TEACHING ALL STUDENTS HOW TO FIND THE MAIN IDEA IN A TEXT

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1. Introduction

It goes without saying that the *main idea* is the most important information in an expository text.[1] In fact, it is the most general statement made by the writer, who then proceeds to elaborate on it and to provide more detailed or specific information, such as explanations, examples, etc., to support it (see: Giora's 1988 and Widdowson's 1984 seminal papers on the information structure of the text).

Furthermore, the title of the text is the *topic* of the text (or, simply put, what the text is about);[2] the *main idea* (often referred to as the *topic sentence*) is what the writer has to say, or argue, about the topic.[3] This is usually information which the reader does not know, or information which is in contrast with what the reader does know. Hence, the main idea, or the *writer's argument* or *view* (also referred to in the literature as the *new information*) often begins with a cohesive device denoting contrast, such as "But", "However", or "Yet". What precedes it (a sentence or more) relates to what the reader knows or believes in, that is, the *common* or *prevalent view*, or the present state of affairs (referred to in the literature as the *old information*), and often begins with phrases such as "It has long been known that",[4] "Over the last thirty years",[5] "Today, many people",[6] etc.

It is true, then, as Barzilay (2005) argues, that the main idea may function "as a brief summary" of the text. However, this is unfortunately not the case, as she argues (2005:8) that

> Most students can be helped to find the main idea
> of a text by teaching them about topic sentences or
> thesis statements. As long as they are told what topic
> sentences are and a short discussion of the *topic* and
> *controlling idea* of a topic sentence is given, they
> should manage rather well on their own.

Research has indicated that finding the main idea and summarizing the text are difficult for most students, even for good readers. My own research (e.g. Segev-Miller, 2008a, 2008b) has indicated that these tasks are difficult even for college students, both undergraduate and graduate, and for experienced teachers of English as well as of other school subjects.

Also, the instruction suggested by Bazilay to help "weak readers" to identify the main idea in a text, albeit appropriate and necessary in my opinion for L1, would require these students to invest too much time and mental effort in the process. These resources could be conserved by teaching the students, both good and poor readers, a rather simple strategy.

2. Locating the main idea

In fact, it is a strategy they are familiar with – *scanning* – which they are often encouraged to use in order to locate specific information in the text, such as names or dates. This strategy could be put to better use in order to locate the main idea in the text, provided the text meets the requirements of textual coherence. That is, provided the text meets the requirements of textual coherence. One of these requirements is the explicit presentation of old and new information at the very beginning of the text (referred to in the literature as the *advance organizer.* For a definition see: Harris & Hodges, 1995), and the explicit use of a means of transition between them, such as "But", as explained earlier.

To illustrate the use of this strategy, I have selected texts, or rather extracts, from the recent 2012 summer English Matriculation exams. In the following two extracts, (1) and (2), it should not take the students more than a few seconds to scan for the "But" or the "However" respectively, and thus locate the sentence containing the main idea, or the new information.

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[1] This article will not relate to narrative text and other genres.

[2] This means that the title should be a short noun phrase. However, too often titles do not meet this requirement, and are formulated as sentences similar to long newspaper headlines for the purpose of intriguing the readers, but as a result do not make it clear what the text is in fact about.

[3] More accurately, the main idea is syntactically a sentence, made up of a subject (the topic) and a predicate (what the writer has to say about it).

[4] Bagrut, summer 2012, Module E.

[5] Bagrut, summer 2012, Module G.

[6] Bagrut, Moed B 2012, Module C.

(1) Seeing with your ears

It has long been known that some animals, such as bats and dolphins, have a very special method of getting information about their surroundings: they make clicking sounds and wait for the echoes that come back from the objects around them. In this way they learn about the size, shape, and position of those objects. But this ability, known as echolocation, is not limited to animals: apparently, humans too can learn to get around with the help of sound rather than sight [Module E].

(2) The future of zoos

Over the last thirty years, American zoos have been initiating reforms in the hope of increasing the well-being of their animals. The small concrete cages of the past have mostly been replaced by large spaces that enable animals to move around freely, and efforts have been made to provide better nutrition and veterinary care. However, some zoo directors and other professionals believe that far more fundamental changes might be needed [Module G].

The next step, of course, would be to process (i.e., to read and try to understand) the sentence, and then to go back to the preceding sentences containing the old information, and contrast the two, in order to see what is new about the new information. However, sometimes, especially if the main idea is preceded by very little text (e.g., one or two sentences rather than a paragraph or two), it may be a better idea, after scanning for the word of contrast, to start reading from the very beginning of the text, that is, from the old information, and only then to contrast the two.

This is still not the same as what most readers usually do: Starting to read from the beginning of the text, word by word, sentence by sentence, without a plan and without knowing where the main idea is located. This is one reason why poor readers often report they feel "lost", or "drowning in words", etc.[7] and give up. This kind of reading has been metaphorically referred to as reading "like an ant", whereas reading in the way suggested here, that is reading flexibly back and forth, has been referred to as reading "like a kangaroo" (Vega & Frilock, 1989),[8] which is one of the major characteristics of good readers, and which I refer to in my classes as smart reading.

The next extract poses a difficulty: The means of transition is introduced in the middle of a sentence, rather than in a more prominent position, i.e. at the beginning of a sentence with a capital letter, and would therefore take more time to locate. This could easily be revised by breaking up the sentence into two, and beginning the second sentence with a "But".[9]

(3) Swap – Don't shop

Today, many Americans have less money than before because of economic difficulties. People are looking for ways to get things they need without spending money. One popular way of doing this is swapping (...). Swapping, or exchanging one thing for another, has been done throughout history, but modern technology has made it much easier (...). [Moed B, Module C].

A word of contrast is the most common means of transition from old information to new information (according to a recent survey,[10] about 80% of academic texts in education journals use it), but there are other means of transition, such as "Now", "Nowadays", or a combination of one of these with a word of contrast, as in the following extract:[11]

(4) A new problem: Too many cyclists in the city

For people who live in the city, there are many advantages to riding a bicycle to school or to work instead of driving a car. The use of bicycles reduces the number of cars, leading to fewer traffic jams, more parking places, and less pollution.

Nowadays, however, it seems that there are too many cyclists in some cities (...). But, according to the Copenhagen Cyclists' Organization (CCO), there is not enough room in these lanes for the growing number of cyclists (...). [Module C].

Extract (4) looks coherent, but the use of an additional word of contrast, "But", later on in the second paragraph renders it less so, although the contents of the sentences following these two means of transition are almost identical. The difference between them is in their level of abstractness: The sentence following "Nowadays, however" is more general (which is exactly what we expect of the main idea), whereas the sentence following "but" contains more detailed information (which is what we do not expect). Again, the text could be easily revised

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[7] These and other metaphors were used by the subjects in my students' research papers to describe their reading processes.

[8] See reference in Hebrew.

[9] And see: Article refuting the argument that one cannot start a sentence with "But" at http://home.pct.edu/~evavra/kiss/Essay/Essay001.htm

[10] Segev-Miller (2012).

[11] For other means of transition see: http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr, and Segev-Miller (in preparation)

to make it more coherent by deleting the "But," thus preventing confusion on the part of the readers.

The last extract poses a more serious difficulty:

> (5) The smell of a sale
>
> [Paragraph a] The smell of fresh bread spreads throughout the supermarket even when the ovens are empty (...).
>
> [Paragraph b] Smells have been found to elicit emotional responses, and consequently, to affect behavior (...).
>
> [Paragraph c] Scent marketing, however, is far from an exact science, and indeed, many attempts to exploit the influence of smell have been dismal failures (...).
>
> [Paragraph d] Scent makers, however, point out that the industry long ago disconnected the use of chemicals that might irritate the skin or the respiratory system (...). [Moed B, Module G].

This text poses a more serious difficulty not only because the word of contrast, "However," is introduced twice, as in the previous extract (at the beginning of paragraphs c and d, which raises the question: Which of these is the main idea?), but also because these are introduced only half-way through the text, after two rather long paragraphs (a and b, 7 and 9 lines, respectively). That is, they are too far removed from the beginning of the text. Since the main idea is the most general sentence in the text, and thus serves as the reference point for all of the other sentences in the text which follow it and which elaborate on it, this means that the reader has no idea until at least half-way through the text what the main idea is. In addition, there is comparatively very little elaboration on the main idea, whatever it is.

3. Instructional implications and suggestions

The major instructional implication of the preceding discussion is that all students, both good and weak, should be offered explicit instruction in how to locate and process the main idea. My research (Segev-Miller, 2004a) has indicated that students who have been provided with explicit instruction of the information structure of the text and other requirements of textual coherence are not only able to process a coherent text easily, but also are able to cope with incoherent texts and even to rewrite them successfully.[12]

Moreover, both textbook writers and test writers should take heed of the textual requirements of coherence, such as the structure of the information in the text, especially at the beginning of the text (i.e. the advance organizer), in order to make the text optimally coherent and easier to process.

Textbook writers (and teachers) should also be careful in their use of terminology. One example is the term *main idea*, which is sometimes mistakenly replaced by the plural *main ideas*. A text has only one main idea (the *macroproposition*), which appears in the advance organizer. The other ideas (the *micropropositions*) appear in the paragraphs following the advance organizer,[13] one usually at the very beginning of each paragraph.[14] That is, each paragraph may have its own idea, but it is not the main idea of the text. Taken together (i.e. generalized), these micropropositions constitute the macroproposition (again, see: Giora, 1988).

Another example is the term *topic*, which I found was used in one textbook in the sense of a *topic sentence* (i.e. a main idea), and caused confusion on the part of the students. The question: "What is the topic of the text?" would, as explained earlier, refer the readers to the title. But the definition given in that textbook was: "A paragraph usually tells about one idea or event. The idea[15] or event is called the topic and is usually introduced at the beginning of the paragraph," and then the question asked was: "Look at the paragraph (...). Which sentence do you think gives the topic of the paragraph?"

Another instructional implication pertains to the comprehension questions following the text: On one hand, hardly any of the questions in the 2012 summer matriculation exams selected here explicitly require the readers to identify the main idea of the text, and on the other hand, the readers are asked too many questions focusing on details. These questions, at the so-called micro level of the text (i.e., questions focusing on information at the level of the word or sentence), prevent the readers from making the conceptual connections between the different parts of the text required for the construction of the macro representation, or meaning, of the text, nor do they encourage readers to make connections between information in the text and their prior knowledge. That

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[12] They should also be helped to transfer this knowledge to their writing.

[13] The advance organizer in comparatively short texts is usually one paragraph long, but sometimes two or even three. In long texts (e.g. journal articles), the main idea may appear much later, but is also easy to locate with the use of a different strategy (see: Segev-Miller, in preparation).

[14] Some paragraphs may not have an idea of their own (these are called *graphic paragraphs*). They usually begin with a cohesive device, such as "For example", and should be considered an elaboration on the idea presented in the previous paragraph.

[15] Underlining not in original.

is, these questions do not require the readers to transform the information in the text, but rather to reproduce it. However, information or knowledge transforming has long been perceived as a prerequisite for significant learning (Berieter & Scradamalia, 1987; Segev-Miller, 2004b).[16]

I have already suggested elsewhere (Segev-Miller, 2003) that students be encouraged to ask their own questions while reading (a strategy which again is characteristic of good readers), as well as be taught *generic questions*, that is, questions which are not text dependent but can rather be asked about any text. Some of these questions relate to the information structure of the text and focus the readers on the important information.

It may also be about time for instruction and assessment to focus on tasks other than questions, such as summarizing a single text (Anderson, 2000),[17] which is "a useful tool for understanding and studying texts" (Brown, Campione & Day, 1982:17), and the best indication of comprehension of a text (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). However since, on one hand, research has indicated that summarizing is a difficult task for most students, involving higher-order strategies such as selecting, organizing, and connecting, but since, on the other hand, summarizing is still a task frequently assigned at school in all subjects, students should be offered explicit instruction in the performance of the task. This requirement is bound to have a bearing on teacher training programs as well.

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[16] See reference in Hebrew.

[17] The next step would be writing an integrated summary of several texts on the same topic, a task which is no less relevant and indeed, is ecologically more valid, as knowledge is usually acquired from more than one source (and see: Segev-Miller, 2007 for the strategies involved in the performance of this task).