The process of reading: steps towards effectiveness

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• Introduction

Reading is an activity that is present almost in every aspect of our lives. We depend on reading in many actions and decisions we have to take every day.

In coutries like Brazil, where millions of people cannot read, it becomes a powerful way to domain and control the whole social system. Access to the university requires an interpretation of a text in a foreign language, which most of our students, after years of study, are not able to do.

Teaching is done merely by following a coursebook, and often even this is not possible. Divided between all the skills, and trying to practice all of them, teachers do not focus their effort on one of them, this way losing time and strength.

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Reading is done most of time in the classes but without any significant results, once our teachers also feel lost and frustrated by doing such activities.

Contemporary reading theories that put the text and the reader in the center of the process and look at reading as a complex cognitive process, in which reader and writer interact to (re)-create meaningful discourse, are the guide lines for this work.

Starting with an overview of the situation of reading in Brazil and its importance as a way to move up social levels, we follow the theories of the reading process and reading in a foreign language.

Readers approach texts in different ways. Each individual reader has specific objectives which support his interest and purposes. To know what the purposes of the readers are, is one of the ways to conduct a successful reading course.

Readers, teachers, and texts are the most important elements of a reading course. Their roles along the process of understanding a text are discussed, supported by the Communicative Approach and the Reflexive Language Teaching. Effective reading is reached through well elaborated texts and related tasks which include pre-; while-, and post-reading activities.

A normal activity such as reading requires a vast range of techniques and strategies until it becomes the process of building up the sense of a written message.

Our intention along this work is not to conclude anything about the reading process, instead we start making some of the conclusions we already perceived in our reality. To support teachers and students' work, changing reading into a pleasant and enjoyable activity, is over all our most intimate and highest wish.

1. Reading in Brazil

For the Brazilian society, which is divided according to peoples'social and economic standard, culture and knowledge are some of the strongest barriers to moving up social levels. So, reading is the most efficient and conscious way to achieve this goal. It is the key that can open many doors which give access to that unknown world of literacy for millions of Brazilians.

In such a social system reading is a very powerful weapon used to maintain the structure as it is, it means to keep the lower levels in their position and provide possibilities to the higher ones to control and domain the whole situation. Why does it happen? In this kind of social organization it is a common practice to attribute a very high importance to written form, closing by this way the access of the majority to their knowledge and the rights they establish for everyone.

Therefore the possession of knowledge is certain to stay with the minority which has access to the information through reading.

Reading is a growing process. Learning critical , reading gives men possibilities to interpret the world they live in. Only through reading men can understand the facts that made our world be as it is. But it does not stop at this point. With knowledge, we are able to analyse, confront, compare. Reflection, which is a product of this process, in turn, makes men take position in front of the situation and try to find adequate solutions for problems. Those solutions require changes which are dangerous for the whole system's structure.

If we look at reading that way it would be the best way to build up a fair society, giving each one the possibilities to know and interpret his world and the conditions to live as a real citizen. In this point of view we agree with Bamberger (1987) when he

says that reading is one of the most efficacious ways of the systematic development of one's language and personality, because it removes educational barriers increasing the intellectual growth and in the case of Brazilians we could add that it would make so many people feel themselves as part of the world and not just as the part that lives on the verge of the society.

The importance of reading in countries in development like Brazil is its "active" role in fighting against alienation. It would make the whole population feel as more complete human beings, free and able to look at life as something more than only a fight for survival.

1.1 - Reading and school

The experience one makes at school is conclusive to the reading experiences he will have in life. In Brazil, these experiences have not produced the results people would like to see.

Brazilian students are used to reading for exams at school, rather than for pleasure or research. Reading is always linked with some kind of evaluation, this way teachers can be sure students have really read what they were asked to. There is no time to develop the habit of reading, to make students feel confident and pleased in doing reading activities.

The Planning Process of each school has also to consider the big curriculum established for the first school years, so reading loses importance as soon as students are able to decodify the linguistic signs. About this topic we have been taught well by Emilia Ferrero.

> *"Literacy is not a luxury, it's a right. And it is necessary to guarantee this right for the children of this continent. But it is not the same as drawing*

some letters of the alphabet, or teaching them how to pronounce some words that are unknown for them. This is not Literacy. We would like to give them the right to appropriate the knowledge of the written language in its whole complexity..." (In: Revista Nova Escola -Ferrero 1989, p. 12 -13 - Our own translation).

The problems with literacy are enormous in our country and if we look at "reading", we will see that it is going through a very hard and difficult way. Children abandon reading as soon as they leave school, which in many cases happens very early. Many adults have not got the habit of doing it and they only "read for survival" (Wallace 1993) in situations of no other choice. The minority that practice reading along their lives is the little part of the population that arrives at the university.

2. The process of reading

Everywhere we look at we see things and they are registered in our mind through a very complex process. The process of reading is also a visual activity, which focusses on signs, drawings, colors, letters and so on. All these things are sent to our brain and there they are linked with all other experiences we have made along our lives. Before this, we go through a fantastic and wonderful way only humans can experience. Smith (1987) and Godman (1991) claimed that reading is a process that involves a transition between visual and nonvisual information. The visual information consists of the written signs of the text the reader has in front of him. The nonvisual information involves all the prior knowledge he has of the world around him. During the process both of them are very important to understand the message as a whole and not just as small separated particles without any linking between them.

2.1 - Using visual information

Here we can see why some methods of teaching have failed when the emphasis is given only or almost only to the visual information. Without involving the learner's nonvisual information, the process becomes incomplete.

During the reading process, the reader can focus himself especially on the visual information, given by the author of the text through the graphic signs on the paper. The reading, that way, becomes slowly and hard work just because it is like trying to follow someone's steps in the darkness. This is reinforced by the fact that if the reading should be processed in English, we, Brazilians, have to consider that the English written system is frequently said to be chaotic on the grounds that correspondences between sound and written symbol are much less consistent than in languages such as Portuguese and Spanish for example. The reader initially cannot make any connection between the language he hears and the graphic signs he has in front of him. The printed form of very common words of his vocabulary can be extremely difficult to be understood.

Another important implication of using the visual criteria alone in the reading process is that similiarities and differences are easily connected with the meaning. Words that show similar visual configuration should also be semantically linked and words that have a different written form should always be semantically different. Stubls (1980) pointed out in one of his studies that words that are phonetically similar but visually different are usually semantically distinct for instance: sky, dry, fly and die.

When a reader, for some reason, needs lots of visual information it might be that his brain can become overload. The processing of this information, which is done by obeying a

limited sequence of significant units which are organized by our short - term memory and long - term - memory is not possible to be done in a normal speed and then, as Smith (1985) points out a "tunnel vision" is the result.

Students that are required to "get every word right" before going on with the reading are being trained to get this "tunnel vision".

The visual information incites the reader to memorization and, as we know, the effort one makes to memorize something can destroy comprehension in reading (Smith, 1985). Once it is a processing of putting something into the long - term memory which requires time to concentration that, in turn, distracts your attention from the text.

2.2 - Using nonvisual information

In an efficient process of reading the use of nonvisual information is as important as the visual one. This concept of reading makes it a highly active task for the reader, who adds information to the text and not just limits himself to get them out of the text. This exchange of information is what, at the end, makes the text comprehensible for the reader, who fits it into his own world and it becomes part of his being from that moment on.

The cycle of reading mentioned by Freire (1983), where the reading of the world precedes the reading of the word and the comprehension of a text through its critical reading which implies the perception between the text and the context, is only possible with the use of nonvisual information.

The more nonvisual information the reader uses the less visual information he needs to build up the sense of the text, and vice versa, the less nonvisual information he uses, the more difficult and slowly the reading will be processed because more

visual information is necessary. What happens, in fact, is that our brain can be overwhelmed with all this visual stuff (Smith: 1985).

In Kleiman's (1989) point of view the action of reading establishes a relationship between the reader and the writer and the understanding of it depends on how deep this relationship can be achieved. If the reader has no elements that can help him to exchange, compare, agree, disagree, then such an experience is not possible, because there will be only one opinion along the reading, and the communication will not be completed.

The reader's prior knowledge plays this important role in the relationship with the author. Without this interaction the text is just a monologue and not a dialogue as it is supposed to be.

2.3 - Bottom-up and top-down

The studies about cognition and artificial intelligence have pointed out two modes of information - processing: Bottom up and Top-down.

These processes, when linked to reading, have to be related to the background knowledge that helps readers in the text comprehension.

A reader can make use of every one of them in his reading task but as Kato (1990) claims, effective and successful reading requires from the reader skills in both bottom-up and top-down processing along the building of the sense of a text.

2.3.1 - Bottom-up processing

The visual information plays the most important role for this kind of information processing. The Bottom-up processing is

linear. It starts with the little units of a text and moves on to the bigger ones.

This process refers to the use of incoming data as a source of information about the meaning of a message. So the comprehension process begins with the received message and its organization. This is done through an analysis in sucessive levels which includes:

- Scanning the input to identify familiar lexical items.

- Using phonological cues to identify the information focus and utterances.

- Using grammatical cues to organize the input into constituents.

The basis for this activity is the reader's lexical and grammaticat competence. In this point of view it is a decoding process, once that the linguistic input from the text is mapped against the reader's previous knowledge. Silberstein (1993) mentions this process as **"data driven"** since it depends on the incoming data given by the text. The bottom-up process is also seen as text-based processing because it requires students' attention to specific sections of the text, where they have to work on all levels of language processing: word, sentence, and discourse.

2.3.2 - Top-down processing

Here is where the nonvisual information plays the most important role. The top-down processing is not linear. It starts at the macro-structure of a text going then to the micro-structure.

This process is only possible when the reader uses prior knowledge to make predictions about the information the author gives him through the text.

The background may take several forms. It is a kind of knowledge adquired through life experiences, stored in long-term - memory in the form of "schemata" and "scripts".

Top-down processing includes:

- Assigning an interaction to part of a particular event.

- Assigning places, persons or things to categories.

- Inferring cause - and - effect relationships, the topic of a discourse, the sequence between events, missing details.

- Anticipating outcomes.

If a reader is not able to make use of top-down processing, the text may be incomprehensible, given that bottom-up precessing of the text often provides an insufficient basis for comprehension.

> *"The second or foreign language reading teacher who understands the differences between top-down and bottom-up processing and the role played by schema and background knowledge in reading will look for classroom strategies that encourage second language readers to use an appropriate combination of processing strategies when they approach a text". (Richards, 1990, p. 76).*

Reading is a psycolinguistic process done in cycles where first the visual information are important, then occurs the interaction with the reader's world where perception and grammatical knowledge between other skills play an important role to get to the last cycle, which is the building of sense.

An efficient reader passes through less cycles to understand the message while a poor one needs a lot of them and very often stops in the middle of the way.

3. Reading in a foreign language

As we have seen until now, the process of reading involves a series of information processing which occur in different levels and require different skills.

When we think about reading in a second or foreign language we have to consider that some other skills are needed.

Reading in this point of view, should be linked to the students' competence in the language itself. Many studies have been done in this field and several hipothesis have been made by Alderson (1984), Jolly (1978), Yorio (1971), Goodman (1973), Cowan (1976), Ulijn (1978) and many others.

Questions like the possibility to transfer reading abilities from one language to another one can not be answered satisfactorily, and the role played by competence and proficiency in the L2 is also not very clear.

The point we are going to work on is that one pointed out by Cziko (1978) and mentioned by Alderson (1984) in his paper **"Reading: a reading problem or a language problem".**

> *"Consistent with the hypothesis that foreign language, is the prediction that foreign language readers, who lack competence in the language will have difficulty in making full use of contextual constraints". (Alderson - 1984, p. 14).*

For Cziko (1978) this ability is held to be crucial for the process and the implication for readers that are not able to utilize them, is that they will be ineffective readers.

The conclusion taken was that as more proficient the students become in the language more able they are to utilize the

text constraints. Interpreting this we could also say that reading is not possible in very low levels of proficiency.

In his studies Cziko also identifies three types of contextual constraints: syntactic, semantic and discourse.

Syntactic constraint refers to the rules of the language. It is this constraint that ables the student to deduce that articles are more likely to be followed by nouns and adjectives are placed before a noun or after a verb.

The role of syntax to get at text meaning was largely discussed by Bertnan (1984), studies were conduced and some conclusions show that syntax is more important at the sentence level, and that in reading courses focus should be given to it only until intermediate levels because advanced students will progress in the utilization of syntactic constraints more by exposure and practice in reading than by direct teaching.

Semantic constraint refers to the meaning of the words and expressions. It is the semantic knowledge that leads one to produce and acept only coherent sentences like: **"The boy looks at the mountain"** and **"the plane flies over the mountain".** Without any semantic constraint a reader could accept the sentence: **"the plane looks at the mountain",** which is an action a plane can not carry out.

Discourse constraint is provided by the topic of the text and is related to the immediate, the institutional, and the wider social context (Wallace - 1992) in which the text occurs. Cziko's experiences showed that students at beginner and intermediate levels were able to use syntactic constraints, but only students at advanced levels and native speakers were able to use semantic and discourse constraints.

In part it can be explained by the lack of competence and to the fact of what is involved in discourse. Wallace (1992) justifies this fact explaining what discourses relate to:

> *"(…) because discourses relate to particular social practices, attitudes, and believes which the writer expects the reader to share, or at least to be familiar with, the reader from a different sociocultural background may find the meaning of even apparently simple texts obscure". (Wallace - 1992, p. 14).*

A whole range of implications show up when a reader is not able to utilize the discourse constrairnt the text, which should be a "meeting point" between writer and reader becomes just an amount of ideas, descriptions and propositions without a clear reason of being.

4. Purposes of reading

Reading, as the other modes of language, plays an important role in social interactions, and teachers should explore more this aspect to motivate students to get involved in it.

A reading teacher who wants to be successful has to search to find out what the students' purposes and interests are. what kind of genre they prefer and are used to enjoy, with this information he can look after the best procedures and classroom material.

4.1 - General purposes

The wide available range of written matter in our time is an interesting invitation for any reader just to read, besides his specific purposes set for learning it.

Here students with different interest have found a meeting point and a possibility to share information and discuss interesting topics along their process of learning.

This kind of activity is one of the most important factors that allow students to develop fluency as readers and increase their background knowledge of the whole language system.

4.2 Reading for pleasure

This is the kind of reading children should be introduce to at the school. Reading as a way of enjoyment and literature as the way of getting into the magic and wonderful world of literacy.

It might be a dangerous kind of reading because easily the reader can decide to stay just at this level where he gets envolved in a "nice", "soft", and "right" world, but on the other hand it is where the habit of reading can be acquired.

Teachers should explore the pleasant reading of novels, comics. So they can offer to the students the relaxing atmosphere it brings into the classroom, but they should also lead students to further steps in the process of reading.

4.3 - Reading for survival

It is the typical kind of reading students ask, at beginner levels, when they intend to travel, for instance. It includes the range of words and sentences linked to common daily life activities like signs as "stop", "exit", "gentleman", "lady", which can help them to stay out of trouble; to satisfy primary necessities.

This purpose can be well used by the teachers to start building up the reader's syntactic and also semantic knowledge of the language. It is always based upon a strictly utilitarian basis.

4.4 - Reading for learning

This is the kind of reading that is most of time present in an academic context, but we can also include here all the range of reading for an specific purpose like the intentions to get able to carry out international business.

It is a guided kind of reading because each reader will look for his very own interest and find then the appropriate "material".

5. The role of reader, teacher and texts

In a foreign language reading course we have to concentrate on three important elements of the process and their different roles: the reader, the teacher, and the texts.

When these three components can (co-) exist in harmony, successful results are more probable to occur, specially because reading cannot be seen as an isolated activity, once it is part of the whole process of learning a language and has to be integrated with speaking, listening and writing.

These three elements also play an important role to create a good atmosphere for the teaching-learning process. Reading, at all levels, should always be practiced in a nice and relaxing environment because it is a process which requires effort and concentration from the students.

We claim here for a reading course, where students are invited to share experiences among them and with the teacher,

too. That way, the behaviors and environments for reading activities should be the same as all others in a Communicative Language Teaching classroom.

Main of C.L.T activities are based on pair or group work. This kind of contact or errvironment leads to a more intensive relationship among learners.

The environment required in C.L.T creates a natural and closer contact between the students and learners. Through the activities in which learners have to interact, opportunities for positive personal relationships are given.

"These relationships can help to "humanise" the classroom and to create an environment that supports the individual in his efforts to learn" (Littlewood - 1981, p. 18).

Classroom is very often called and seen as an artificial environment for learners but it is much more a social context in which language use requires the learner's behaviors and attitudes. Favourable attitudes in relation to the target language can open the student's mind for a more intensive contact with the second language community.

So learners attitudes affect the purpose for a second language learning and can contribute to leading the course to successful results.

5.1 - The reader

Reading is a kind of magic through which you can look to the world with other eyes, with another mind. It is a way to go to places you have never been before, to travel around the world, to live in other times, and specially to share with somebody else, who is the writer, life experiences.

The reader is the active subject of all these actions. He gets involved in all kinds of tasks along the journey, it is his responsability to reach a place called meaning.

As Nuttall mentioned in her book **"Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language":**

> *"The meaning is not merely lying in the text waiting to be passively absorbed. On the contrary, the reader is actively involved and will very often have to work to get the meaning out". (Nutall- 1987, p. 9).*

In this involvement we can identify some specific roles a student who wants to be fluent in reading has to carry out.

5.1.1 - "The meaning searcher"

The reader knows, from the early beginning, that his job is to get the meaning of what is written down in a text.
Consciously or unconsciously he applies some techniques or strategies to reach that point.

The most common procedures are:

- **Skimming:** Here the reader reads to obtain just a general sense of the contents of the text. This is important because he will determine if a more careful reading should be done.

- **Reading for comprehension:** It is a deeper search once it goes beyond the understanding of a text (Silberstein - 1994) to get a more detailed comprehension. The reader tries to establish the relationship among the ideas and this is most of the time done by paraphrasing the writer's ideas.

- **Scanning:** This is a kind of quick reading to locate some specific information. The reader has his arguments and through scanning he tries rapidly to find words or phrases that could support these arguments.

- **Critical reading:** At this point the reader is able to make inferences and recognize implicit relationships and establish relationship of cause and consequence. Such activities allow readers to create a meaningful discourse for a text.

Students also develop own techniques to read a text. They apply strategies on their own way and very often it happens that they themselves teach classmates how to get at the point faster and easier.

5.1.2 - Information dealer

At this point we could say that the reader is an **"information dealer".** These **"dealings"** start with the shared assumptions (Nutall - 1987), which build up a common area of interaction.

The background knowledge of the students can contribute to a better interaction with the writer. Their experiences can be the same or different at any point but enrichment will happen anyway.

In this way, the more the reader négociâtes with the in-formation the better his understanding becomes. The sharing area with the author also increases and the result of it is the comprehension of the text as a whole, with its inner contents like implicits and discourses.

5.2 - The teacher's role

Traditional methods give the teacher the authority, the knowledge and the responsability of learning in class.

Modern methods of teaching share the authority, the knowledge and the responsability inside the classroom with the participants involved in the learning process.

Teachers have to manage the classes so that a good environment is present for teaching and learning. They do not need to concentrate all aspects of teaching and learning on their own knowledge. The co-participation of teachers is one of the most important roles they have to assume in the classroom.

The teacher becomes less dominant than in other times but not less important. He must not controll all activities or provide all knowledge but his presence should be an important psycological support for learners. He will be the one who will see the gaps and provide a constant link between pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities.

Breen and Candlin (1980) describe the teachers most important roles is these terms:

> *"(...) the first voile is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. (...)*
>
> *A third role of the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities". (In: Richards, Jack C. and Rogers, Theodore S -Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, p. 77)*

5.3 - The text in the classroom

A text has always to be seen as a vehicle of ideas. At the moment it is taken to a classroom, the intentions which are implicit (persuading, informing, entertaining) will be spread among the students. For this reason we shall try to bear in mind the purposes of reading we have set with our students.

In selecting a text, some important aspects should be considered like readability (combinations of structural and lexical difficulties), conceptual difficulties and the students' interest. With these actions we can access easier the students' level and involve them actively in the process, even though we cannot expect a class to be entirely homogeneous.

5.3.1 - Criteria for selecting texts

The task of selecting texts for the classroom should always be done under a range of criteria. The teacher has to have clear in his mind if that text:

- can be a way of teaching specific language structures and/or vocabulary.

- should present content which the students are interested in.

- should be on an appropriate level for that group.

- should give students the opportunity to develop reading strategies and a kind of co-relation with other texts to enlarge their knowledge (Intertextuality).

- should promote interaction, discussion and sharing among students.

- should be an authentic text, i.e., that was not written with the purpose of pedagogical uses.

- should be an example of the genre most students appreciate.

This range of criteria has not to be exclusive. The reality in which reading occurs has to be also considered, and the possibilities to find a variety of English language material too.

When teachers abandon authoritarianism and start working together with the students getting their confidence and esteem instead of revolt and fear, a feeling like "playing for the same team" arises in the classroom. This is the ideal atmosphere for the development of the reading process.

• **Conclusion**

Characterized as one of the most common and important activities in one's life in a literate society, reading contributes decisively to the position one has inside this community.

For countries of the so-called "Third World", literacy is one of the biggest problems. Millions of people are not given the right to access the knowledge reading can guarantee them. The power is concentrated among the minority that can read and interpret the highly valued written forms.

Reading has been discussed deeply by many teachers and researchers all over the world. Studies have been made in different fields to elucidate how this process occurs in our brains.

Results of several studies in artificial intelligence have lead to two modes of information-processing: Bottom-up and top-down. These processes in reading focus on the visual and the non-visual information, which are of equal importance in the building of sense of a written message. So, reading is seen as a psycholinguistical process, where the interaction between reader and writer and the sharing of information are essential to achieve effectiveness.

Reading in a foreign language requires a certain range of skills besides those the reader uses for doing it in the L1. A determined level of competence and proficiency is needed before effective reading can be established in the L2. It does not mean definitely that a competent L1- reader will not in any circumstances be able to transfer his skills to the FL.

Reading in both, L1 and L2, is a process in which the reader tries to make sense of the information the text gives him, by relating them to his background knowledge. Achieving this knowledge through different ways can lead to successful results for readers and teachers at the end of the process.

Texts have to be selected under a range of criteria which include the students' level of competence, interest, purposes, and reality.

A reading course should always lead the students to be able to understand authentic texts, which are examples of the use of the language without pedagogical purposes. When this is not immediately possible for several reasons, as it is the case in our Second Grade School, teachers have to adapt the reading material so that it can lead to effective reading and not just to what Widdowson (1979) has termed the "usage" (i.e. formal description of the language).

The waste of time in English classes, where students spend most of the time doing reading without any significant results, can have their origins in the following reasons:

1. The teachers do not know the theories which support the development of the reading skill or any of the others.

2. The intention to develop the four skills without the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge leads teachers to feel themselves lost along the teaching-learning process.

3. Students are not motivated for reading activities because they were not shown clear reasons for doing it besides learning grammar.

4. The reading aloud around the class, an activity that is seen.as real reading by most of the people, is in fact not reading, since reading is a silent activity. Reading aloud is an extremely diffcult exercise that requires highly specialized skills. Its frequent practice in the classroom as a normal reading exercise makes reading become harder and increases anxiety.

Teachers have to search in their classes to find out what the students' difficulties are in approaching a text. Accessing text difficulty is an essential procedure for a successful reading course. It can lead students to become independem and efficient readers.

The time students and teachers spend doing reading activities in the classroom can become productive from the moment when clear objectives are set, theory is studied and applied, text related tasks are well planned and done as a way to contribute to the understanding of the text as a whole, and not just as a way to learn the structure of the language.

Reading is a very complex process. It cannot be simplified or reduced to a mere decodification. It involves a variety of abilities and skills, which have to be trained, developed and practiced. Teachers have to apply different methods and techniques to increase their students' capacity to read. Students have to become active participants in this process, using their own knowledge of the world to make sense of what they read.

Many teachers are reluctant towards the new tendencies and find several excuses against any changes in their practice inside the classroom. Changes always give rise to anxiety and fear, but we claim here for a slow but effective way of changing the approach towards reading classes. Time is needed for teachers and students to get accustomed to a new vision of

reading. Results of these changes will be the best way to convince both, teachers and students, that effective reading is certainly a more enjoyful and pleasant work than what we have done in our classes until now.

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