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Teaching Intensive Reading

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Reading has been defined as making sense of the printed word. We read in order to get something from the text whether it be a dictionary or a novel. There must be a reason for reading. We want our students to read, discuss and criticise. We want to develop their intellectual capabilities while analysing a text.

Traditionally reading has been divided into intensive and extensive reading. Both approaches are essential and they share many of the same strategies. Intensive reading focuses on a short text. The aim is to help the students understand it by using a variety of skills. Students are encouraged to work out, for example, how the writer has conveyed inference. Further, by focusing on a short text the students learn how to dissect it in order to understand the exact meaning.

Firstly, all materials selected must be stimulating for the students. Secondly, they need to feel they can contribute their personal opinions.

In an intensive reading lesson students may be required to practice scanning and skimming skills. Scanning a text is when a student reads very rapidly in order to find out a particular piece of information, a date for example. It is also used to ascertain whether a text is useful, for example, whether the chapter contains relevant information for an essay. This can be done orally to encourage reading quickly. Skimming a text is when students read for gist. Asking the class to find out what topics the text deals with ensures fast reading. Both scanning and skimming techniques need practice.

Goals and Techniques for Teaching Reading : Instructors want to produce students who, even if they do not have complete control of the grammar or an extensive lexicon, can fend for themselves in communication situations. In the case of reading, this means producing students who can use reading strategies to maximize their comprehension of text, identify relevant and non-relevant information, and tolerate less than word-by-word comprehension.

Focus: The Reading Process

To accomplish this goal, instructors focus on the process of reading rather than on its product.

- They develop students' awareness of the reading process and reading strategies by asking students to think and talk about how they read in their native language.
- They allow students to practice the full repertoire of reading strategies by using authentic reading tasks. They encourage students to read to learn (and have an authentic purpose for reading) by giving students some choice of reading material.

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- When working with reading tasks in class, they show students the strategies that will work best for the reading purpose and the type of text. They explain how and why students should use the strategies.
- They have students practice reading strategies in class and ask them to practice outside of class in their reading assignments. They encourage students to be conscious of what they're doing while they complete reading assignments.
- They encourage students to evaluate their comprehension and self-report their use of strategies. They build comprehension checks into in-class and out-of-class reading assignments, and periodically review how and when to use particular strategies.
- They encourage the development of reading skills and the use of reading strategies by using the target language to convey instructions and course-related information in written form: office hours, homework assignments, test content.
- They do not assume that students will transfer strategy use from one task to another. They explicitly mention how a particular strategy can be used in a different type of reading task or with another skill.

By raising students' awareness of reading as a skill that requires active engagement, and by explicitly teaching reading strategies, instructors help their students develop both the ability and the confidence to handle communication situations they may encounter beyond the classroom. In this way they give their students the foundation for communicative competence in the new language.

Integrating Reading Strategies

Instruction in reading strategies is not an add-on, but rather an integral part of the use of reading activities in the language classroom. Instructors can help their students become effective readers by teaching them how to use strategies before, during, and after reading.

Before reading: Plan for the reading task

- Set a purpose or decide in advance what to read for
- Decide if more linguistic or background knowledge is needed
- Determine whether to enter the text from the top down (attend to the overall meaning) or from the bottom up (focus on the words and phrases)

During and after reading: Monitor comprehension

- Verify predictions and check for inaccurate guesses
- Decide what is and is not important to understand
- Reread to check comprehension
- Ask for help

After reading: Evaluate comprehension and strategy use

- Evaluate comprehension in a particular task or area
- Evaluate overall progress in reading and in particular types of reading tasks
- Decide if the strategies used were appropriate for the purpose and for the task
- Modify strategies if necessary

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Using Authentic Materials and Approaches

For students to develop communicative competence in reading, classroom and homework reading activities must resemble (or be) real-life reading tasks that involve meaningful communication. They must therefore be authentic in three ways.

1. The reading material must be authentic: It must be the kind of material that students will need and want to be able to read when travelling, studying abroad, or using the language in other contexts outside the classroom.

When selecting texts for student assignments, remember that the difficulty of a reading text is less a function of the language, and more a function of the conceptual difficulty and the task(s) that students are expected to complete. Simplifying a text by changing the language often removes natural redundancy and makes the organization somewhat difficult for students to predict. This actually makes a text more difficult to read than if the original were used.

Rather than simplifying a text by changing its language, make it more approachable by eliciting students' existing knowledge in pre-reading discussion, reviewing new vocabulary before reading, and asking students to perform tasks that are within their competence, such as skimming to get the main idea or scanning for specific information, before they begin intensive reading.

2. The reading purpose must be authentic: Students must be reading for reasons that make sense and have relevance to them. "Because the teacher assigned it" is not an authentic reason for reading a text.

To identify relevant reading purposes, ask students how they plan to use the language they are learning and what topics they are interested in reading and learning about. Give them opportunities to choose their reading assignments, and encourage them to use the library, the Internet, and foreign language newsstands and bookstores to find other things they would like to read.

3. The reading approach must be authentic: Students should read the text in a way that matches the reading purpose, the type of text, and the way people normally read. This means that reading aloud will take place only in situations where it would take place outside the classroom, such as reading for pleasure. The majority of students' reading should be done silently.

Using Reading Strategies: Effective language instructors show students how they can adjust their reading behaviour to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and reading purposes. They help students develop a set of reading strategies and match appropriate strategies to each reading situation.

Strategies that can help students read more quickly and effectively include:

- Previewing: reviewing titles, section headings, and photo captions to get a sense of the structure and content of a reading selection

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- Predicting: using knowledge of the subject matter to make predictions about content and vocabulary and check comprehension; using knowledge of the text type and purpose to make predictions about discourse structure; using knowledge about the author to make predictions about writing style, vocabulary, and content
- Skimming and scanning: using a quick survey of the text to get the main idea, identify text structure, confirm or question predictions
- Guessing from context: using prior knowledge of the subject and the ideas in the text as clues to the meanings of unknown words, instead of stopping to look them up
- Paraphrasing: stopping at the end of a section to check comprehension by restating the information and ideas in the text

Instructors can help students learn when and how to use reading strategies in several ways.

- By modelling the strategies aloud, talking through the processes of previewing, predicting, skimming and scanning, and paraphrasing. This shows students how the strategies work and how much they can know about a text before they begin to read word by word.
- By allowing time in class for group and individual previewing and predicting activities as preparation for in-class or out-of-class reading. Allocating class time to these activities indicates their importance and value.
- By using cloze (fill in the blank) exercises to review vocabulary items. This helps students learn to guess meaning from context.
- By encouraging students to talk about what strategies they think will help them approach a reading assignment, and then talking after reading about what strategies they actually used. This helps students develop flexibility in their choice of strategies.

When language learners use reading strategies, they find that they can control the reading experience, and they gain confidence in their ability to read the language.

Reading to Learn

Reading is an essential part of language instruction at every level because it supports learning in multiple ways.

- Reading to learn the language: Reading material is language input. By giving students a variety of materials to read, instructors provide multiple opportunities for students to absorb vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and discourse structure as they occur in authentic contexts. Students thus gain a more complete picture of the ways in which the elements of the language work together to convey meaning.
- Reading for content information: Students' purpose for reading in their native language is often to obtain information about a subject they are studying, and this purpose can be useful in the language learning classroom as well. Reading for content information in the language classroom gives students both authentic reading material and an authentic purpose for reading.
- Reading for cultural knowledge and awareness: Reading everyday materials that are designed for native speakers can give students insight into the lifestyles and worldviews of the people whose language they are studying. When students have access to newspapers, magazines, and Web sites, they are exposed to culture in all its variety, and monolithic cultural stereotypes begin to break down.

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When reading to learn, students need to follow four basic steps:

1. Figure out the purpose for reading. Activate background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate content and identify appropriate reading strategies.
2. Attend to the parts of the text that are relevant to the identified purpose and ignore the rest. This selectivity enables students to focus on specific items in the input and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in short-term memory.
3. Select strategies that are appropriate to the reading task and use them flexibly and interactively. Students' comprehension improves and their confidence increases when they use top-down and bottom-up skills simultaneously to construct meaning.
4. Check comprehension while reading and when the reading task is completed. Monitoring comprehension helps students detect inconsistencies and comprehension failures, helping them learn to use alternate strategies.

Conclusion: Reading is an integral part of language learning, linking into speaking, listening and writing. It is essential that students enjoy the lessons so they are motivated to read thereby improving all aspects of their language skills.

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