answers we can already see that reading instruction is not always present in training courses for teachers or it may have only a marginal role in comparison with other aspects of language teaching. The last personal question - "What kinds of texts do you read yourself in English outside school?" -, which aimed at investigating the nature of these teachers as readers, revealed that they are all used to reading novels, magazines, short stories or books about teaching methods and techniques in English.

The next section of the questionnaire was about the importance of reading instruction among other language skills and their development during English lessons. I asked teachers to number "listening", "reading", "writing" and "speaking" in order of

importance and it emerged that “speaking” is the most important skill on which they focus during their classes, while “reading” is listed by three teachers only in third and fourth place. This opinion is also reflected in the following question about the most important goals of reading activities, since teachers seem to use reading in class as a way of making students learn new vocabulary and grammatical structures rather than practise reading skills and learn to analyse a text. In effect, only two teachers agree on the statement that some English lessons should be exclusively devoted to the teaching of reading comprehension, while one teacher disagrees and the other two neither agree nor disagree.

After having considered the theoretical principles on which teachers base their teaching methods, it is now important to clarify what happens in practice during English lessons. Depending on the year of school, English teachers see their students three to four hours a week, except for one teacher who has only one hour of conversation, and they declare that they carry out reading activities with their students either every lesson (2) or once a week (2) or once or twice a month (1). In this sense, most teachers aim to include reading instruction at least every week in their syllabus, although, as has been argued before, the purposes for presenting such activities may be very different from strictly improving comprehension abilities. Going on with other teaching habits, three teachers think that they should read new English texts aloud to the class frequently or very frequently, while the other two believe that it should be done only occasionally. On the other hand, they all agree that students should frequently or very frequently read aloud to the whole class and only occasionally read silently on their own. As far as reading materials are concerned, three teachers find sufficient resources in English course books, while the other two only rarely. Moreover, teachers agree that authentic English texts

should be presented to students very frequently, as has already been demonstrated by many researchers (see 1.4.1). When reading in a foreign language, students may tend to translate the text into Italian to facilitate comprehension, but four teachers believe that they should be rarely or occasionally encouraged to do so. On the contrary, almost all teachers agree or strongly agree on the fact that students should be encouraged to read extensively outside the classroom and especially to read for pleasure. It is, in fact, true for every language that the more one reads, the better a reader one can become. However, language learners may not be completely aware of their reading abilities and only two teachers notice this awareness in their students. The last question about teaching methods for reading aimed at making teachers reflect on how often their students accomplish certain tasks after having read something. It turned out that teachers most frequently ask students to answer reading comprehension questions and to answer oral questions about or orally summarize what they have read. Other frequent post-reading activities are doing exercises which focus on vocabulary or grammar rules and talking with each other about what they have read, while on average teachers make students write something about or in response to what they have read only occasionally.



The other important focus of my study deals with the role of learning strategies for reading and aims at investigating whether teachers of secondary school integrate strategy instruction into their English lessons. First of all, all teachers agree on the usefulness of learning strategies to improve reading comprehension and, except for one of them, they also believe that strategies for reading should be discussed with students. Moreover, three teachers are in favour of providing strategy instruction explicitly, while the other two neither agree nor disagree on this kind of approach. In addition, the majority of teachers think that strategy instruction should be integrated into English lessons, which means that students should be encouraged to know and use particular strategies while they are learning the language. Teaching text analysis in English is an important aspect for four teachers and only one disagrees on its value as helpful means to make students improve their reading skills. When teachers are asked whether their students use reading strategies or not, two of them agree, two neither agree nor disagree and the last one disagrees, showing that it is not completely clear at what degree secondary school learners can be said to be good strategic readers. Further in this chapter I will compare students' reports on their use of learning strategies with teachers' perspectives on the same topic. The idea of the good language learner relates also to awareness of one's own progress and competence, which is characteristic of autonomous learners, as has been mentioned in Chapter 2 (see 2.1). Nevertheless, the majority of teachers cannot clearly state that their students are aware of their use of reading strategies, probably because such approaches are more often evident during other kinds of activities aimed at developing different language skills. What is sure, instead, is the fact that working in pairs or in small groups is felt by teachers as a good way to improve reading comprehension among students.

Going back to strategy instruction, four teachers claim to have devoted a whole lesson to reading strategies and it also seems that the teaching of learning strategies is in fact included in their English syllabus. The next question presented teachers with a series of strategies for reading from which they had to choose those which they usually teach their students; in the table below I have collected all the answers.

STRATEGIES TAUGHT BY TEACHERS					
	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5
1. reading the title of a text	X	X	X		X
2. trying to predict what they are going to read	X	X	X	X	X
3. reading comprehension questions before reading the text		X			
4. activating background knowledge before and while reading	X		X	X	
5. underlining important information in the text			X		
6. taking notes while reading		X	X	X	
7. re-reading the text various times	X				
8. skimming a text and then reading it carefully		X			X
9. scanning a text to look for the main ideas	X	X			X
10. trying not to translate word-for-word	X		X	X	
11. guessing unfamiliar words		X	X	X	X
12. using the context to understand difficult passages	X		X	X	

As we can see, there is one strategy which is usually taught by all teachers - “trying to predict what they [students] are going to read” -, followed by another two strategies which are chosen by four teachers, “reading the title of a text” and “guessing unfamiliar words”. On the other hand, the least taught strategies are “reading comprehension questions before reading the text” and “underlining important information in the text”, which are selected only by one teacher. These represent some of the most important strategies suggested by researchers in the field, but teachers may certainly decide to teach other strategies which are not listed in the question.

The last part of my questionnaire is constituted by some questions about reading assessment, which usually represents the last step in the teaching of reading

comprehension. I first asked teachers whether assessing reading proficiency in English is important and their responses were all positive; moreover, some teachers wrote the following statements to explain why it is so important for them:

“I think it will be useful for any future job which implies the knowledge of English.”

“I consider reading comprehension an essential part of the English learning process as they (students) are very likely to get in touch with written texts in their future both in their future jobs and tourism, therefore it’s very important for them to be able to understand what they are reading.”

“To improve the language (intonation, word order).”

“But not so essential as speaking.”

Reading teachers’ opinions we can understand that the assessment of reading comprehension can have an important role especially in relation to the future needs of students who will encounter English texts during their lives. Furthermore, one teacher believes that reading assessment can help students improve the language, probably because she thinks that by evaluating read-aloud performances teachers are able to correct intonation and to highlight specific word constructions in English. Even though reading assessment is considered important, the last teacher points out that it may not be so essential as speaking assessment, confirming the common idea - already expressed by all teachers previously in the questionnaire - that the development of speaking skills should be placed in first place in the teaching of English. Looking at their particular habits in class, teachers claim to assess reading comprehension once or twice a month, except for

one teacher who does this never or almost never. In the table below I show which standardized reading assessment task formats² teachers prefer to use to assess reading:

STANDARDIZED READING ASSESSMENT TASK FORMATS					
	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5
1. cloze	X	X			
2. gap-filling formats (rational cloze formats)	X				
3. C-tests (retaining initial letters of words removed)					
4. cloze elide (removing extra word)					
5. text segment ordering					X
6. text gap			X	X	
7. choosing from a "heading bank" for identified paragraphs	X		X	X	X
8. multiple-choice	X	X			
9. sentence completion			X	X	
10. matching (and multiple matching) techniques	X				
11. classification into groups					
12. dichotomous items (T / F / not stated, Y / N)	X				X
13. editing					
14. short answer		X	X	X	
15. free recall					
16. summary	X		X	X	X
17. information transfer (graphs, tables, flow charts, outlines, maps)	X				
18. project performance					
19. skimming		X			X
20. scanning	X	X			X

Most teachers seem to use in particular two formats, choosing from "heading bank" for identified paragraphs and summary, followed by other two commonly used reading tasks, short answer and scanning. On the whole, it can be argued that teachers do not exploit many of the possible ways to assess reading comprehension and this may lead to the conclusion that since reading activities are often carried out as an opportunity to learn the language rather than understanding the text, comprehension and its assessment are not always considered as crucial as other aspects of the teaching process. Another point to take into consideration are the goals of assessing reading which are set by teachers. In the questionnaire I suggested four purposes for reading assessment: to assign marks, to

² The list was taken from Grabe (2009: 359).

modify my teaching methods, to inform parents of students' progress and to identify students with reading difficulties. The goal which was chosen by most teachers is the last one, while grading students and modifying teaching methods were selected only by two teachers. The fifth teacher states the following as her goal: *“to make students get used to reading and understanding texts by themselves or at the certification exams”*. However, it must be said that only one teacher affirms that she assesses reading in English classroom tests frequently, while all the others do this rarely or even never. This means again that for the majority of teachers reading comprehension can be taught together with other language skills, without the need to assess students' reading proficiency regularly.

Finally I would like to compare the frequency of the use of learning strategies for reading comprehension reported by students with the strategies taught by teachers. In two cases we have a correspondence of strategy choice between the two groups, that is “reading the title of a text” and “guessing unfamiliar words”; then most teachers report to teach the strategies of “trying not to translate word-for-word” and “using the context to understand difficult passages”, which are also frequently used by students; in the end, “re-reading the text various times” has a high frequency of use on the part of students, but it is taught by only one teacher. It is remarkable to notice that the one strategy which all teachers claim to teach - “trying to predict what they [students] are going to read” - is usually not employed by students to achieve reading comprehension. Considering the fact that only one teacher teaches English to the class chosen for my research, these conclusions are only indicative of this particular school and do not necessarily represent the rule. Nevertheless, I believe that this kind of investigation could help teachers understand better their students' behaviours as language learners and readers, improve

their methods and find new ways of enhancing comprehension through explicit strategy instruction.

CONCLUSION

When I started researching the topic of my thesis I had no idea how wide and intricate the view on the teaching of reading in English as a foreign language was. My experience as a student led me to think that the greatest difficulties resided in the text itself, in the kind of language used, in the syntax and in the content. What I did not realize was that the same text would be just a piece of paper without a reader trying to make sense of it. Thus, it became clear that before concentrating on the object I first had to understand the nature of the subject of a reading activity and, in my particular case, the nature of English learners.

Language acquisition has been fascinating many researchers throughout the centuries, most probably because this characteristic distinguishes us from any other animal species on earth, and a great number of theories have been developed which attempt to solve the ‘mysteries’ of the brain functioning. Being able to understand how people acquire a new language would mean creating more effective teaching methods; unfortunately, things are not as simple as they seem and the only certainty we have is that each person has their own personal way of achieving competence. Many variables affect the learning process, such as age, gender, personality, beliefs, motivation and so on, and

so it has been argued that one successful approach which teachers could adopt is a learner-centred method of teaching. In this way, students should be the protagonists of English lessons and teachers should act not merely as instructors but instead as guides, advisers, consultants who constantly assist their pupils. The fact that this is no easy task is reflected in the usual teaching approach of Italian schools, as I could observe during my research. English classes are shaped around a coursebook and the teacher presents the content while students follow silently; then the teacher can ask some questions to verify whether the lesson has been understood; finally, students are given some exercises in order to practice new knowledge by themselves at home. In this way, students' participation is very marginal and those who have more difficulties in learning might be left out.

The aim of this work was to shed light on the current methods adopted by Italian teachers to teach English reading and to provide some possible suggestions for improving the teaching of this important skill which is often neglected in favour of other language competences such as speaking and writing. In particular, I believe that the introduction of proper strategy instruction could help students understand better the mechanisms of reading comprehension and encourage them to become more independent in the learning process. Furthermore, the results of my investigation have shown that secondary school students employ certain strategies while accomplishing reading tasks, but they are only partially aware of them. As a consequence, if teachers managed to focus their attention on specific reading skills and to help students develop self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, all of them could benefit from an enhanced approach to language acquisition which could lead to faster and better results.

By way of conclusion, there are many useful means which could be adopted to improve the teaching of reading in English as a foreign language in Italian secondary schools, such as the introduction of language learning strategy instruction. However, the first step which should be taken by all instructors should be that of becoming aware of the learners they have to deal with, in order to plan their teaching according to their specific needs and aptitudes. Although there is no best method which is valid for all students of English, we should be encouraged to look for the best possible approach to help them become successful readers.

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