

“TO READ OR NOT TO READ?” SOME ADVICE ON HOW TO TEACH READING WITH UNDERSTANDING

Introduction

Reading with understanding is one of the most important communicative skills a successful learner of a language needs to practise. Practising the skill of reading with understanding is as important as mastering listening and speaking skills. However, teachers may find the attempts to develop it difficult because students prefer to watch films, listen to the radio and talk to native speakers rather than read books and newspapers. It is easier and, without doubt, more interesting to watch a film, listen to a radio programme or talk to somebody, all of which are faster than reading a text.

In our fast-moving world various aspects of human life have changed, no wonder the texts students read in their free time are also different. The most popular are comic strips and short messages sent via cellular phones, which are attractive to learners because of pictures and not much text. “Why do I need to read this?”, “Do I really need to read it?” or a heavy sigh are the most frequent students’ responses when given a longer reading assignment. Students do not like reading in their native language, therefore we should not be surprised that reading in a foreign one is not among their favourite pastimes.

It would not be particularly original or innovative of me to suggest that motivation is the key to success. Nevertheless, it is essential for a teacher to be aware of the importance of positive motivation. What can teachers do to boost learners’ motivation to read a text in a foreign language? In order to stimulate such willingness we need to show them the scope of situations in which we read. Every day we come across different texts: documents, contracts, instructions, rules and regulations, articles or books. We read them for entertainment or for purely practical reasons.

The aim of the article is to provide some practical advice on how to teach the skill of reading with understanding. The suggestions I have presented below are based on the books by such specialists as Jeremy Harmer *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (1991) and Christine Nuttall *Teaching Reading Skills*

in a Foreign Language (1982), as well as on my own teaching experience. The article has been divided into four main parts. Firstly, I focus on the problem of choosing a text, then I briefly analyse the skills students use when reading. This leads me to a short analysis of some aspects a teacher must consider when preparing a reading lesson. Finally, I suggest a number of reading comprehension exercises which can be used by teachers. I do hope that the information will be of help to all Teachers of English.

1. Choosing a text

When teaching the skill of reading with understanding, our first consideration is choosing an appropriate text: should the material be authentic or adapted? Our choice may well determine whether learners are motivated or not; therefore, the positive and negative aspects of both kinds of text should be carefully weighed up.

Christine Nuttall in her book claims that if we decide to work with adapted material, there is a danger that students will get demotivated as they are exposed to a text which has been prepared for the purpose of practising specific language in the context of a lesson. However, such texts can also motivate learners precisely because the adaptation process makes them more accessible to students; the text is adjusted taking into account not only the learners' linguistic ability but also their knowledge of the world.

On the other hand, if we opt for an authentic text, considerable care should be taken when devising the comprehension questions. The exercises set must be appropriate to the students' linguistic level. In other words, the text may be difficult but the exercises should match the students' linguistic skills and expectations, otherwise learners will get frustrated and the process of teaching reading with understanding will be hindered. If the exercises are well prepared and executed, the benefits of choosing authentic material are undeniable; learners feel immense satisfaction, which may result in wanting to read even more (Nuttall 1982: 25–32).

2. Reading skills

While reading a text, we subconsciously apply a number of skills which help us understand it, as well as get the most out of it in a short space of time. Jeremy Harmer focuses on certain skills and their role in approaching the text. He discusses the ability to predict the content, which is related to what our expectations about the text are. He also mentions the skill of scanning, which comes into play when specific information is being sought. If, on the other hand, we wish to know the most important points, which means being able to answer the questions when, where and how, we skip over unnecessary information and, in so doing, exercise the skill

of skimming. Another useful technique, especially when students are presented with a difficult text, is the ability to recognise discourse patterns which give clues about how words function in a text. In the course of foreign language education, students learn the conjunctions which are used to make a text cohesive. Therefore, they know how to join ideas, introduce contrast, or summarise the main points. If learners are aware of such patterns, they will notice them in the text, which will make grasping information and text analysis easier (Harmer 1991: 183–184).

3. Points to consider

Teaching students to read with understanding requires careful lesson planning in order to achieve the intended result. In this regard, here are a few aspects which should be considered if success is to be achieved.

The first decision to be made is whether or not the topic of the text needs to be introduced. If the answer is "Yes", the next logical step concerns the length of any such introduction. Possible mistakes made at this stage include asking irrelevant questions or making a lengthy speech. A successful introduction involves drawing the students' attention to possible problems, as well as relating the text and the problem(s) it presents to students' attitudes, opinions and life experience.

When we have decided how to begin our reading lesson, the next question to be addressed is the preparation of appropriate comprehension exercises. Christine Nuttall suggests balancing questions, by which she means that we must focus equally on all parts of the text. It is wrong to leave some of parts of it untouched. She also claims that it is important to devise questions varied in type, paying attention to the language used in the instructions. It is crucial that the questions are not more difficult than the text students are going to read (Nuttall 1982: 131, 153–155).

Finally, we must be aware of another very important aspect, the necessity of finding appropriate fragments in the text, which will prove that students' answers are correct. Regardless of the type of exercise opted for, whether it be multiple choice, True/False, or open-ended questions, it is vital to remind learners of the need to consult the text when giving their answers to comprehension questions. They must be conscious that it is important to find appropriate information and analyse the links between different parts of the text because such an approach is the key to developing a good reading strategy (Nuttall 1982: 83).

4. Types of exercises

When helping students develop reading skills, we have a wide variety of stimulating exercises at our disposal, not only multiple choice, True/False or open-ended questions as mentioned above. Experts recommend using the following techniques:

- **completion** – students can be given a few sentences, a summary or a diagram with missing information, which they should complete according to the text,
- **prediction** – the text can be interrupted with questions about what is going to happen later,
- **reassembling** – in this type of exercise the students' task is to put parts of the text in the correct order,
- **filling in** – students must complete gaps in the text with sentences or paragraphs given next to the text,
- **pooling information** – this is an information gap exercise done in pairs. Student A from each pair is presented with a gapped summary of Student B's text. Student A listens to their friend retelling the text and completes the missing information in the summary. Later students swap their roles.
- **odd one out** – we insert a few sentences into the text which do not fit the context and it is the students' task to identify them; we can decide to insert just one such sentence so as not to make the task too complicated.
- **matching** – students have to match information from the text, for example people or dates with events.
- **searching** – students are given definitions or synonyms of words appearing in the text together with the paragraph where the word appears; their task is to look for the word. Alternatively, we can ask them to look for antonyms (Harmer 1991: 192–202; Nuttall 1982: 129–130).

In the handout attached to the article, I use some of the techniques presented above, hoping that they will be of help to teachers interested in teaching the skill of reading with understanding.

Conclusions

Each and every learner needs to practise all communicative skills of the target language to gain integrated knowledge of the language. Time devoted to mastering these skills ought to be properly balanced in order not to neglect any of the skills in question. However, teaching reading with understanding poses more problems than teaching other skills, such as listening or speaking. This results from the fact that reading has ceased to be attractive for young learners when compared with broadcast media, which are definitely more appealing.

Motivated students do not require additional incentives, but if we work with students who do need to be encouraged, the task becomes more challenging. Providing positive motivation seems to be the factor which will make teaching reading easier for both learners and teachers. In this article I have suggested a few ways in which we can increase learner motivation. This aim will be achieved by the application of interesting techniques and exercises, including: relating the text

to students' expectations and experience; matching; choosing the odd element out; prediction; completion; and pooling information, all of which are described in section 4 of the article. Keeping this in mind, with some innovation on our part, will make students successful readers of foreign language texts.

Bibliography

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- All the definitions in reading comprehension exercise No. 4 are taken from *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*.

HANDOUT

How a Sugar Pill Can Heal (or Hurt) You

New research shows that the placebo effect isn't all in your head.

BY JOHN CLOUD

Part 1

During World War II, battlefield nurses who ran out of painkillers sometimes used a trick to help wounded soldiers in agony; injecting them with saltwater and telling them it was a potent dose of morphine. 1 _____.

The nurses weren't just tricking the soldiers. They were activating a placebo response. Scientists are coming to understand the placebo response as a cascade of neural reactions that not only provide psychological relief but also play a physiological role in blocking stress hormones that damage the body. 2_____. In clinical trials, most drug responses are now assumed to be partly due to the placebo effect.

Part 2

But the placebo (Latin for "I will please") has a flip side: the nocebo ("I will harm") response, when patients experience negative side effects from drugs merely because they expect to. In Stephen's study, cursing reduced the perception of pain more strongly in women than in men.

In a new paper in the journal *Pain*, researchers found that clinical-trial participants reported a wide variety of nocebo complaints, including burning sensations, vomiting and even upper-respiratory-tract infections. 3_____. Other research has shown that when doctors tell patients a procedure will be painful, those patients report more pain than patients not similarly warned.

"Time", November 2, 2009

Reading Comprehension exercises for B2 students

I. Introduction

Before students focus on the text, start with a short discussion about sugar: how it is made; what it is used for; if it has a positive or negative influence on people's health. Then talk about the possible use of sugar pills in medicine.

II. Comprehension exercises

1. Ask students to work in pairs. Student A reads the first part of the text, student B the second part. Having read their part, each student retells what they have learnt.

2. Insert the sentences into gaps in the text above.

- a. Many participants reported these problems even when they were part of control groups that were taking a sugar pill.
- b. Often, the soldiers' pain would vanish – at least temporarily.
- c. In other words, simply thinking you will get better can actually make you better.

3. In the text find the sentence which does not belong to it.

4. In the text find words for the definitions.

- a. to disappear suddenly (verb) (in part 1) _____
- b. a feeling of comfort when something frightening, worrying, or painful has ended or has not happened (noun) (1) _____
- c. because of something (preposition) (1) _____
- d. only (adverb) (2) _____
- e. an illness (noun) (2) _____
- f. to tell someone about something before it happens so that they are not worried or surprised by it (verb) (2) _____

III. Follow-up

Conduct a short discussion in which students express their opinion about the information presented in the article.

KEY

Ex.2

1.c, 2.d, 3.b,

Ex.3 In Stephen's study, cursing reduced the perception of pain more strongly in women than in men. (paragraph 3)

Ex.4

- a. vanish
- b. relief
- c. due to
- d. merely
- e. complaint
- f. warn