

Unit 9

Teaching Reading Skills

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Thus, Reading occupies a central role in world-wide communication. The teaching of reading has been an essential part of learning a language ever since foreign language began to be taught¹.

However, though reading has continued to play an important role in teaching the foreign language, our knowledge of the process of reading itself is limited. And this knowledge, in any case, is derived from research in the native language, and particularly from the development in psycholinguistic research².

1. Objectives of Teaching Reading.

The teaching of reading aims at training students to:

- * form their expectations for a reading activity,
- * encourage students to take risks in guessing, in ignoring the fact that they should always be correct,
- * train students to use the minimum number of syntactic and semantic clues to obtain the maximum amount of information.

Since language is a tool for communication, the teaching of reading should focus on the message or meaning and not on the medium or structure.

Students should therefore be trained to be flexible in reading by using different kinds of exercises, i.e. to:

- * obtain specific information (scanning),
- * obtain the general idea (skimming),

¹ (Kelly, 1969). One can recall the reading method' of teaching which aimed at the acquisition of new vocabulary through fluent reading.

² (See supplementary No. 10)

- * obtain a comprehensive understanding of reading (through comprehension) or
- * evaluate information (critical reading).

2. Approaches to Teaching Reading.

2.1. The pedagogical Approach.

- * The pedagogical approach is organised around a reading passage accompanied by comprehension questions.
- * The passage is usually used as a vehicle to consolidate structure and vocabulary.
- * It is thus used as a means to grammatical knowledge rather than as a manifestation of discourse¹.

Passages which contain syntactic structures and lexical items beyond the learners' competence are not easy to comprehend. The procedure to follow in this case is to provide a list of the problematic words and phrases and their meanings before learners are given the opportunity to read the passage. These are called "primary glossaries²". The aim here is to prepare the learner beforehand to encounter difficulties in reading the passage³.

Alternatively, words which are assumed to create difficulty through context can be glossed after the passage, and the reader's attention is directed to them. They appear in the footnotes or in the margins alongside the passage⁴.

¹ Even when the passage is put in the form of a dialogue, it is still used as a device to display "usage" rather than "use". It therefore misrepresents the normal use of language

² (Widdowson, 1978).

³ Such glossaries which give the meaning in advance might inhibit the reader's attempt to discover the meaning for himself and hinder his ability to interpret the passage. Reading becomes, in this case, simply a matter of recognising given and fixed meanings as they occur in the passage.

⁴ Widdowson (1978) calls them "prompting glossaries".

Primary and prompting glossaries tend to assist the learner in interpreting the discourse for himself. They, therefore reduce the development of effective reading strategy.

- * The reader becomes engaged in understanding a particular passage not the development of an interpreting strategy which can be applied to other types of discourse.
- * In addition, such glossaries give the passage the impression of being a language learning exercise and reduce the possibility of authentic discourse¹.

In short, the pedagogical approach, with its emphasis on the simplification of language structures, falls short of teaching reading as communication. In order to acquire communicative competence the learner should be trained to treat reading passages as discourse, as instances of “use” rather than as instances of “usage” in Widdowson’s terms.

2.2. The communicative approach.

In the communicative approach to reading, the reader is presented with a purpose (often solving a problem). In trying to solve a problem the student is dealing with language.

The reader may be asked to transfer information derived from the text to other forms of communication such as visual display using listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. For example:

- * The students could be instructed to scan the passage to get specific information.
- * They could be asked to transfer such information to other forms such as a table summary indicating the general categories and specific details.
- * The table could be provided by the teacher as an exercise or devised by the students themselves.

¹ Primary and prompting glossaries have, however, the advantage of simplifying the passage, but they do not develop the communicative ability of the learner.

- * This table summary is then used as a basis for class discussion or written exercises.
- * Thus, the information obtained from the reading passage is transferred to speaking, listening and writing activities so that the four language skills are integrated together. In this way, the writer and reader communicate with each other as do the speaker and the listener.

The interactive nature of reading can be illustrated through presentation of dialogues. The reader can be asked to formulate questions to which the writer's statements are responses. This can be successfully done when the dialogue is a discussion or an argument¹.

This view of reading as a conversation between the writer and the reader leads us to consider the other important aspect of spoken interaction: prediction.

- * Like the listener, the reader can predict what will come next².
- * It also depends on the reader's knowledge of the topic and its relationship to the real world.

Exercises which develop the ability of constructing a text are those which ask the readers to construct a text following a specification of a given note³.

These sorts of exercises move the readers from the receptive reading activities half-way to productive writing. Thus, reading involves a more active contribution by the receiver than was traditionally thought. The trend is towards the

¹ In this way, the reader contributes actively to the creation of discourse, and becomes an active participant in a joint act of silent dialogue.

² This ability to predict depends on knowledge of the language code and the fact that certain items are more likely to occur than others.

³ For example, the students can be given a list of headings representing different functions which form the rhetorical organisation of the text. They are then asked to match scrambled sentences to produce the complete set.

integration of the active skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking – a feature of communicative methodology¹.

Finally, in the communicative approach, students are encouraged to treat reading as discourse. Examined passages are linked together and taught as a whole to form a normal rhetorical unit².

However, passages should be introduced in a gradual process reflecting increased complexity.

- * One might begin with an introductory account of the subject.
- * Then introduce paragraphs which explain causes and consequences.
- * Passages might begin with the main points of an argument and go on to their development later.
- * Thus a gradual shift is involved from a controlled projection of a single paragraph to a passage containing several which form a complete whole.

3. Reading exercises.

3.1. Skimming.

Skimming is quick reading which is intended to give the general idea of the text. This skill is useful when the reader is given time-limits and has to read something very quickly. The only effective way to teach this skill is to force students to read rapidly in order to get some information³.

3.2. Scanning.

¹ Thus, students become more motivated to listen, speak, read, and write, since each activity enables the students to perform a task beyond the one which they are carrying out at the moment.

² Thus having introduced the parts of the discourse, the teacher should deal with the whole as a complete unit in a rhetorical context.

³ For example, the teacher formulates questions at the beginning of the activity and asks students to read the passage quickly to find the answers.

This skill is similar to skimming in that the reader is forced to read quickly, but the search here is for specific information (a date, a number, or a place). Thus, in addition to taking advantage of contextual clues, the reader is taught to be aware of graphic forms such as:

- * a written number
- * a numeral,
- * a capitalised word,
- * or short phrases containing key words.

3.3. Reading for Through comprehension.

Reading for through comprehension is intended to train students to get the total message of a passage: its main points and supporting details.

- * Comprehension questions can assist the students in developing thorough comprehension of the passage.
- * The teacher must make sure that the questions reflect the focus and direction of the passage.
- * He must also ensure that the students have access to the information demanded by the questions.

3.4. Critical reading.

This skill aims at pushing the students beyond the through comprehension stage and encouraging them to evaluate what they read. This critical reading can be developed when we introduce passages of reading which argue a particular point of view and invoke other suggestions.

Questions that would develop this critical reading are of this kind:

- * For what purpose and for what audience is this intended?

- * Are you convinced of the evidence presented?
- * Do you agree with the writer's point of view?

These sorts of questions open up new lines of thought and lead to discussion in which the students use vocabulary and information from the passage¹.

4. Language exercises.

Learners' efficiency in reading depends on their proficiency in language. Exercises which treat specific language problems in reading are, therefore, necessary. Special attention should be paid to vocabulary and syntax.

4.1. Vocabulary.

You can often guess the general meaning of a difficult word by looking at the context, the other words in the sentence or nearby sentences².

Vocabulary exercises should aim at training the learners how to use context to understand the meaning of lexical items as words never stand in isolation. The use of context requires the analysis of syntactic and morphological clues.

Syntactic clues can help the reader understand unfamiliar words from the context³.

¹ It should be noted that the majority of ESL/EFL textbooks do not ask such questions and take the points of view of the author for granted. Such textbooks may be responsible for hindering the critical reading skills of the students.

² In the example below, the underlined words help you guess the meaning of the **boldfaced** words.

Examples:

The bus can only **crawl** along because there is a lot of traffic.

The air is **stuffy** because the windows are closed. (Lee & Gundersen, 2002, p. 132)

³ For example, if the reader is told that the unfamiliar item is verb, he begins to make inferences about the previous items: whether they are nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. The structure of the sentence which contains the unfamiliar item then makes sense to him.

Morphological clues can also provide some help in understanding parts of speech which give some sense to the text. Exercises on stems and affixes can help the reader attack unfamiliar words.

A variety of exercises can be devised to infer meaning of unfamiliar words from the context.

- * The teacher may use short texts containing unfamiliar words and offer a choice of explanations/ definitions to use these words¹.
- * At advanced levels, students are required to supply specific words which replace more complex meaning.

It is necessary to build into the learners the confidence to adopt a positive attitude towards the new lexical items.

- * They should learn to continue reading if they encounter a new unfamiliar item and not to stop reading.
- * They should be made aware that they can continue reading and obtain a general understanding of the item if the meaning is not clear in order to get some more evidence to support their inference.
- * It is important to tell the learners that probability is all we need.²

4.2. Syntax.

The syntactic structure of the text can create some problems. The student who does not know what a pronoun refers to or who can not supply the full version of an elliptical sentence will not be able to understand the text.

Discourse markers such as “however”, “although”, “furthermore”, “namely”, mark the functional value of sentences; they tell the intention of the writer.

¹ The student’s task is to choose the correct explanation that matches the unfamiliar words.

² They are not expected to reach a 100% understanding of the text. As they read, probabilities gradually turn into certainties, without conscious effort in arriving at an exact interpretation.

- * A discourse marker such as “although” means that the writer is conceding something.
- * If the writer uses the word “namely”, he is specifying something and so on.
Discourse markers such as these are extremely useful for the reader.
- * If a reader comes across a difficult clause introduced by “but”, he realises from this word that the clause contradicts the meaning conveyed in the previous sentence.

Thus by focusing on the interpretation of cohesive devices, functions, and organisation, the reader can approach the complex process of comprehension.

Sentences can be made simple by finding the reference words in the sentence and what they refer to.

- * Readers need to refer to other parts of the text by identifying words like “it”, “he”, “our”, “this”, “those”, “then”, “one”... etc¹.

In explaining the text structure:

- * it is necessary to display the text so that it can be seen by everyone.
- * you may underline, circle, or draw lines from one word to another,
- * use colour to indicate differences in function or structure,
- * block off certain sections, write in the margins and so on².

5. Discourse Exercises.

The reader needs to know the functions of the sentences in the text.

- * He needs to recognise that the writer is defining something, making a hypothesis, giving an example... etc.

¹ * These words signal the readers to seek the meaning in the text and identify the previous referent.

² An overhead projector would be an efficient way of doing it.

- * Discourse markers such as “therefore”, “for example”, “however” can tell the reader the functional value of sentences.

When there is no such explicit signal the reader has to make some inferences to work out for himself whether the sentences at hand are intended to be a hypothesis, an example, a statement... etc¹.

5.1. Identifying the Rhetorical structure.

- * The functional value of sentences in the text can only be made more clear in a context.
- * The context consists of sentences which take their value from one another.
- * The relationship which exists between these sentences reflects the rhetorical structure of the text which underlies the ideas and the connections which the writer makes between them.

The rhetorical structure of the text can be seen more clearly when we consider:

- * The topic of the text,
- * The writer’s purpose in writing it, and
- * The audience which the writer has in mind².

In recognising the paragraph, the reader needs to:

- * identify the topic,
- * the main point,
- * the minor or supporting points and so on³.

¹ In other words, the reader needs to have recourse to discourse skills such as the ability to identify the rhetorical structure, to make inferences, and predictions, in order to arrive at an overall understanding of the text.

² These three elements: topic, purpose, and the intended audience, give us a good idea about the text, its rhetorical structure and how the ideas hang together.

³ For example the reader may realise that the first sentence of a paragraph may be an assertion, the second and third sentences may substantiate it with examples, and the fourth may modify the sentence by a reservation and so on.

The paragraph can be organised according to:

- * the sequence of events or
- * the logical progression from general to specific or
- * from specific to general.

The reader needs to know the hierarchical organisation of the text above the paragraph level.

- * The largest unit is the whole text which is composed of sections.
- * Each section has an internal structure which can stand alone and consists of smaller units at the level of the clause and the word.

It may help the reader to know the principles on which the text is organised.

- * whether it is organised on outlining the problem, offering a hypothesis or an experiment to test or stating a summary of findings and so on.

If the reader understands the overall organisation of the text, he will be in a better position to understand the individual parts of it and will have a clearer understanding of the text.

5.2. Presupposition and Making inferences.

At times, the reader can not trace the development of the writer's ideas through connections made between sentences. It is likely that this will happen when the writer presupposes that the reader will make inferences to bridge the gap. He expects the reader to have his own knowledge, experience, opinions, and attitudes to understand the text¹.

5.3. Prediction.

¹ For example, in a text in which facts or points in an argument are made clear, the reader can reach unstated conclusions.

e.g.: Mr. Zaki owns 6 restaurants (fact)
He's probably very busy (inference).

This skill relates to the development of thought in the text rather than to a specific feature of it.

- * The organisation of the text can possibly enable the reader to predict what it will contain.
- * The reader can begin to predict from the moment he reads the title. He forms expectations of what the text will contain. This will make the reader actively involved and make him think about the topic.

If the reader formulates his predictions as questions in advance and expects the text to answer his questions, he is preparing himself to read for a purpose. He is likely to see which of his questions are answered and which are not. When reading becomes geared for a purpose, the reader is likely to understand better.

Predictions can be made at a number of levels.

- * The title of the book can help the learner predict the topic and how it is treated.
- * From the beginning of the sentence, the reader can predict its end.
- * The reader can also predict what will happen next in a story¹.

Consider the following method:

Method:

- * Expose the first paragraph of the text and allow time for the students to read it. Make sure it is understood. Discuss what the paragraph is doing².
- * Next ask what the next paragraph is likely to do: will it give specific examples to support the generalization? Or will it qualify the generalization in some way? If it is a story, what will happen next?³

¹ How the writer is going to develop his argument, or what methods will be used to test a hypothesis.

² For instance, perhaps it is making a generalisation, or it may be the beginning of a story.

³ The students should look for the clues as to the line the writer is likely to follow, and should be encouraged to propose questions they think the writer will have to deal with either now or later.

- * When it has been discussed enough, expose the second paragraph and discuss how far it agrees with the prediction and the reasons for choosing this rather than another way of developing the text. Then repeat the above process with this paragraph, and so on¹.

Prediction helps the learner learn better:

- * New information is easily assimilated if it can be fitted into an existing framework of ideas in the learner mind.
- * In addition, prediction can be a sign that the learner has understood the text.
- * When the reader understands the text, he can say what is likely to come next².

6. Classification of Reading Tasks.

Reading tasks can be classified into three categories: tasks which do not require the use language, those which involve spoken language, and those which make use of writing.

6.1. Tasks which do not require the use of language ask the learner to:

- * draw a diagram,
- * complete a table,
- * classify some information in the text,
- * make, arrange, or do something which does not involve use of ink or paper such as operating a machine, or carrying out instructions.

¹ (Nuttall, 1983, p. 121).

Exercises on predictions such as this make the students very much involved in reading. They are useful even when the predictions are not correct, as mistaken predictions can show the sources of misunderstanding and help avoid false assumptions.

² And if the learner can decipher the thoughts of the writer in advance he will be able to understand what the writer is in fact saying.

6.2. Tasks which involve spoken language can be used in the form of:

- * dramatisation and role play.
- * debate and discussion based on the text which introduces the students to the topic and exposes them to different points of view¹.
- * Another task which involves the use of spoken language is reading aloud which is widely used as a practice technique in most language classrooms. This task has been widely criticised. The main criticism is that reading aloud does not help students concentrate on meaning².

6.3. Tasks which require the use of writing involve summarising and note-taking, translation, and the use of the cloze procedure.

Summarising and note-taking.

- * Students could be asked to write a summary of the text or to complete a gapped summary in which the omitted words are carefully chosen to pinpoint possible interpretations. Or,
- * the student may be asked to correct an incorrect summary³.

¹ Discussion can help the readers see for themselves the process of making sense of the text and help them learn from each other.

² It should be noted that learners need to understand what they read rather than give performance of the text. It is therefore necessary to study the text, discuss it first and understand it well before reading it aloud.

³ It should be made clear that summarizing can be an extremely useful exercise which demands a full understanding of the text. It requires lucid and accurate expressions and, therefore, it is not recommended for beginning students.

To make the exercise simpler, the teacher must select the information in the text that can be used in summary form, and not to ask for a summary of the whole text¹.

Translation.

Translation is another way of exploiting the text by the use of writing. It requires an excellent command of the native language and the target language, and a supreme understanding of the text. It helps the students arrive at a satisfactory comprehension of the text.

The cloze procedure.

Finally we consider the cloze procedure as a teaching device which involves the use of writing.

- * A cloze text consists of an introductory sentence without omissions.
- * Then every seventh word in the following sentences is deleted.
- * Students should have enough time to read through the text to supply the missing words.
- * Then, the teacher calls for suggestions to fill in the gaps.
- * Students should be given the opportunity to choose the best answer and give their reasons for rejecting words while the teacher should do little of the talking.

¹ Nuttall (1982) gives the following example:

(On a text in which an account is given of an incident that took place in a school, and for which several boys were to blame).

Write notes for the headmaster on the part played by each boy, with a comment on the extent to which each was to blame. (p. 142).

A great deal of learning takes place here as students try to supply the missing words¹.

It is clear then that reading entails the use of writing. It follows that writing is a skill that should be acquired since it is integrated with the other basic skills of the language such as listening, speaking, and reading as we have seen in previous units. It is to the skill of writing that we now turn in some detail in the following unit.

¹ Choosing the right word requires the reader to read ahead as well as to bear in mind what has been said before. This may require the skill of inference and the ability to understand what is directly stated.

Supplementary No. 10: The Psycholinguistic View

Psycholinguistics offers some insights into the reading process.

- * According to the psycholinguistic view, the process of reading does not involve the use of all information in the text, but a selection of language cues to arrive at meaning.
- * In addition, the reader resorts to his background knowledge and relies only partly on graphic representation. The psycholinguistic perspective of reading is summarised by Goodman (1967) as follows:

Reading is a selective process. It involves partial available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed. Rejected, or refined as reading progresses. (PP. 126-127).

- * The reader extracts part of the graphic material and creates a replica of the message.
- * He uses orthographic, semantic and syntactic clues in the reconstruction of the text in order to understand how reading works. This process of using the language code to understand the message involves language and thought.
- * The reader brings to the task his ideas, attitudes, and beliefs.
- * This background knowledge and the ability to make linguistic predictions determine the expectations of the reader as he reads.

Reading is thus an active process.

- * The reader forms expectations about the material,
- * He then selects the most productive cues to confirm or reject them.

- * He achieves that while he is engaged in a sampling process in which he takes advantage of his knowledge of language and the real world. Reading skill, therefore, entails efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and background knowledge.

The reader then tests the accuracy of the constructed information against previous information which he has already stored in the long-term memory dealing with the same topic. If the reader confirms that the reconstruction is in agreement with previous knowledge, the cycle of sampling begins again. If the reconstruction is inaccurate or inconsistent with previous knowledge, the reader then uses a strategy of reading or suspension of belief. (Coady, 1970).

The psycholinguistic model assumes that a reader will have a number of potential points from which uncertainty may arise. This is the point which Goodman makes when he refers to reading as “a psycholinguistic guessing game”. Goodman indicates that readers guess wrongly at certain points. Proficient readers recover from such wrong guesses and are a little hampered by them, while poor readers do not recover and fall into wrong previous information and wrong predictions.

Unlike unskilled readers, fluent readers use a minimum sampling of text to derive the meaning by using world knowledge, language and reading knowledge as a substitute for redundant features of the text; they approach the text with expectations based on their knowledge of the subject. They confirm or revise these expectations as they proceed in reading the material. They, then, build more expectations on the bases of what has been read.

The psycholinguistic view of reading puts the traditional concerns of teaching reading into question. Thus, word recognition, word perception, and word attack skills are no longer under consideration. The focus instead shifts to a consideration of language as an organised whole which consists of several parts, and words constitute only one part.