

Inglês Instrumental: Using Strategies to Teach English as a Foreign Language

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Although its position seems secure in the majority of Brazilian undergraduate first-year courses of different backgrounds and in technical schools at high-school level, the teaching-learning process of *inglês instrumental* has often been the focus of unfounded criticism indicating that a lot of misunderstanding still prevails. A point to make at the outset is that this process is firmly grounded on sound theoretical and applied research, mainly from the perspectives of psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, reading theories, and cognitive science (Bradsford & Johnson, 1979; Dooling & Lachman, 1971; Leahey & Harris, 1989; Nuttall, 1983; Meyer, 1985; Smith, 1988; Rumelhart, 1980; West, Farmer & Wolff, 1991; Widdowson, 1983) and a lot of research has already been developed in our context (Dias, 1986; 1987; 1992; 1993; 1994; Kleiman, 1990a; 1990b; Santos, 1986).

This paper intends to take the research already carried out in Brazil and abroad as the basis for the discussion of some points which still seem obscure in the attempt to shed some light over existing misconceptions concerning *inglês instrumental*. The paper will focus on questions which remain either unanswered or poorly understood with the purpose of discussing the role of *inglês instrumental* as a communicative teaching approach, its theoretical basis, its use of reading strategies, its current

trends, and its importance and appropriateness for the context of teaching English as a foreign language at the high-school level in Brazil. The main argument is that conventional methods for teaching English as a second language cannot be adapted (and are no longer used) in our specific teaching-learning situation.

Inglês Instrumental or English for Specific Purposes?

English teaching specialists and students alike tend to be unsure whether there is a difference between these two terms and misunderstanding often arises. In addition to *English for Specific (or Special) Purposes* (ESP), the term *Language for Specific Purposes* (LSP) is also existent. In reality, both have somewhat the same meaning and refer to the teaching of a certain language for a specific objective based on students' most prevalent needs. The main goal may be the teaching of either reading, or writing, or speaking, or listening, or even the teaching of a combination of two or more abilities. For instance, an English course can be designed for pilots and stewardesses for whom the major focus of interest is the oral communication. As a consequence, *speaking* and *listening* would be selected with the aim of attaining the students' major need which is the ability to exchange information with English-speaking people (passengers or job personnel). The course goals would include the ability to carry on a conversation with a passenger who is not feeling well, ask questions about weather conditions, or give information through the microphone, etc.

On the other hand, reading would be the main ability to be emphasized with students who are being prepared for entering graduate courses which require proficiency in the English language for research purposes. In the Brazilian context, the term *Inglês Instrumental* has been used as equivalent to both ESP and LSP, where the word *instrumental* indicates the use of English as an "*instrument*" (or tool) for either job advancement or academic improvement (or both). Moreover, reading is the ability

which has been mainly focused on in our courses, based on our students' needs and present or future goals. My instructional material, for example, is directed to the development of reading fluency in English with writing and listening as enriching activities to the interpretation process (Dias, 1993).

Courses in *inglês instrumental* (or ESP, or LSP) have similarities as well as attributes that distinguish them from the conventional methodologies for teaching English for general use. These likenesses and differences relate to content, the context for language use, and the needs and objectives of learners. The main point in common is that, like the conventional approach, courses in *inglês instrumental* are communicative and also explore the view of language as a means of communication. Furthermore, both types of courses deal with students' vocabulary expansion and share the concern with authentic materials taken from magazines and journals to be used in the classroom. There is also an attempt to produce language activities that are meaningful and closer as possible to real-life reading situations.

Another point to make is that the use of communicative activities such as role playing, filling in crosswords, listening to and interpreting pop songs, listening to news (from a tape) and writing down a summary about the heard information are part of both types of courses. Moreover, both approaches have to be efficient and motivating for the students who are taking them.

The major difference, however, lies in the context in which the language is learned. In ESP courses learning activities are normally drawn from either specific professional content or from areas of study such as chemistry, or biology, or ecology aiming at approximating students' needs to the use of language in the classroom. For instance, a real-life dialogue between a stewardess and a passenger, or a set of instructions on how to operate a certain type of equipment to be acted upon can be incorporated into the teaching event. Emphasis thus shifts from the exclusive

development of basic skills to the use of the language in professional or academic contexts. Moreover, courses in *inglês instrumental* may focus on just one of the abilities (with the complement of the others) to cater for students' needs and this perspective is seldom adopted in courses for general English.

Another distinguishing attribute is that *inglês instrumental* which is directed to the teaching of reading makes a systematic use of strategies in the attempt to teach students how to read more efficiently with the ultimate goal of developing their autonomy. As a result, there is a constant concern with raising their awareness of the utility of reading strategies for a better and more adequate processing of information in English.

Theoretical Background

Ingês instrumental is a branch of the communicative approach and as such encompasses the main features of this orientation to language teaching. It includes, for instance, the notion that language must be taught for communicative purposes to fulfill its social function, "a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part" (Brumfit & Johnson, 1981, p. 3).

The choice of reading as the main focus for the teaching event means that reading will be considered as a communicative task. This implies the use of authentic texts extracted from their original sources as classroom materials. This also implies that the reading activities will be designed so as to approximate real-life reading tasks where the person reads either for pleasure, or for extracting some specific piece of information, or for researching purposes. In this way, reading will be taught to achieve its social functions with the students being engaged in a more meaningful processing of information. Therefore, *inglês instrumental* is an approach which is prone to recognize the prime importance of the communicative features of language and sets its teaching strategies in this direction in an appropriate way.

Another important point is that reading is viewed as an interactive process involving both the information in the text and the reader's *knowledge of the world* which is brought to the reading task. (Dias, 1986; 1993; 1994; Rumelhart, 1980; Widdowson, 1983). This indicates that the reader relies on knowledge he/she already has internalized in his/her cognitive structures to grasp the new incoming information, to adequately process it, and to encode it for future use (see a description of this process in Dias, 1994).

Moreover, several experiments have already been carried out to provide evidence for the relationship between old and new information when the reader is engaged in the interpretation process (Brandsford & Johnson, 1979; Dias, 1993; 1994; Dooling & Lachman, 1971; Guimarães & Dias, 1992; Wittig & Williams, 1984). This research also supports the view that the same text may be read from different perspectives depending on the previous knowledge that is activated during comprehension. A point to reiterate is that a *"spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning; rather it provides directions for listeners or readers on how to use their own stored knowledge to retrieve and construct the meaning"* (Leahey & Harris, 1989, p. 201). Reading is thus a dynamic activity which involves the reader in *"a negotiation of meaning"* (Widdowson, 1983, p. 63), a perspective which *inglês instrumental* fully incorporates into its teaching strategies.

Another important aspect of *inglês instrumental* is that this teaching approach capitalizes on the use of the nonverbal component of discourse as a strategy to facilitate the reading process (Dias, 1987). In fact research provides us with evidence that the communicative function of a text is not conveyed exclusively by verbal means - nonverbal elements contribute to the whole communicative meaning as well, either by supplementing verbal statements, or replacing them, or providing a general idea of what the text is about, or still as a visible form of the verbal information as, for example, in graphs (Dias, 1987; 1993; Nuttall, 1983; Widdowson, 1983). Therefore, the rationale underlying the use of the nonverbal

information is that the reader who does not have a complete command of the verbal component yet may make use of the nonverbal counterpart to initiate his/her negotiation of meaning (Dias, 1987; 1993). As examples of elements of the nonverbal code we can mention the illustrations, graphs, diagrams, pictures, the typographical indices of organization, the typographical devices for placing emphasis, formulas, the page layout etc. An intensive exploitation of the nonverbal information as a reading strategy is undoubtedly a major contribution of inglês instrumental to the recognition of this component as an essential part of written discourse.

An additional aspect of inglês instrumental as a teaching approach is

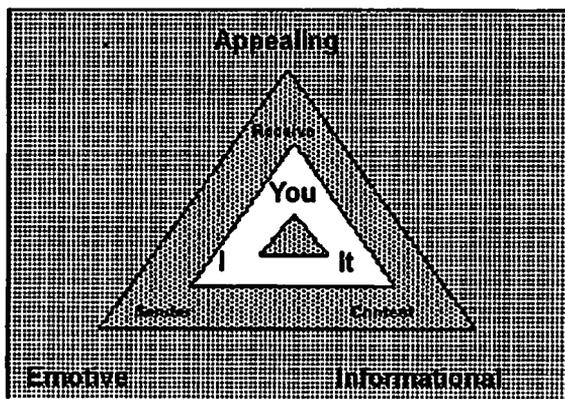


Figure 1: Three types of texts

that it considers the written part of discourse as a coherent whole and not simply as a set of sentences put together. Consequently, it includes strategies to teach students how to see the verbal component as a complete meaningful entity so as to facilitate their processing of information in English.

For example, one of the adopted teaching strategies is that of classifying texts according to the overall pattern into which they have been structured. This in turn will group texts into three types: (1) the informational or denotative; (2) the emotive or connotative; and (3) the appealing or persuasive (see Figure 1) (Dias, 1993).

Informational texts tend to focus on the subject-content that is being conveyed and are seemingly more objective; emotive texts concentrate on the sender of the message as in poetry and, as result of that, are more subjective, revealing the author's viewpoint and commitments more clearly. An appealing text tends to focus on the receiver of the message aiming at persuading the reader about its intended message. Advertisements are typical examples of text of appeal. The student has to be made aware of the fact that each of these types of texts fulfills different functions. Furthermore, they must include this awareness as a reading strategy to facilitate the interpretation process (Dias, 1993). Another crucial point that students have to learn is that a clear-cut distinction among the three types of texts is hard to establish and some overlapping normally takes place.

For example, the informational text often contains elements of the other two types of texts, materialized in the author's point of view that is being defended in the text, the commitment to the scientific truth he/she wants to reveal (or uncover), the rhetorical features that are being used to persuade the readers. The teaching strategy of classifying the texts according to their overall pattern and of making students aware of the fact that some overlapping always exists can help students to develop their ability to read a text in a more critical way. Students are provided with the tools which enable them to detect the structures and the use of words which implicitly or explicitly reveal the author's own viewpoint thus having the opportunity to assess the validity of this perspective against their own position.

Another strategy is that of raising students' awareness of the fact that written discourse organizes its intended message around certain

rhetorical patterns such as those of exemplification, enumeration, definition, comparison, contrast, chronological sequence, cause-effect relationships, preview statements, summary statements. Students should be further informed about discourse markers as, for example, *consequently, moreover, in the same way as* which signal these methods of paragraph development (Dias, 1993; Mayer, 1985; Santos, 1986). This, in turn, will help them read in English in a more efficient way.

In short, *inglês instrumental* deals with the verbal component of written discourse by showing students how the ideas are interrelated inside a text to express coherence and cohesiveness. The strategy consists of presenting the whole, that is, the text as a complete entity which informs about a particular subject-content or which conveys the author's point of view or commitments or which persuades the reader about a certain object or idea. Then, paragraphs are analyzed to discover which rhetorical patterns have been used, followed by the recognition of signal words which can be used as clues in the interpretation process (Dias, 1993). So there is a concern with the strategy of going from the whole to the parts in the attempt to facilitate students' processing of information.

The Use of Strategies

The incorporation of strategies into the teaching event is also a key major component of *inglês instrumental*. This perspective is so important in *inglês instrumental* that I will present some discussion about strategies and their role in helping students read better in English. In fact some of these roles have already been discussed above. Strategies can be defined as mental operations that students make use of to acquire, retain, and retrieve different kinds of knowledge. They have been classified in a number of different ways and one of these classifications groups them into four families: (1) chunking or organizing strategies, (2) spatial strategies; (3) bridging strategies, and (4) multipurpose strategies (West, Farmer, & Wolff, 1991) (see Figure 2) (Dias, 1994).

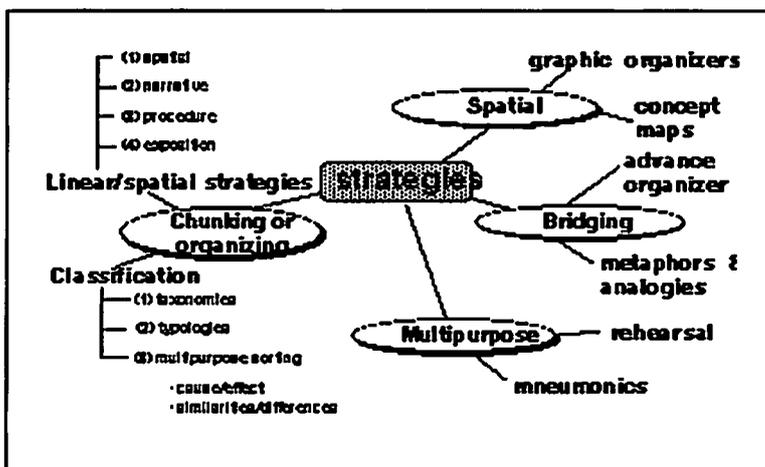


Figure 2: Four families of strategies

These strategies are either given by the instruction itself or generated by the students themselves. Inglês instrumental makes use of these two functions of strategies when developing students' awareness of the key role they play in the interpretation process.

Chunking Strategies

These organizing strategies have the purpose of allowing learners to capture in a glance some of the main relationships established in a textual material in a structured way. By reducing the complexity of many relationships inside a text, these organizers help readers avoid information overload which hinders interpretation and understanding. Without the development of these chunking strategies, intellectual management of the very complex environment would probably be

impossible. For instance, important information that students have to retain may be chunked so as to facilitate the processes of perception, interpretation and encoding which take place in reading comprehension. On the other hand, students may also be encouraged to group key information from a text in a structured way. Better retention of information can result from this generation of meaning from their own perspective.

Spatial Strategies

These strategies explore a two-dimensional perspective to provide a graphical arrangement of a substantial amount of information. They have the advantage of the chunking strategies in addition to being more visual. They have the characteristics of both the verbal and image codes. For instance, they explain and describe the relationships about concepts by means of words (having, though, the characteristic of texts). Like images (pictures), on the other hand, they convey meaning through the exploitation of the two-dimensional space. Examples of such strategies are graphic organizers and concept maps. While graphic organizers comprise a great variety of grid-like arrangements like frames, diagrams, tables and so forth, concept maps involve the highlighting of concepts and specific relations between connecting concepts, normally in a hierarchical fashion (Dias, 1993; 1994).

This graphic organizer (Figure 3) can be given by the teaching event to fulfill different goals. It can provide, for example, an overall idea about the content of the coming text and various aspects of pollution and acid rain can be discussed to elicit previous knowledge about these two phenomena and the relationship between them. In addition to that, aspects of vocabulary and of textual organization can be discussed before reading the text for details. Students can even be asked to write short paragraphs about certain parts of the graphic as, for instance, a paragraph about preventive measures to acid rain or the pernicious

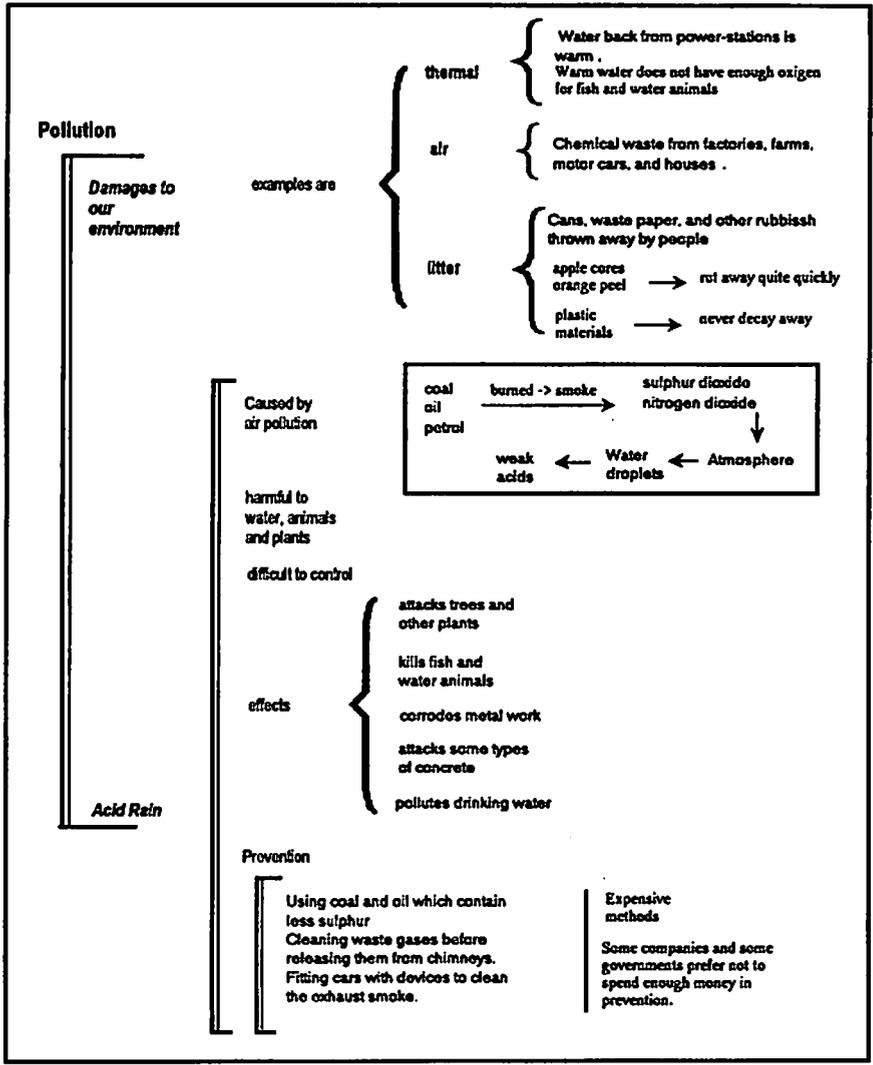


Figure 3: Pollution & Acid rain

effects of acid rain, etc. These instructional means will help students fully process the coming text in a more meaningful way.

Another beneficial perspective of the use of this organizer in a reading class is that of asking students to produce the graphic themselves based on a text they have read. This way they will be reconstructing the information from their own point of view, which will eventually entail better encoding and retention of information for future use.

Bridging Strategies

These strategies have the function of acting as a bridge between existing knowledge and new information that will be processed. They have the capability of helping learners recall what they already know and transfer that knowledge to new topics. In this family are aids to processing such as advance organizers and analogies (Dias, 1994).

An example of the use of an advance organizer in a reading class is that of presenting a new unit to be learnt by establishing relationships with the unit presented before. Based on students' previously acquired knowledge, the introductory paragraph in the form of an advance organizer will act as a bridge between existing knowledge and new incoming information which will be processed. This strategy is normally instruction-based and students are seldom required to produce it from their own standpoint.

Multipurpose Strategies

These are bottom-up strategies because they are driven by the parts of the content rather than by holistic mental constructs. They are means of learning the parts and the details as opposed to getting the big picture which can be provided by chunking and spatial strategies. They allow the mastery of manageable chunks. Included here are rehearsal and

mnemonic strategies. As rehearsal strategies, teaching situations may be created to help students learn the parts of discourse which signal textual organization. For example, markers like *moreover*, *nevertheless*, *on the contrary* can be associated with the rhetorical pattern of contrast and meaningful encoding of information can take place. Learning the parts may help students in the task of interpreting the whole entity (which, in turn, will help them comprehend the parts, as mentioned before).

Furthermore, as a mnemonic strategy, the past and the past participle of irregular verbs may be chunked according to similar structural forms and several groups may result (Dias, 1993). For instance, verbs like *drive*, *write* will be put together in a certain group, while verbs like *swim*, *sing*, *drink* will be gathered in another group. Their similar structural forms in the past and past participle may act as aids to memory thus facilitating the encoding of information as well as its retention for future use.

Inglês Instrumental and the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

Any language may be taught either as a second or as a foreign language, meaning that the former perspective sets learners' fluency in the four abilities as a goal to be attained, while in the latter point of view the end objective may be fluency in only one of the abilities with the complement of the others. In this case, learning the language corresponds to the attainment of students' most prevalent needs. If we accept these differential attributes, we can say that *inglês instrumental* is an approach directed to teaching English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, differences between teaching English as a second or as a foreign language make us realize that a distinguishing rationale underlies each perspective, together with the principle that different end objectives lead to distinct methodologies. Teaching English as a second

language requires, for instance, homogeneity of students' level in the classroom, a small number of students (maximum of 20) per group, teachers' fluency, longer periods of classes, a situation which does not match the teaching reality at high-school level in Brazil.

On the other hand, teaching English as a foreign language with focus on one of the abilities with the complement of the others may be suitable to the reality of our students who are taking high-school courses. This paper argues that *inglês instrumental* could be the adopted teaching approach to develop students' fluency in reading a second language for job advancement or research purposes. To deny students the opportunity to learn English for reading purposes is to close our eyes to the reality of our university entrance examinations as well as to the acceptance of English as the language of the scientific community. In addition to that, it can be further argued that *inglês instrumental* as an approach fits more appropriately the Brazilian context of teaching English at high-school level.

A point to make clear is that a current view of *inglês instrumental* as a teaching approach no longer emphasizes the development of only one of the abilities – the others are normally used as supplementary activities. A course may, for instance, pay closer attention to reading and writing and use listening and speaking as enriching counterparts. Watching movies, listening to songs, reporting a summary of a text orally may be suitably used as communicative activities in a reading course. Furthermore, grammar – both in the form of discourse grammar as well as conventionally – may also be incorporated as reading strategies to facilitate the interpretation process.

Concluding Remarks

This paper aimed at clarifying some misunderstanding which still prevails about *inglês instrumental* as a teaching approach. It has also discussed its appropriateness to the Brazilian educational system,

especially at high-school level. A focus on the development of fluency in reading and the use of writing, listening, and speaking (at the level of reporting reading experiences) may be a more balanced perspective for the forty-student English classes in our context.

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