

The sunset approach towards reading

by Maiza Fatureto

How many times in your English lessons have you heard teenage students say: *'Teacher, I don't like reading !!!'* You might have thought *'Gosh, what am I going to do? There are so many texts in their coursebook. Even worse, if they don't like reading, how will they answer the comprehension questions that follow the texts? How will they make sense of new vocabulary?'* Well, but then you think: *'How about talking to other people in the area and checking what their feelings are?'* There you go. In an effort to get to grips with this situation, you talk to their Portuguese teachers or History teachers and their answers are quite unanimous: *'They hate reading. They never seem to be interested in reading the texts we assign them. The only way of getting them engaged in the topic of the unit is when we bring videos or extra visual materials about places, things or people they show some interest in. But then, it is impossible to offer only what they like!'*

This scene reminds me of a film called Mr. Holland 's Opus with Richard Dreyfuss. Mr. Holland teaches music in a regular school. Just like all of us, he has students who do well in class and others who don't seem to make much progress. One day a teenage girl enters his room and says she's giving up the clarinet.

Girl: I'm giving up the clarinet.

Mr. Holland: Is it any fun?

Girl: No but I wanted it to be.

Mr. Holland: Do me a favor.

Girl: Yes.

Mr. Holland: Listen to this song. Do you like it?

Girl: Yes.

Mr. Holland: Why?

Girl: I don't know.

Mr. Holland: Yes, you do.

Girl: It's fun.

Mr. Holland: Yes, it's fun. Although they play the same four chords over and over again, I like it because it's fun. Music is supposed to be fun. It's not about notes on the page. It's about heart and feelings and moving people ...I can teach you notes on the page. I can't teach you the other stuff ...

Food for thought ... How does this scene relate to our daily practice of teaching reading? Maybe we should start reflecting about what reading is. How can we define reading? Does it have any similarity with reading *the notes on the page*? Reading is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text. Having said that, and taking into consideration that both readers and texts are different, the interaction is obviously different.

Interaction. More questions. Actually, once we start our reflective journey, questions are a common place. So, what is the nature of interaction? Basically interaction

exists when there is interest. Does it mean that when students are not interested in a text, there will be no interaction and, as a consequence, no reading will take place?

My dear friend Tereza Sekiya once told me that when we can't change something, we should at least try changing the way we approach it. This sounds smart and relevant to our practice, doesn't it? Perhaps we should think of applying this approach when we look at the page or at the text of the book we use and try to expand possibilities of exploring the reading. More question marks spring to mind, our most fertile soil for growing them. How can I approach this text so as to engage my students? If I engage them in a sequence of steps ... What kind of steps? How many steps?

One day we come across some reference books for teachers that teach reading and what a relief we feel!

We can't help interacting with such books. They are relevant to us and our teaching practice. We realize that the more we read the more we understand it. It dawns on us that now we understand students' feelings about reading. And again the key word in this process seems to be **interaction** ...

We learn that teachers can facilitate interactions with texts in three different phases:

The **pre-reading/motivational phase**: the moment that precedes the reading of the text. This is when teachers:

1. Engage students through kinesthetic, visual or auditory cues.
2. Elicit students' previous knowledge on the topic.
3. Check students' expectations about the topic.
4. Help students anticipate and predict the context of the passage.

The **while reading phase** refers to the moments when readers have reasons for reading the text. Such reasons are determined by the tasks which signpost the objectives they have to achieve. The point is having the students resort to reading the passage at least three times so that each time they read it they have a purpose in mind. Students may read the passage to:

1. Confirm predictions.
2. Skim the text to have a general idea about it.
3. Scan the text to look for specific information.
4. Guess the meaning of unknown words.
5. Make inferences.
6. Understand text organization.
7. Understand figurative language.
8. Distinguish fact from opinion.
9. Recognize tone, etc.

The **post reading phase** makes room for more interactions. In this phase students are given opportunities to relate what they read to their personal lives. Besides, they can have interactions with their peers as to the value the text has added to them as human beings. Moreover, they can even discuss about the way they

managed to interact with the passage, what posed more difficulties, what helped them understand unknown words, how they felt about answering comprehension questions, etc.

Mr. Holland: Do me a favor. Take the clarinet and sit down.

(Teacher takes away the 'notes on the page'. She hesitates but ...)

Mr. Holland: No, don't worry. You don't need it.

Girl: Why?

Mr. Holland: You already know it

(She tries playing twice and fails)

Mr. Holland: When you look in the mirror, what do you like most about yourself?

Girl: My hair.

Mr. Holland: Why?

Girl: My father says it reminds him of the sunset.

(Mr. Holland asks her to close her eyes)

Mr. Holland: Play the sunset.

(To much of her surprise, she plays it beautifully)

Mr. Holland: Don't stop it.

Wrapping things up, as teachers we have to bear in mind that all things are linked. This film conveys a message that fits our context too. From the moment you started interacting with this text, you started figuring out its meaning, relevance and application in real classes. From now on, when you hear your colleagues complain about their students who don't like reading or if your learners come up with a negative response towards reading, remember: You can implement the **sunset approach!** Oh, and one more thing: Don't stop it!