

DEVELOPING READING SKILLS BY

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In this paper, I want to look at reading and some of the factors involved in the process, including reasons for reading and objectives. Then I want to consider some fundamental aspects to be taken into account when devising a course, and some of the techniques for further development in this essential skill.

Reading can be defined as a process of looking at and understanding what is written but it is not as simple as that, for many understand some things and not others and still be reading. Compared to someone who is reading in his own language, the foreign language reader may not understand many things and will have to develop strategies to overcome the problems encountered. Yet, the fact is that, despite this view of what reading is, the reader does not have to look at or understand every word in a text to be able to understand it in some measure. Although there are differences in the way people read, research shows that the efficient reader does not read word by word, but in groups of words, taking what he needs to discover the meaning of the text in an activity which has been called a 'psycholinguistic guessing game'. This does not, however, mean random guessing, but principled and guided by two main sources - the text and what the reader brings to it.

The effective reader brings with him a number of very important things. He knows the writing system and can recognise letters in a printed and handwritten form, and is familiar with the spelling of a wide variety of words. Moreover, this reader already knows many of the words in the text though perhaps not all and, although he may not be able to explain the workings of grammar and syntax, he is nevertheless used to them, and to a variety of words and have therefore acquired a certain amount of vocabulary and are familiar with a range of structures, their knowledge is still limited to cope with the amount of texts they will be confronted with during the course. To add to this, there are marked differences in the ability of the students for, whereas some are able to use a variety of structures

and vocabulary, there are others who cannot, and the numbers of the more able vary from class to class, and from year to year. Further problems are thus introduced.

Whatever the situation, however, one of the main difficulties for the foreign language learner is undoubtedly his incomplete knowledge of the language which will be a major obstacle when dealing with some texts as, most of the time, he uses reading to help him learn the language, unlike the native speaker who uses knowledge of the language to help him read. Nevertheless, reading is not simply understanding the meaning of words and sentences in isolation. Understanding these is important, but the effective reader has to be able to interpret the text as a whole and the relationship between sentences and paragraphs.

Students often find it difficult to follow the writer in this manner. The reason for this may perhaps be that they have been used to texts with clearer 'signposts', like with, because, therefore, for example, etc. which provide clearer indications of the meaning. Many texts do not provide these, making it more difficult for the students to find these relationships, but there are good exercises which can be done to train them.

WHAT THE READER BRING WITH HIM

What the reader brings with him is also important, for readers already have a stock of knowledge or 'knowledge of the world' as it is referred to, when they read a text. They all bring something to the text, but whether it helps them to understand the text or not depends on the content itself and their particular knowledge.

The knowledge readers bring with them does not include that of just a particular topic but normally that of familiarisation with a variety of texts, culture and way of life. If we take articles on sport or entertainment for instance, they generally assume that the reader already knows about the subject, though some readers will already have a lot of information, and others will have little. The reader's ability to interpret the subject will thus vary, causing greater difficulty in some cases, even when the reader speaks the same language as the writer. Of course, for the foreign language learner with his limited stock the problem is greater.

REASONS FOR READING

The reasons why people read are no less important. People read for

a number of reasons whether they are conscious of this or not and their reasons generally come under the headings of reading for information, interest and pleasure I will take a few examples When confronted with warning signs, for instance, people are reading involuntarily The signs are put there to make them stop and draw attention to some kind of danger With timetables, however, people normally just scan them for particular information.

Another example is the local newspaper column Rather than reading in detail, many people just pick out things that interest them whilst others go through it more thoroughly if they are looking for something in particular. With regard to the articles themselves, some people just read the headlines or some headlines and select only a few articles to read in detail, depending on a variety of factors, mainly dictated by tastes and interests Yet when reading a novel, unless it is also for study purposes, the reader does so for pleasure and tends to read fairly rapidly.

As we can see, there are many reasons why people read and differences in the process of reading are largely dependent on the motives the reader has The effective reader adapts to each type and does not read everything slowly.

When we come to the foreign language learner, however, his reasons for reading are not generally for information, interest or pleasure since in most cases reading to learn English will also be his main target The learner may therefore think that he should read slowly and intensively to grasp the meaning of every single word, and if the text is very difficult for him this may be the only way in which he will be able to make sense out of it This may be of help to him yet this slow, intensive way of reading may not make him an effective reader, able to adapt to different styles and purposes. Simply just being able to make out the meanings of words will not suit the purpose if he Wants to be an effective reader it is essential to learn to use language in an adequate manner and with flexibility All the same, reading for the sake of learning and practising language is still a good reason for the language learner to read, but should never be the only one The best thing is for the teacher to set the students a variety of tasks in which they can practise reading in different ways through a range of texts, providing them with different purposes for reading which will help to develop their skills.

READING OBJECTIVES

At this point, it may be useful to consider the objectives the learner has in reading. They may be summed up as reading texts with comprehension; reading flexibly to suit the purpose, to learn language and content from reading, and to read with a sense of critical awareness, although, of course, there will be differences in these objectives.

When we look at the first of these, reading texts with comprehension, we mean that the reader will be able to understand the purpose and function of the text, and also the main topic and how this is developed from one paragraph to another. This also means that he should be able to understand the meaning of sentences and their inter-relationship. The reader will encounter language and sometimes grammatical problems, depending on the extent of his knowledge of language and ability. He will have to acquire techniques in vocabulary and also be prepared to deal with uncertainty.

The second of these, reading flexibly to suit the purpose, means that the learner can read texts in different ways, at different speeds, sometimes intensively, but often that he will be able to skim and scan and read extensively in order to fulfil a number of purposes. Variety in the type of material the learner is presented with in order to develop his skills is therefore fundamental.

In many cases, much of the new language the learner meets will be through reading, which brings us to the third of these objectives, learning new language from the context. Some of this can be learned through guessing or using a dictionary, but being able to recognise a word or guess it is not the same as learning it. He will be able to learn from the content when he can select relevant information, weigh up evidence and arguments, pick out the main points from the mass of detail and evaluate their importance. He will likewise know how to use indexes and headings when he needs reference material as it is obvious that studying and reading skills sometimes overlap, with a great deal of reading activities also being a preparation for study.

Turning to the fourth point, reading with Critical awareness, at least, in some degree the reader ought to be able to look at a text objectively and find out what the writer is actually trying to do in a given text. If we consider advertisements, for example, they are often careful in their use

of rather persuasive language and the reader should be able to detect this. Not all texts, however, are as obvious as advertisements. In fact, they may be far more subtle, biased and tending towards a particular point of view. Some texts may be too complex and escape many of the readers. The language learner therefore needs to be made aware of such tendencies in order to be able to develop his skills.

DEVISING A COURSE

These reading objectives can be a good basis for the language teacher in devising a course. They require thought and planning and also often modification in methods and material as the course progresses, in accordance with the ability of the students and their reactions.

A good way of building the four objectives of comprehension, flexibility, learning through language and content and critical awareness, into a course, is by using themes as the basic unit for organisation, such as for example, food, travel, sport, hobbies, etc. Moreover, this topic approach provides a way of incorporating authentic material into the course. The learner is introduced to new vocabulary and is given the chance to consolidate it by practising it through exercises and activities in the topic. Increasing difficulty in the texts can also be introduced so that there is a progression.

The selection of topics and material is up to the teacher, but will depend on the ability of the students and the level they have already reached, together with the availability of material. The choice is vast and may include reading texts from already prepared material, which is sometimes very good, but not always, as this can sometimes be rather artificial, and it is also important to include what are often termed 'authentic texts', that is any text that has not been written for language learning purposes, including signs, advertisements, stories and novels, postcards, reference books on history, science, etc. and articles. Sticking solely to course book material can be dull. The language is often highly controlled and may offer little variety in text type. When choosing supplementary material, it should offer additional information on the subject or approach it from a fresh perspective, and if the textbook provides a piece of narrative writing it is a good idea. Or the supplementary material when possible, to provide instead a letter or an article.

Authentic material should anyway be used to familiarize the learner with writing that is 'real', with examples of the language as it is really written for a variety of relevant purposes. Moreover, as long as the texts are within the scope of the learners they will be encouraged by the fact that they can understand them, and I have to stress how important encouragement is.

READING TECHNIQUES

Reading techniques to help students with unfamiliar words and complex structures therefore play a major role for, although the students may be used to many of the methods when dealing with texts in their own language, many often find it difficult to apply these to the foreign language. Training the students so that they are able to deal with unfamiliar words and complex sentences without being discouraged is therefore essential.

INFERENCE

I will now look at some of these techniques. When first reading a text, the students should be encouraged to guess the meaning of words and expressions they do not know. Many just want to ask the teacher or open the dictionary - hardly the best thing. First, they ought to attempt finding solutions for themselves and develop the skill of inference, making use of all kinds of syntactical, logical and cultural clues. The skill is vital to their development as readers. This is not to be confused with the times when they do need to find precise meanings for words and for which they have to use a dictionary, in itself a valuable skill and one which is not as easy as it sounds for, in many instances, students are unable to select the best or even the right word, and also need practice in the technique.

LINKING SENTENCES AND IDEAS

Students need to be able to understand a text as a whole. They need to realize that it is not made up of isolated sentences which, though significant in themselves, work together to form a text if they are to interpret a text coherently. They have to be able to understand the relationship between the various sentences in order to do this, the student has to be able to detect the devices which create textual cohesion especially how reference and link words are used to express ideas, and modifying and quali-

ifying statements By reference we mean all the devices which allow lexical relationship for example, anaphora, the use of synonyms and antonyms, compression, nominalization, etc.

If a reader does not know the meaning of some of the words in a passage he may not be able to grasp some of the points, but failure to understand inter- or intro sentential connections, which announce conclusions, examples or suppositions, etc. may mean that the communicative value of the passage will be lost or, at least, to some extent Words like these aid the development of a passage and will aid the reader when skimming it is therefore important to recognise these signals from the start, and among the good exercises that can be done are those which allow the reader to see the function of the connectors and look for equivalents, completing texts with the missing connectors, producing a coherent text by joining sentences and adding link words, the last type being particularly useful as there will be a number of acceptable versions and comparing these will highlight different ways of conveying the information.

IMPROVING READING SPEED

Reading speed is also an important factor to be considered for, if a student reads too slowly and stops at every word, he will probably find that he is easily discouraged A practical way of improving reading speed is to ask the students to time themselves They can also use a conversion table if they wish with the length of the text and the reading time, keeping a record of their results, and so be encouraged to monitor their own progress However, reading speed for its own sake is not enough, for the student must be able to read at a speed which enables him to understand the content of what he is reading One useful way is to set comprehension questions when working on improved reading speed.

PREDICTION

Grammatical, logical and cultural clues enable the student to guess what is going to happen next and this is more a skill than a technique, but is basic to many reading techniques and the process of reading itself it is certainly a useful skill and a worthwhile one to practise This can be done by doing such exercises as completing unfinished passages, or stopping at some points in a text and asking students to predict what will probably come next.

PREVIEWING

This is a specific reading technique in order to find the desired information, it requires using the table of contents, the appendix, the preface and the chapter and paragraph headings it can be very useful when skimming and scanning.

MOTIVATION

Motivation plays an important part in developing reading skills because what we read by choice reflects our own interests and it normally follows that we are thus motivated This also means that we expect to find certain things in what we read, perhaps answers to questions and information and ideas which are of special interest to us for the process of reading is a permanent inter-relationship between the reader and the text in which expectation is a fundamental characteristic indeed, the knowledge we already have about the subject and what we want to find in the text may be as important as what we take from it As we read, we make predictions, some of which are confirmed or modified.

In the classroom, however, the situation is different and artificial with students often being confronted with texts they do not know anything about and are not interested in reading All this of course it may be argued, makes the learning situation difficult The teacher is therefore faced with the task of finding material which will appeal to the class as a whole, and also allow the students to choose their own when possible Yet this does not mean that the choice of texts should be limited on y to what they know already it is an exaggeration to say that only texts they know something about should be selected as of en others they know less about can awaken interest and lead to the desire to read A balanced approach is best to ensure that there is a range of material to which the students will be able to respond, encouraging them to pursue their reading on whatever topics they are interested in and also provide variety.

Conclusion

I have pointed to some of the obstacles our students face in reading and ways in which these can be overcome, offering some suggestions on worthwhile activities. The role which these play in the process of developing reading skills has to be emphasized.

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