

TEACHING OF READING SKILLS

by

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LEARNING to read is possibly the most complex mental activity. It is a slow and difficult process. Some people do not progress past the early stages of their life and others never manage to master this complex skill at all. It takes time, effort and practice. The more practice a student has, the more confident and competent he will become. A skilled teacher can specify applications suitable for a wide range of language situations to enable his students to acquire the reading skills (Long and Richards: 1993).

Reading is often known as a 'receptive' skill. Students need to react to what they read in order to understand the meaning of what has been written. A successful reader needs to master two distinct processes. Firstly, he must decipher the language in its written form and to do this, he must be able to recognize the letter or symbol shapes of the written form of the language. In the case of a second language, these may be different from those of his first language. Secondly, having identified the letters or symbol shapes, he has to interpret the meanings that these letters or symbol shapes represent in the form of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs. A skilled reader needs to learn and master language skills, some of which may be the same as or different from his first language. The language teacher should examine the background of his students so as to plan strategies for helping them to develop their reading skills for the new language (Nuttall: 1994).

As far as teaching method is concerned, there is no one right way to teach reading in secondary schools. In general, teachers' approach of teaching reading skills should match students' reading style. Some teachers may find that phonics, drills and worksheets are ineffective. Some teachers may advocate the global method, which requires high-interest materials involving students emotionally. There are others who prefer the tactile or kinesthetic approach with hands-on resources such as computers, typewriters, games and visuals.¹

Broadly speaking, there are two types of reading: content-focused and skills-focused. Content-focused reading is when a person reads to learn facts and obtain information from a text. The vast majority of reading falls into this category. When the purpose of the reading exercise is to develop reading skills, content-focused reading becomes inappropriate. The student has inadequate language ability and insufficient reading skills for such content-focused activity. The objective of the reading exercise should be to develop the skills that the student needs not just to read a class text, but any similar text of a comparable level of difficulty. In this kind of reading, the content is incidental and is not important for its own sake, but as a means to an end (Chaika 1994).

Semantics is the study of word meanings. When reading, a person tries to understand the meaning of words on the page. Skilled readers are able to use their background knowledge, especially their grammatical and lexical knowledge to guess the meaning of words they do not know. Predicting is closely related to guessing word meanings as it involves using background knowledge

1 Marie Carbo, 'Deprogramming Reading Failure: Giving Unequal Learners an Equal Chance,' *Phill Delta Kappan* 69 (3) (November 1987): 197-201.

and information in the text to predict the content of the text. As a person reads, he continually updates his reading predictions by analyzing, questioning and inferring based on his understanding of the text. Skilled readers also draw conclusions from their reading (Thomas and Robinson: 1972).

Syntax basically means the word order in a sentence. Word order is an important aspect of grammar in English, as a change in word order brings a change in meaning. For example, the sentence 'the man ate the fish' has a complete different meaning from another sentence using the same words but with a change in word order, 'the fish ate the man'! Skilled readers reach a clearer understanding of what they read by using their knowledge of grammar, syntax and lexis. This knowledge also helps them in understanding meanings indicated by word order such as sentences showing cause and effect, sequence of events and subject and object relations. (Meyer and Keefe 1995).

A text is more than a list of individual sentences. The sentences relate to each other to convey meaning. This relationship of meanings between sentences is called discourse. A student should learn to recognize and understand particular words, which show relationship between sentences. They are known as discourse markers and they include the sequence of sentences, the use of grammar and the use of words like 'subsequently', 'although', 'before', 'then', 'however' etc. Knowledge of these discourse markers will help students in their reading comprehension (Argondizzon: 1992).

Intensive reading, sometimes called analytical or study reading involves close reading of a text to understand the meaning in great detail. This type of reading needs a slow speed. It is usually taught in higher Forms in schools through reading comprehension. Reading comprehension exercises require students to read a passage of a certain length and then answer questions about the content. Students may also learn to write a summary or precis about the passage in their own words. Teachers have to guide students in stages to master this skill. A test of vocabulary is often included in such an exercise (Weir: 1996).

Extensive reading is reading for general knowledge, enjoyment and leisure. It is encouraged in schools by using supplementary reading materials for reading outside the classroom in order to foster reading habit among students. One way of helping students in extensive reading is supplying them with simplified but interesting story books. The teacher may ask the students to read the books at home for a week and then require them to retell the story in their own words in class. This task may be modified slightly by asking the students to note and describe the main characters and highlights of the books. They may also write a critique or review about the books they read. Teachers can organize an extensive reading program whereby students are required to read a number of books each semester and the teachers keep a record of their reading skills (Krashen: 1981).

Skimming is reading quickly through a chapter, paragraph or book to find the main idea. It is a sub-skill to acquire for fast reading. One common approach to train students to develop this sub-skill is by giving them a passage to read through quickly and asking them to tell the gist of it in their own words. They may also be asked to supply a title or heading for the passage (Grellet: 1981).

Scanning, like skimming, involves rapid reading to find something particular in a text. Students are trained to acquire this sub-skill in order to look for particular information or details of events in a reading passage. Newspapers are good materials for such an exercise. Students can eventually be equipped with the skills of how to use the parts of a book such as the preface, title

page, glossary, index and chapter heading etc. Simple tasks like locating dates, names and events (Scanning) can be extended to reading primarily for attaining the gist of subject matter (Skimming). Library resources, classified advertisements and telephone directories may be utilized for such an exercise. The development of these sub-skills is founded on the belief that a teacher's responsibility is not to teach students to read, but to make it possible for them to learn to read (McWorter: 1996).

One of the pressing problems faced by teachers today is the selection of suitable instructional materials to develop students' reading skills in English as a second language. The materials chosen need to be representative of the kinds of texts the students may find for future use. There should be sufficient variety of genres, including essays, stories, narrative descriptions, plays, poems, graphs, tables and charts which give information in well-written language. A variety of writings should be represented so that students are exposed to different styles of writing. The content of the texts should be sufficiently varied to take account of different interests and needs of the students.²

Some may like to read science fiction and about computers, while others may prefer love and war stories. It is important that the texts are motivating and can help students to generate a love for reading. Sometimes, there is very little actual class time for students to learn to read books in a second language. The best way to ensure students can acquire the necessary reading skills is to follow the philosophy that 'Reading teachers reading' (Bowen and Marks: 1993). Many students who can read do not in fact, read. Teachers must encourage such students. Learning is a personal enterprise and no learning can take place unless the students' attention is engaged by learning materials through which they are to learn. The content of the materials is important, in that it serves to enhance and strengthen student motivation. To the students, it is often not the second language which is being explored, but it is the content of the reading material which is being explored through language. Content, far from being merely something to practise language with, has an intrinsic appeal to the students. A subconscious absorption of the language can be indirectly facilitated (Brinton, Snow and Wesche: 1994).

The way in which a text is presented affects teaching and learning in the language classroom. It can affect the way students react to it and directly affect their interest in the subject. When students meet a text which the teacher has managed to arouse interest in, they usually read it more enthusiastically and purposefully. A text that is presented in small, manageable instalments tends to appeal more to students than a passage of same total length presented in one lesson. Similarly, texts that are accompanied by lively illustrations tend to have immediate appeal than texts which lack illustrations.

A text is easier to understand if it is on a familiar topic. Students' background knowledge may include not only their awareness of a particular topic, but also their awareness of different types of materials: advertisements, timetables, programs, newspapers, magazines, and various types of books. Teachers should be sensitive towards their needs, abilities and interest (Dubin, Eskey and Grabe: 1996).

2 Frank Smith. (1978). *Reading*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. p.6-7.

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