



Developing New Strategies for Reading

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This article focuses on the reading strategies of skimming, scanning and detailed reading, which learners mostly from elementary to pre-intermediate require for the effective comprehension of a reading text. It also analyses the issues in teaching sub-skills of reading and provides suggestions pertaining to those issues discussed.

Learners at lower-levels generally need to develop the habit of reading, as they do not read much outside the classroom. Teaching the learners to use reading strategies effectively will help them develop a more positive attitude towards reading. Learners are required to read General English texts intensively, as in reading short texts for comprehension, and extensively, i.e. reading novels, stories. They also need to employ a range of strategies when reading a text, be it for a General English course, or for future needs, such as the IELTS exam.

As Richards and Renandya (2012: 273) states, “reading... is a skill highly valued by students and teachers alike” and, at some point, “learners must learn to make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn other information” (Ibid.). Hence they should be exposed to a variety of reading texts and genres, as the significance of “a broad diet of texts cannot be overstated” (Wallace, 1992: 68).

At pre and intermediate level, learners are trained to use various strategies of reading to be able to read academic texts. Reading strategies involve different ways of processing text, which will vary with “the nature of the text, the reader’s purpose and the context of situation” (Wallace, 1992: 57).

A reader can approach the text in different ways: top-down or bottom-up. One may adopt a top-down approach to predict the meaning, and then move to the bottom-up to understand the overall meaning of the text, what is known as ‘interactive reading’ (Nuttall, 2005:17). Both ways can be “mobilised by conscious choice, and both are important strategies for readers” (Ibid).

The three main strategies in reading are skimming, scanning and detailed reading.

Skimming:

Skimming is done at high speed. It requires “quickly running one’s eyes over a text to get the gist of it” (Grellet, 1981: 4). A reader does not try to read for details. Skimming may involve trying to decipher the main idea of the text through textual clues such as headings, sub-headings and some lines from each paragraph to understand the gist of the text.

Skimming to get a top-down view of the text is particularly useful for reading difficult texts (Nuttall, 2005).

Scanning:

Reading for specific information, also known as scanning, happens at high speed. It requires “quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information” (Grellet, 1981: 4).

When scanning, the reader’s focus is on the key words, numbers or dates, etc., to locate the information quickly, whether it is the beginning, or middle or at the end. Nuttall defines scanning as glancing rapidly through a text “to search for a specific piece of information” (2005: 49).

Activities such as skimming and scanning prepare the reader for reading in detail. “As they read more fluently and get the gist of a text more easily, a deeper and more detailed understanding of the text can be worked toward” (Grellet, 1981: 6).

Detailed Reading:

In contrast to skimming and scanning, reading in detail is a slow and careful process in which a reader stops to think, go back and re-read a text. This involves reading shorter texts to extract maximum details from it.

For detailed reading of a text, the learner will need an understanding of:

Inferring:

The ability to read between the lines or to get the meaning an author implies but does not state directly. All comprehension strategies involve inferring in the sense that comprehension requires readers to note text clues, to access prior knowledge associated with those clues and infer what the meaning is (Duffy, 2012: 122). A reader’s understanding of meaning involves the understanding of conceptual, propositional, contextual and pragmatic meanings within the text (Nuttall 2005: 21-22).

- Conceptual meaning refers to the meaning a word has.
- Propositional meaning refers to the meaning a sentence has on its own.
- Contextual meaning refers to the meaning a sentence has in context.
- Pragmatic meaning reflects the meaning that is construed by the interaction between writer and reader.

Cohesion:

It involves identifying referencing words and cohesive features, such as pronoun reference, and lexical cohesion to understand the text. In addition to cohesive devices, the learner should be aware of the use of discourse markers, such as *thus*, *and*, *however*, *although*, which “help to point out the intended value of the sentence in which they occur” (Nuttall, 2005: 26). E.g. *however* indicates a contrast, *thus*, a result.

Sequencing of sentences:

It involves how the sentences and paragraphs are organized in a text. Nuttall (2005: 28) points out that paragraphs follow a pattern, which can be found in a variety of text types. A paragraph could be organised according to the events or according to a progression of general to a specific idea or from specific to general. Other common structures may include problem-solution, classification-examples, and cause-effect. Recognising the organisation of the text leads to a clearer understanding of the overall message of the reading text (Ibid.).

ISSUES:

Issues with understanding the reading text :

One of the issues with reading, be it skimming, scanning or detailed reading, is that the learners sometimes find textbooks uninteresting. Many learners often complain that the topics are boring and they do not feel motivated to read. They may even argue that some of the topics do not relate to real life. For example, a topic such as “*At Home on Mars*” from *Pathways 1, Unit 6*, may be difficult to comprehend at elementary level due to the lack of background information and thus the learners might not be able to relate to it. “Students naturally often have difficulties with the conceptual content of texts, particularly if the topic is unfamiliar or if writer and reader are from different cultures” (Nuttall, 1996: 41).

Issues with reading speed :

Some of my learners at lower levels tend to be slow in reading. They have a problem recognizing words. While the usual speed of reading usually varies among ESL learners between 90 and 120 words per minute (Duffy, 2009: 32), many learners even at pre-intermediate level read at the rate of 50-70 words per minute.

Faulty reading habits such as finger pointing, regressive eye movements (eyes moving back to check the previous word instead of moving forward) could be the reasons for slower reading (Nuttall, 2005: 54).

Another reason could be due to the learners' lack of practice in reading and they may not even read their L1 texts (in Arabic) efficiently. There is thus a negative transfer of L1 reading habit to L2.

Learners do not understand the concept of skimming or scanning and tend to read each text in detail. They tend to read word by word. Nuttall (Ibid, 48) claims difficulties with scanning and skimming could be attributed to the very "idea that some parts of the text may be ignored or skipped is strange to the students".

Issues with inferring

Unknown lexis

Learners often find it difficult to read the text when they come across unknown lexis. They are unable to guess the meaning from the context and therefore do not skip the sentence and move forward. What they usually resort to is using a bilingual dictionary (usually English-Arabic) to find the meaning of the unknown lexis and this halts the reading process. The learners are also in the habit of using Google Translate in class, which more often than not renders the meaning out of context.

Understanding the propositional, contextual and pragmatic meanings of the text:

Learners are unable to infer the overall meaning of the text, which sometimes leads to apprehension when faced with a new text. This is because they do not know how to deduce the propositional, contextual and pragmatic meanings of the text.

Issues with cohesion :

Learners often struggle to find pronoun referencing or logical connectors within the text. (For example: *There were 10 students in total. Two of them were from the UAE.* Elementary learners might not be able to relate *them* to the object of the previous sentence: anaphoric referencing, *10 students*).

Issues with sequencing of sentences:

Learners often show lack of comprehension of the text, when they do not understand the sequence of the sentences in the given text. They need to be aware of the sequence of the sentences so that they know how a sentence is connected with the previous and the following idea in a text. Examples: sequencing of events or chronological sequencing.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING :

Use of Authentic texts for reading:

As Wallace says, a reading text should "offer high-interest content" (1992: 75) that is, it should evoke learners' prior knowledge, interest or curiosity. "Authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people" (Nuttall 1996:172). Learners can be asked to select the text themselves. Another way to motivate the learners to read is by integrating technology into the reading skill. I have observed that my students are more enthusiastic when reading tasks are given on Moodle (e-learning portal) to practice their reading as they find it more engaging than a paper-based task.

Reading speed :

For improving the reading speed in general, using a cardboard mask above the first line and moving it down as one reads helps to focus the eyes on the line and discourages regressive eye-movement (Nuttall 2005).

Students need to be trained on how to find the answers quickly for certain 'wh' questions like who /what/where/ when/why to be able to locate the information while skimming or scanning for information.

Scanning:

Learners should be told that scanning has to be done fast. It is not scanning unless it is done quickly. They are asked to read the questions and scan for specific information. Giving authentic texts such as Tv Guide or flight timing, helps them practice scanning better as they can transfer the L1 strategies of scanning to L2.

Skimming :

Repeated reading of the same text improves the reading speed. As Hedge says " the same text... can be tackled in a number of ways" (2000: 196).

Using the same text for both helps to increase their reading speed as it was quite effective for both scanning and skimming.

Then they are asked to summarize the main points of a text in less than 15 words. This method makes them focus on the main points of the text, and leave out irrelevant details.

Suggestions for detailed reading

Unknown Lexis :

For most of the issues related to vocabulary, the solution is to encourage the learners to read a wide range of books for “the more fluently and widely a learner reads, the more exposure to the key structures and vocabulary of the second language he or she gains”(Wallace 1992:74).

Learners could be given a text to guess the word from the context. “Context is a strategy because the reader must be thoughtful and use prior knowledge to decide what the unknown word is... Even beginning reader should be taught to use context” (Duffy 2009: 31).

High-frequency words can be pre-taught before reading the passage. Learners are taught to use context clues to guess the meaning of the word. In these exercises for elementary level, the learners are asked to guess the meaning of the words from the context without the aid of a dictionary.

Cohesion:

A short text could be given to identify cohesion within the text to raise their awareness of referencing or how sentences are connected in the text. By identifying the pronouns they can be asked to interpret what they refer to in the text and how the different words are used to refer to the same idea.

Sentence Sequencing :

Learners at Pre-intermediate level could be asked to read the text and identify the organisation of the text by arranging the events in Marc’s life in the right sequence. To further reinforce organization of ideas, they could number the problems and solutions in the correct order. Understanding the organisation of ideas within the text leads to a clearer understanding of the overall message, and the individual parts of it (Nuttall 2005: 29).

Reciprocal Teaching :

One can practice reciprocal teaching in class to break the monotony of a reading class, especially when the learners are asked to read the text in detail. Reciprocal teaching designed by Palincsar and Brown involves a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to students in teaching (Nation: 2009). In reciprocal teaching, a student in each group is assigned the role of a teacher and he/ she demonstrates to the group how the reading strategies could be effectively applied and provides feedback to the learners. Such a practice motivates the class as they respond with greater interest when tutored by their peers.

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