

A Practical Approach to Reading Skills

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1 . Introduction

Reading is often seen as the skill *par excellence* for testing purposes. Especially if the tester limits the questions to those of a true/false or a multiple choice nature, the test can be checked quickly (or even, as in the *Sentaa Shiken*, checked by computer) . Other simple responses, such as gap-fill, or comprehension questions requiring a short unique response similarly aid the ease of grading. There is, therefore an unsurprising temptation to limit the way we deal with reading texts in class to the same kind of limited answers to limiting questions. After all, it can be argued, this is how teachers prepare students for entrance exams.

Unfortunately, such an approach, especially if it is the only way that teachers deal with reading texts, serves to suck the very lifeblood out of them. The mere act of reading, then answering simplistic questions on the text in question, can lead only to frustration, and the feeling felt by many, that ending education means never having to pick up a book again. If we are denied the opportunity to discuss what we have read with others, we are left unsatisfied. The enjoyment of reading precedes the stimulation of discussion. There is no reason why teachers should not bring such a sharing of reading experiences into the classroom, allowing students to connect them with their own experiences, opinions and tastes.

Moreover, teachers ought not to be too paranoid about the level of difficulty of texts to be considered for classroom (or, indeed, home) use. Lightbown and Spada (1999: 168) suggest that, presented with a meaningful context, learners are able to comprehend the general meaning of many structures which they have not yet ' mastered ' or ' produced ' by themselves. Similarly, Krashen (1992) made the case for reading for pleasure as a rich source of comprehensible input for acquisition, insisting that the text should be " comprehensible " and that the content should be " something the student is genuinely interested in, that he would read in his first language ". Activities designed around a text should aim to promote, not isolated skills, but more holistic skills in the classroom, in order to reflect what is ' real ' to language learners (Widdowson , 1998: 332) .

Clearly, teachers need to choose texts that fulfil these criteria, or engage students in the subject matter through well-chosen pre-reading activities. It is, of course, important that our students be capable of understanding a text. Traditionally, this has long meant demonstrating the ability to translate parts of it into Japanese. Unless our students are aiming for a career in professional translation, this unrealistic activity would seem a largely fu-

tile enterprise.

This paper aims to offer a communicative and stimulating approach to teaching the reading skills, by means of examples of pre-reading, reading and post-reading tasks, offering communication, personalisation, and the integration of reading with other skills.

2 . Pre-Reading Tasks

Pre-reading tasks can be divided into two categories, those aimed at motivating students to read the text, often drawing on their own experience; and those intended to make the text more accessible. Willis (1996: 72) warns against the dangers of having learners approach a text “ cold ”, explaining that having a purpose for reading is of paramount importance, otherwise “ they tend to see the text as a learning device, and read one word at a time. ” It is this “ word by word ” approach, with its connotations of the grammar-translation method, that teachers need to be at pains to avoid.

2.1 Pre-reading for interest

Harmer (2007: 286) advises that “ in order to get students to read enthusiastically in class, we need to work to create interest in the topic and tasks. ” Similarly, Grellet (1996: 18) , highlighting the importance of motivation in reading, suggests what she terms “ psychological sensitising ”, in the pre-reading stage. This is similar to the schema-based approach advocated by many writers. Nation (2009: 49) amplifies on this point, reminding teachers of the need for enjoyment in reading, seeing an increase in reading fluency as being a precursor to students sense of enjoyment. Teachers then, need to stimulate this sense of enjoyment. This, in its simplest form, may involve students in pairs, asking , “ What do you know about X? ”, “ X ”, of course, referring to the general content of the text they are about to read. Use of pictures can also serve to generate interest, either to elicit useful lexis (see below) , or having students order the pictures to predict the gist of the text. Ideally, teachers should aim to supply students with texts that they would choose for themselves, albeit in their mother tongue, a point made succinctly by Dörnyei (2001: 63) , who states that “ one of the most demotivating factors for learners is when they have to learn something that they cannot see the point of because it has no seeming relevance whatsoever to their lives. ” He goes on to add that demotivation is likely to set in “ unless they regard the material they are taught as worth learning. ” Harmer (2009: 288-9) suggests using not only visual (i.e. picture) clues to generate interest and predict content, but also simply giving students a list of words, and having them speculate how they might fit together in a story.

2.2 Pre-reading for access

Paribakht and Wesche (1997: 117) emphasise the value of constant re-cycling of lexis as one of the main values of extensive reading. Nevertheless, it is often worthwhile for the teacher, as a prelude to in-class reading activities, to lend a hand with vocabulary which s/he anticipates may be unknown, thereby reducing learners' reliance on dictionaries. In fact, the authors conclude (ibid: 197) that “ reading supplemented with specific vocabulary ex-

ercises produces greater gains for the targeted words. ”

Pre-reading for lexis can be as simple as giving students a list of words, and having them check them in a dictionary. Requiring a little more effort on the part of the teacher, a column of such words can be typed into a table with their definitions, randomly typed in the column on the right, allowing students to match predicted problematic lexical items with their definitions, helping to overcome a barrier to comprehension, which might frustrate students, especially with authentic texts. Another option is to supply the words in a box on a worksheet, and have students choose the best option to fill a gap in a set of sentences. If the pre-taught words are mostly nouns, they can be matched with pictures, aiding students who work best with a visual learning style. The pictures can also serve as a means of generating interest in the text.

3 . Reading Tasks

3.1 Traditional reading tasks

As mentioned in the introduction, it is tempting for teachers to confine themselves to “ traditional ” reading activities, perhaps justifying this decision by the claim that this is the best way to prepare their students for exams. Such tasks will include translation of all or part of the text into Japanese, True/ False questions, multiple-choice questions, and short answers (which can often be answered by directly quoting from the text) . As university entrance exams gradually embrace features related to Communicative Language Learning, this is less of a valid excuse. More importantly, it can have a seriously demotivating influence on students. The following sections describe some more adventurous, communicative and, hopefully, motivating approaches to reading texts.

3.2 Read and Draw

A much-loved pair-work speaking task employed by language teachers is the “ describe and draw ” activity, in which one student describes a picture, while his/her partner attempts to draw it. This can easily be adapted to reading tasks as a “ read and draw ” activity, whereby students read an extract from a text, and try to draw the scene they have read, emphasising the visual nature of the text in question, while at the same time giving an opportunity to shine to those students whose preferred learning style is visual rather than verbal. A perfect extract for such a task is the “ Room 101 ” scene from Orwell’s *1984* . Students read the text, and attempt to draw the room as it is described in the text. Grellet (1996: 5) refers to this type of activity as “ transcoding ” . By comparing their attempts, and probably finding differences between them, students are motivated towards a closer reading of the text. The teacher may then show an extract from the movie version of the novel, so that students can compare their own renderings of the scene with that of the director of the film. Clearly, such an activity need not necessarily be based on a extract from literature (though this is clearly a fertile field) . For an extended discussion of the use of a communicative approach to literary texts, see Brown , 2003.

3.4 Reading for gist

This section could just as easily have been placed in the pre-reading section. Gist reading exercises should be short, and serve to increase interest and motivation to read the text in greater detail. Activities of this nature include choosing a title for an article, choosing titles for each section or paragraph, and choosing a sentence that best sums up the article.

3.5 Jigsaw Reading

One challenge for teachers is to integrate a reading task with other skills, especially speaking. An ideal way of achieving this is by means of a jigsaw reading activity, in which half the students (or a third or a quarter, depending on their teacher's preparation time, imagination and classroom management skills, become an "expert" on one particular subject, while the other half (third or quarter) become experts on a parallel subject. They then work together to share what they have learnt, by asking and answering questions. This type of activity works best with texts about, for example, people and places, for which it is relatively simple for Student A and Student B to find an answer to the same set of questions. With some imagination, however, it can be applied to a variety of topics.

3.6 Personalisation

Textbooks often do teachers a disservice by including texts about people, places or events that have no relation to the students own lives. Despite the increased workload, it is worthwhile replacing these with texts with ones incorporating a greater personal relevance. Naturally, this means knowing our students interests, but this, anyway, is a *sine qua non* of a good teacher. Whatever kind of reading task the teacher chooses to employ, it is important to incorporate at least some degree of personalisation. This may be simply adding some personalised additions to comprehension questions. If the task is a jigsaw reading, the last few questions may be of the variety of "Which of the places would you prefer to visit. Why? What would you do there?", or "Which of the two people do you admire more? Why? If you met her/him, what questions would you ask?" Further ideas for personalisation are included in the following section.

4 . Post-Reading Tasks

Post-reading tasks often aim to follow up on the reading activity, especially by means of productive activities, such as speaking and writing. This is also true of pre-reading tasks. Ur (1996: 151) points out the likelihood that "activity before, during and after the reading itself will entail extended speaking, listening and writing."

Students can be asked to read up to a certain point in a text, then discuss with a partner what they think happens next. Discussion activities can focus on whether students agree or disagree with the actions of a character in a text, or discuss what they would do in a situation such as the one they have read about. Clearly, activities such as these relate to the concept of personalisation described in the previous section. Harmer (2009: 297) also suggests that the teacher may read (or have someone else record to tape or CD) different continuations. Students then discuss which they prefer.

Students may also be given the task (for example as a homework activity) to write the paragraph following the extract they have read, or write a letter to a character in a text. Texts with multiple protagonists may lend themselves to having students write to one another in the character of someone in the text, as assigned by the teacher or (though this can prove logistically tricky) one they have chosen.

5 . Extensive Reading

Intensive reading takes place in the classroom under the control (to at least some extent) of the teacher. To limit reading skills to intensive reading is, however, somewhat akin to teaching grammar and vocabulary, excluding fluency activities. Harmer (2009: 283) points out that in order to maximise benefit from reading “ students need to be involved in both extensive and intensive reading. ” In tandem with in-class reading, it is important to set up an extensive reading programme, especially (if this is feasible from a logistical and financial viewpoint) one in which students have the opportunity to *choose* what they read. There are excellent series of graded readers from publishers such as Oxford and Penguin, which offer a wide range of types of books, both fiction and non-fiction to learners of all ages and levels. Harmer (2009: 284) recommends setting up a reading library, from which learners check out books in order to be sure that the class library “ does not disappear over time ” .

Nation (2009: 115) recommends that 95 - 98% of lexical items in an extensive reading activity “ should not be a burden on learners. ” It is also a means, as mentioned before (Paribakht and Wesche , 1997: 117) , of recycling lexis. This combination of choice and suitability of level is vital in maximising the potential of an extensive reading programme.

Furthermore, follow-up activities can add to the efficacy of such a programme. Such activities may be oral (in-class interviews/ discussions in which students recommend graded readers to their classmates) or written (files of book reviews, classified by level and/or genre, in which readers write a short factual description of the book, followed by a personal opinion) . Naturally, such materials should also be open-access, though teachers may need to be on the lookout for plagiarism .

6 . Conclusions and Further Study

For reading-based activities to be successful, they should match as many as possible of the following criteria. They should be relevant to the students’ own lives, and have intrinsic interest for the student (though to some extent, this can be stimulated by well-devised pre-reading tasks) . Students should not be expected to go into the text “ cold ” . By means of pre-reading and gist activities, they should already have some knowledge of, and engagement with, what they are about to read. Texts should be approached with imagination in terms of what kind of tasks students are given. Though there is a role for traditional true/ false, multi-choice, gap-fill and so on, a diet consisting purely of such closed activities will soon kill students’ appetite for reading. Furthermore reading should be integrated, as much

as possible with other skills, especially as a means of personalising the tasks. Finally, attention should be given to developing, not only intensive, but also extensive reading skills. This can be best achieved by a self-access programme based on graded readers.

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