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Reading and Understanding Texts

ABSTRACT. The ability to read effectively is essential to the success in life. Unfortunately many students experience difficulty in mastering this skill. That is why in this article I have presented certain techniques which can help to develop and improve the students' reading skills. Reading is widely considered to be a passive process whereas it is an active and involving one. To be able to read effectively, the reader must work out what they want to achieve and how well they are progressing. Reading is an active and interactive process involving many skills. Therefore the teacher's role in enhancing the reading skills is enormous.

1. WHAT IS READING?

Eddie Williams (1984) defines reading as a process whereby one looks at and understands what has been written. The main point here is *understands*, because there is no reading without understanding. The fact is that the reader is actively involved in working on the text. They are able to understand texts without looking at every letter or word. The efficient reader needs to obtain the meaning of the text. Kenneth Goodman (1976) called this process *psycholinguistic guessing game*. This guessing game draws upon two sources to guide it: first, the text itself and second, what the reader brings to the text. Reading is something more than a sequence of words which we read. When reading the mind is not passive. Experiments using a tachistoscope (an instrument, which shows how much time we need to read a text) have shown that some words can be recognized faster than letters. The eye seems to sample only part of the available information and then predict the rest. Further evidence that each letter is not *read* has been obtained from studies of how the eye behaves during reading. These have shown that the eye does not stop and focus on every letter. The fluent reader takes in several letters at a time. The fluent reader is able to predict what is likely to follow on the basis of only a few letters. The fact is that the eye focuses on words which

help the reader predict what may be coming in a given sequence. The truth is that the reading process does not involve only the recognition of graphic information. The reader is able to predict what may be coming next in any language sequence on the base of the shape of the word or the first few letters. Goodman (1976) is of the opinion that reading is a process of sampling possible cues in the printed message, constructing a probable message and then matching it to the given output.

James Rye (1982) mentions various constraints (grammatical and semantic constraint, coefficient of usage) which enable the fluent reader to predict what may be coming next in the text. The reader knows what is grammatical and what is ungrammatical, and uses his understanding of word meanings and his previous experience of words occurring together in a certain order.

All these factors help the fluent reader anticipate what is coming next in a text. In fact, without this "little help" reading would be an extremely laborious and slow process.

2. WHAT IS READING COMPREHENSION?

Understanding a written text means extracting the required information from a text as efficiently as possible. In everyday life we apply different reading strategies, for example, when looking at a notice board to see if there is an advertisement for a particular type of job and while carefully reading an article of special interest in a scientific journal. In the first case the reader is looking for specific information and that is why he will reject the irrelevant information. In the second case it is not enough to understand only the gist of a text but the detailed comprehension is necessary.

3. STYLES OF READING AND SKILLS INVOLVED IN READING PROCESS

Each reader has their own style of reading. Readers read in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. As a result there are different styles of reading:

- 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;
- intensive reading: reading shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more an accuracy activity involving reading for details;
- extensive reading: reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding;
- passive reading;
- critical reading.

The truth is that no single way of reading a text is better. They are simply different. How we choose to read a particular text will depend on the nature of the text and our specific goals at the time. The reader can adapt their own style to their purpose, and does not need to read slowly or intensively. Nonetheless, a foreign language learner prefers to read slowly and intensively in order not to miss any words. It may be the only style for them especially if the text is difficult for them. The reader should adapt their own style of reading flexibly according to that purpose. As a reader you must know what you intended to do. You must adjust how you read to the nature of the reading material and the nature of the reading assignment.

The process of reading involves a variety of skills, e.g.:

- recognizing the script of a 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 relations within the sentence;
- understanding relations between the parts of a text through lexical cohesion devices;
- understanding cohesion between parts of a text through grammatical cohesion devices;
- interpreting 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);
- selective extraction of relevant points from a text;
- basic reference skills;
- skimming;
- scanning to locate specifically required information.

In conclusion, the student will use effective strategies before, during, and after reading, viewing, and listening to self-selected and assigned materials.

4. WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR READING?

There are two main reasons for reading: reading for pleasure and reading for information (in order to find out something or in order to do something with the information you get).

According to Williams (1984) the main reasons for reading are:

- general information about the text;
- pleasure or interest;
- to learn a foreign language, though learning a language should not be the aim in itself: the ultimate aim is to be able to use the language appropriately.

Catherine Wallace (1992) mentions three more personal reasons for reading:

Reading for survival is a kind of reading in response to our environment. It serves immediate needs or wishes related to our own daily life. Obvious examples are "ladies", "gentlemen", "exit".

Reading for learning - reading plays a great role in extending our general knowledge of the world. Readers may not want to learn something new but they would like just to remind themselves about half-known facts.

Reading for pleasure is done for its own sake.

To conclude, the main purpose for reading is to get a message from a text.

5. READING AS THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Reading is the communication process. Christine Nuttall (1982) presents reading as the communication process as following:

| | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Sender</i> | encoding | written | decoding | <i>receiver</i> |
| <i>Encoder</i> | MESSAGE | >>>>>>> | TEXT>>>>>>> | ??? |
| <i>Writer</i> | | spoken | | <i>reader</i> |
| <i>Speaker</i> | | | | <i>listener</i> |

On the left there is a writer or the speaker. Their role is to encode the message. The encoder has some message in their mind, which may be an idea or a fact, which they want somebody else to share. In order to do it they must first put it into words, they must encode it in either spoken or written form. Once it is encoded, it is available outside their mind as a text. The text is accessible to the mind of another person, who decodes the message this text contains. When the text is decoded, the message enters the mind of the decoder and communication is achieved. Obviously some things may go wrong in any stage of this process and we cannot be sure that the decoder received the message that was intended. That is why it is marked as "???". Nevertheless, this process is clear enough for us to say that reading means getting out of the text as nearly as possible the message that the writer put into it.

6. WHAT MAKES A TEXT DIFFICULT?

First of all, a text will be difficult for you if you do not know the code (the language), in which it has been written or spoken. That is why to communicate successfully both the reader and the writer should share the same code. Secondly, the difficulty of a text depends on the amount of previous knowledge that the reader brings to the text. Besides, the source of difficulty may also be the vocabulary. For readers whose vocabulary is not that wide it is extremely difficult to understand the author's text.

Since there are different kinds of difficulty of the text, it is so important that the reader and the writer should have certain things in common, if communication between them is to take place. That is why they should share the same code, which means that they should write and understand the same language. They also should have in common a command of that language that is not too widely different, if the reader has a far smaller vocabulary than the writer, he or she will find the text hard to understand. Nevertheless, the most interesting requirement is that both the reader and the writer should share certain assumptions about the world. Things that can be shared by both the reader and the writer are knowledge of the language, attitudes, beliefs, values, and all the assumptions that are shared by two people who have been brought up in the same society. The importance of background is essential in understanding a text.

7. READING AS AN INTERACTION

The reader is actively involved in the process of reading. The recipient of the information is not a passive object waiting for information. As reading is an interactive process both the sender and the recipient are actively engaged in this process. They both make the assumptions about what is coming next in the text. When the writer makes assumptions, he or she involves the reader in getting the meaning for himself or herself. That is why the process of reading is not only an active process but an interactive one. Since the writer is not available while reading, they cannot get any feedback from the reader. That is why the writer has to guess where the problems may lie and shape the text accordingly. Since the writer does not know who their readers are, they will never succeed completely.

8. HOW TO READ MORE EFFECTIVELY?

Simon Greenwall (1986) and Michael Swan (1986) define effective reading as being able to read accurately and efficiently, and to understand as much of the passage as you need in order to achieve your purpose.

During the reading process the reader's attitude towards reading has an essential meaning if we are considering the effectiveness. Andrew Northedge (1991) says that how you feel about what you are doing has a big effect on how well you do it. The fact is that you cannot learn more effectively unless you are able to become interested in the subject to some extent. Also, enjoyment during reading is extremely important. It helps the reader to get engaged in the subject, to find it interesting, and remain till the very end of it. Besides, you cannot let the irritation with the language or the style of a text hinder your reading. Unfamiliar and special language can put the reader off and make him frustrated with the struggle required to squeeze meaning out of the text. To succeed in understanding it, the reader can use a technical or a good general dictionary as a very useful resource.

It may happen that the reader does not agree with the writer's point of view and that is why he can feel frustrated and may find it very difficult to carry on reading the text till the end. The reader should distance themselves from hostile feelings and try to use them constructively by writing criticisms as well as their counter-arguments point by point.

If the reader cannot concentrate for a long time, he cannot expect to learn effectively hour upon hour. It is important for them to divide their study time. It is important for the reader to observe themselves and their own reading habits, and to think about what works best for them.

The reader's efficiency as a learner will drop sharply if they cease to study in a purposeful, managed way. Being a student acquires acting as one's own manager.

Northedge's (1991) created golden rules how to read effectively:

- Defining reading tasks and setting themselves targets, for example the number of pages to read one evening;
- Maintaining the reader's progress on the reading task and then;
- Re-setting the reader's targets in the light of this.

9. SELECTING A TEXT IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LESSON

The fact is that a text should be at the right level of difficulty for students, but assessing the right level is not as easy as it seems to be. Christine Nuttall (1982) says that readability is the combination of structural and lexical difficulty. As a matter of fact it is not difficult to assess lexical difficulty, unless you do not know your students. One of the ways how to do this is to list all the new words or phrases, remembering to include new uses of familiar words and new idiomatic combinations, for example phrasal verbs, whose meaning is more than the sum of their parts. But if you do not know your students well, you have to find out about them as

soon as possible. If you want to select a suitable text, you have to find out how much language they already know. It may happen that all the students have previously used the same set books, in such a situation you should carry out a research. It would be advisable to make a list of all the words, which occurred in this set of books. The truth is that in most cases the class comes from a variety of backgrounds. Then it is impossible to avoid the period of trial and error. You can find out about your students' level by giving them a series of graded cloze tests. In Nuttall's opinion (1982) you should have a test consisting of a series of brief texts which level is steadily increasing. Students' results will inform you which level they can start at.

Unfortunately most of the classes are mixed-ability classes. That is why you as a teacher have to compromise by choosing material that suits most of your class. In fact how much new vocabulary is acceptable depends on the reader's purpose. If you only want to get the gist of a text, you can skip unfamiliar words and on the other hand, for intensive reading, it is advisable to have quite a lot of new words. It is argued that the ideal text for intensive work would contain no new words at all, unless the student can understand unfamiliar words. In such a situation you have to take your choice: some texts can include only familiar words and the students should already know them, while others can include new words so that students can develop skills for dealing with them.

It is essential that the student should read a lot and they will do it only if they can read with tolerable ease.

Readability cannot be associated just with vocabulary. Structural difficulty is also very important but unfortunately difficult to assess. It is obvious that new grammatical forms, for example tenses or structural words, can cause problems. But the fact is that sentence length and complexity are the main cause of structural difficulty, because they make the relationships between the various parts of the text difficult for the reader to sort out.

The teacher should remember to include a variety of books on subject known to appeal to the students. That is why it is important to carry out an investigation of what your own students like before you order many books or select reading materials.

You should take into account what students have actually read as well as what they would choose to read. You should look for a book that is going to interest the greatest number of students and that will not bore the students and you of course.

These criteria are useful for extensive reading material. But many of the same criteria apply also for intensive reading, but for this purpose you should choose material that is not only interesting but worth spending time on.

10. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING LESSON?

It is obvious that when the students read they improve their knowledge of a foreign language. But in Christine Nuttall's opinion (1982) reading should be considered as a kind of bonus and not as a purpose of a reading lesson.

The truth is that the teachers are interested in the understanding that results from reading. That is why we select the texts that give practice in this process, but to improve students' knowledge of the content is not our aim. We want our students to learn how the language is used for conveying content and we want them to develop the skills that are needed to extract the content from the language that expresses it. These skills are necessary to become an effective reader. The teachers' aim is to push a student as far as possible towards becoming an effective reader. In fact every text we use during the reading course is a step towards that target. When choosing a text we should think what sort of interpretive skills it demands and what methods we will be able to use to help your students to develop them. But the most important is that the text should interest the students.

We must be aware of the fact that the text that is linguistically too difficult for the students will not help them to develop most of reading skills. If this text is full of new vocabulary items and complex structures, our students will resort to translation. In such a case their process to achieve independence in reading will be very slow. A well chosen text does not demand a steady intervention of a teacher. If you cannot find a suitable original text, it is better to simplify a text to the level of the students. But when you simplify a text, you have to be very careful not to remove basic qualities of this text, for example discourse. Above all, you ought to retain as much as possible of the textual quality and discourse structure of the original. You have to think carefully before choosing a text so that your students work with a text, which will help them to develop reading skills and their intelligence.

11. WHAT SORT OF TEXT SHOULD WE USE DURING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LESSON?

The fact is that the more linguistically difficult the text is and the more information it carries, the more time you must spend on it. It is obvious that if students are to read faster and develop the skills of skimming and scanning, they must practice on simple material. The material which you choose to develop the students' reading speed, scanning and skimming must be well below the level of current textbook, because the students may feel inse-

cure if you want them to stop paying the same attention to each word in the text. Once you notice that your students can get the gist of a text without reading every word, you can give them more difficult texts. The most important thing is that you must help your students how to skim or scan the text, which contains many new words or is difficult in other ways. You must not let students read such texts fast and with understanding because it is impossible to do.

12. WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON READING PROBLEMS?

There are six main areas of reading failure:

- *Insufficient sight vocabulary.* The child's fluency is hindered because the number of unknown words is too great.

- *Inadequate visual analysis skills.* The child has difficulty in separating words into parts that are going to help in the recognition of words.

- *Inadequate auditory analysis skills.* The child has difficulty in applying phonic analysis to both easy and difficult words.

- *Inability to use context clues.* The child has difficulty in using the information given in the text to anticipate the meaning of new and unfamiliar words.

- *Inadequate comprehension skills.* The child has difficulty in gaining meaning from what is read and in thinking through the ideas in the text.

- *Inefficient rates of reading.* The child lacks the understanding of the need to adopt his reading style to suit his particular purpose for reading and the particular text being read.

The most important method to find out about the student's reading difficulties is to examine the mistakes that they are doing while reading. As a matter of fact the teacher should find out about the kind of errors the students make rather than count the number of errors made by them.

The fact is that the main problem is with the students who turn out to read very badly. You as a teacher have to deal with it. If a student reads slow, it is enough sometimes to supply them with additional easy material on which they can practice improving their reading speed, but this student needs to be encouraged. But if such a student has more reading problems, they will need special attention. Then you must carry out the remedial program. The most important ingredients of such a program are time and caring.

You must prevent your lessons from being boring and monotonous. There are lots of new books which propose a range of activities which make a lesson much more interesting. You have to choose the activities which best suit the text you want to study. Your reading lesson should reflect the fact that we read different texts for different purposes.

The fact is that reading is an invisible and private process, but you need to make sure that it is really taking place in order to judge the success of your approach. You can use discussion which gives the weaker students a chance to see for themselves how they got on with reading and which gives all the students a chance to learn from one another. But you cannot listen to each student and discuss the text with every individual student.

That is why you need another form of testing - a feedback: information about how students are progressing and where their problems are.

The teacher must remember that the primary purpose of reading tasks is the process not the outcome. We should not say that such tasks are to give you feedback. The teacher should state a clear purpose for reading. We must choose tasks which are to force students to think when reading to make students interact with the text. Students have to be taught how to approach the text in order to become the efficient readers. We also have to remember that the meaning is not in the text but each reader brings his own meaning to what he reads on the base of what they expect from the text and their previous knowledge. That is why we must not impose our own interpretation of the text on the learners.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have described certain techniques which help develop and improve the students' reading skills. All we need to remember is that reading is an active and involving process. That is why the reader must be able to work out what they want to achieve and how well they are progressing when reading. The process of reading involves many skills. That is why the teacher's role in enhancing the reading skills is enormous. It is the teacher who should help students to cope with reading problems. The fact is that it is possible only when the students are interested in improving their reading skills and willing to cooperate with the teacher. To make the students eager to develop the reading skills the teacher should tell the students what the aim of each reading activity is. The teacher should capture the students' attention and motivate them to overcome the reading problems. The teacher should show the students benefits of reading.

Every reader should be aware of the fact that reading is unconscious language learning. When reading activities we acquire the language. Moreover, reading makes it easier to memorize vocabulary, grammar structures and later on to put them into use. It does not matter if we are effective or ineffective readers, because we all have opportunities and a chance to improve our reading skills. All we need is willingness and perseverance to achieve success in reading competence.

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